

Seriously Funny: *Disco Elysium* and the Aesthetics of the Metamodern Condition

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Abstract: The paper reinterprets metamodernism as described by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, expanding its theoretical core through François Lyotard's conception of the modern–postmodern dynamic from “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” It argues that the dichotomy between modern and postmodern sensibilities no longer requires generational phases but can be contained in a single artwork. It analyzes the video game *Disco Elysium* as a paradigmatic metamodern artwork in the sense that it embodies its central aesthetics of everlasting oscillation between opposites.

Keywords: metamodernism, aesthetics, François Lyotard, *Disco Elysium*

In 2010, cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker published an essay titled “Notes on Metamodernism” that claimed a significant contribution to the constellation of theories often ironically grouped under the label of post-postmodernism—those that insist postmodernism has ended or no longer serves to adequately describe contemporaneity. While acknowledging that postmodernism is not a homogeneous phenomenon, and even going so far as to call it a “‘catchphrase’ and ‘buzzword’ for a multiplicity of contradictory tendencies”¹, Vermeulen and van den Akker believe what its variants share is an aversion to “‘the’ modern—to utopism, to (linear) progress, to grand narratives, to Reason, to functionalism and formal purism.”² Therefore, the difference between modernism and postmodernism, according to them, can be summarized through the distinction of enthusiasm versus irony. Furthermore, they claim that all other post-

¹ imotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker, „Notes on Metamodernism“, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, vol. 1 (January 2010): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>

² Ibid.

postmodernist theories, such as hypermodernity, automodernism, digi-modernism, and so on, do not restructure but rather radicalize postmodernism insofar as they deal with its excesses instead of proposing a new interpretative schema of the world in the 21st century, where a significant discursive shift has occurred.

In contrast, metamodernism, according to this essay that reads almost like a manifesto³ in its combination of descriptive and declarative registers, defines a new sensibility—a new “narrative of longing” whose primary characteristic is a constant oscillation between modern and postmodern sentiments. The authors claim the shift they report and cherish is visible in the gradual abandonment of pastiche and cynicism by the culture industry in favor of ideas of responsibility and hope. This tendency encapsulates a variety of mediums and genres, art forms and cultural practices. Examples include artists like Olafur Eliasson and Zico Albaiquini; the New Sincerity movement popularized by David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*; the general post-irony trend in contemporary art that features the work of film directors such as Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman; individual pieces like Best Picture winner for 2022 *Everything Everywhere All at Once* or the comedy-horror *Cabin in the Woods*; sitcom series like *The Office* and *Community*; the so-called post-ideological urbanism in architecture seen in the works of the Bjarke Ingels Group; and even some internet phenomena such as shitposting or AI-generated humor. Another evidence of the metamodern is found in the restructuring of political discourse and the “material landscape”⁴ of the economic system provoked by financial crises, ecological catastrophes, and geopolitical instability.

The key to understanding metamodernism is the “meta” part of it, which signifies neither transcendence nor sublation but an in-betweenness—a sort of Platonic *metaxy*, a constant swinging between the poles of longing for the long-lost and the self-irony of having lost it. It is, first and foremost, a form of performatism, an epistemological “as if” attunement that laughs at its inability to get rid of the metanarratives it was supposed to have overcome—but its laughter is simultaneously that of sarcasm and empathy. To quote a metaphor by its ideologues,

³ One must note that the actual manifesto of the movement is inspired by this essay and published a year later in a website. See cf. <http://www.metamodernism.org/> Accessed on June 17, 2025.

⁴ Ien and Van Den Akker, „Notes on Metamodernism“, 4.

metamodernism is caught in “a kind of donkey-and-carrot double-bind. Like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across.”⁵ Metamodernism is also, therefore, a form of absurdism.

While Vermeulen and van den Akker describe an intriguing tendency of contemporary cultural sensibility, their framework appears to lack an account of the structural conditions that make the shift they describe possible. The aforementioned political, economic, and climate factors are explicitly viewed as branches within which the change is taking place. Neither of them causes it. Moreover, there isn’t so much as a possibility of such an explanation within the boundaries of their framework, which is focused on effects rather than causes. To address this gap, I propose a turn to Jean-François Lyotard’s aesthetics of the postmodern, as developed in “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” and a brief association with *The Postmodern Condition*. To show how the role Lyotard ascribes to the avant-garde can be brought to bear on the metamodern in concrete terms, I examine ZA/UM’s video game *Disco Elysium* as a paradigmatic artwork. While Lyotard is dismissed by Vermeulen and van den Akker as just another herald of postmodernism⁶, metamodernism can receive a stronger theoretical core through a closer reading of his conception of the internal tension that’s endemic to the modern.

Let’s proceed by retracing Lyotard’s view. Firstly, he claims that the postmodern sensibility that transformed our aesthetic conception began with photography and the expansion of technoscientific culture. However, mainstream “realist” art, i.e., art that enabled existing sociopolitical and religious order using the expressive means of perspective, was endangered long before the start of this process by a modernist avant-garde, representative of which are the late 18th-century Romantics. This avant-garde rebelled against the idea that art could only represent the order of things and instead turned to the unrepresentable, to the sublime in a Kantian sense, which resulted in art’s self-reflexivity—it

⁵ ulen and Van Den Akker, 5.

⁶ and Van Den Akker, 4.

started asking what is art. However, despite its increasing abstractness, Romantic art was more so a nostalgia for presence, emphasizing “the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, [...] on the obscure and futile will which inhabits [the human subject] in spite of everything.”⁷ This expression of the sublime was an incomplete one insofar as it had a very limited conception of negativity. It represented the unrepresentable as mere lack, thereby providing “solace and pleasure” to the viewer but not the pain and monstrosity that the “real” sublime should invoke.

What postmodern avant-garde does then, as a response not only to photography and technoscientific culture but also to the self-reflexive question of art, is that it tries to represent the unrepresentable not as a mere fact or a lost absolute but as a possibility for infinite experimentation—as the invention of new “rules of the game” and radical stylistic changes. This leads Lyotard to conclude that the postmodern is:

“a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday [...] must be suspected. What space does Cezanne challenge? The Impressionists’. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cezanne’s. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it cubist. And Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched by the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work. In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.”⁸

Postmodernism is therefore modernism in becoming.

There are a couple of noteworthy implications of this thesis. Firstly, one must note that what Lyotard calls postmodern art is what is typically called modernism. However, he extrapolates it as a disruptive movement endemic to the modern that sets off its immanent dialectic and thereby precedes it “ontologically”, even if historically it’s the other way around. Secondly, the modern avant-garde does not get normalized

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoffrey Bennington, 13. *Theory and History of Literature 10* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 79.

⁸ Ibid.

nor absorbed into popular bourgeois art but remains a necessary opposition to the postmodern one.

How does metamodernism fit into all of this? At first glance, if we follow Lyotard, it seems metamodernism shouldn't be called a neoromantic sensibility because the original Romantics were already Neoromantics, having already lost the absolute. What's more important, if we add to Lyotard's idea of the postmodern avant-garde his idea of the dissemination and production of knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition* as constantly striving to maximize the input/output ratio⁹, then it would seem that metamodernism elucidates an even further acceleration of the modern-postmodern dynamic whereby the need for different generations of artworks isn't necessary for the creation of a dichotomy. The movement with which the modern becomes the postmodern and vice versa is now contained within a single metamodern artwork, and this is the new avant-gardism. Furthermore, if the postmodern is already nascent in the modern, then the metamodern must already be nascent in the postmodern.

This presupposes a new condition where the artwork is in a state of constantly anticipating itself, oscillating between the two types of sublime. Metamodernism, then, might not mark a new aesthetic principle altogether, but an increase of tempo within the existing modern/postmodern dialectic—one in which the oscillation is no longer stretched across artistic generations but collapsed into a single artwork. The metamodern artwork itself is the locus of modernism's becoming—it exists in a constant state of self-anticipation, continually shifting between irony and earnestness, style and chaotic rebellion, without resolving the contradiction via sublation.

To help illustrate this, let's take a brief look at *Disco Elysium*. The game exemplifies metamodernism on the one hand through its eclectic references and tonal hybridity, and on the other, through its story's oscillations between irony and the search for meaning, fragmentation and coherence, existential collapse and transcendence. Both formally and thematically, it embodies a post-ironic sincerity that parodies its own metaphysical hunger while nevertheless refusing to abandon it. Even its studio's name, ZA/UM, already expresses a metamodern tendency. The slash that differentiates Kruchyonykh's neologism accentuates its dou-

⁹ rd, *The Postmodern Condition*, 44.

ble meaning—for but also beyond reason. It's described on Steam as "Hard boiled, hard core. Death, sex, taxes, and disco—nothing is off the table. Intimidate, sweet-talk, resort to violence, write poetry, sing karaoke, dance like a beast, or solve the meaning of life."

Disco Elysium is a neologism itself not only in its language but also in its weaving of references ranging from mass media to high art while constantly making fun of the imbecility of the former and the elitism of the latter. It is an attempt at a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* whose inspirations include role-playing board games, detective novels, and quests in point-and-click computer games but also Russian avant-garde, the Strugatsky brothers, and China Miéville. It casually and constantly refers to ideas pertaining to the intellectual heritage/baggage of the West and doesn't axiologically favor one register above the other. The game is dense, thematically rich, and complex. In what follows, I concentrate on three interrelated dimensions through which *Disco Elysium* articulates its metamodern tension: (1) the fragmented identity, (2) the experience of ontological fading, and (3) the formation of community against all odds.

The story revolves around an amnesiac detective who's tasked to solve a murder in a city recovering from civil war. The main character is a white, paunchy, middle-aged man, normally an emanation of police and colonial power, who is, however, found literally and symbolically stripped of the totems of his authority—naked in a hotel room, having lost his uniform, badge, gun, and identity. Amnesia is a common trope in video games that serves to justify the lack of knowledge of the ludic avatar about the world he inhabits while also allowing the integration of role-playing elements that shape the avatar into a person more or less determined by the player's choices. Even in cases where the avatar's personality is facetiously constructed, a certain form of restoration is always achieved in the end—the player seals the fate of the protagonist in an affirming expression of the power fantasies of a self-confident subjectivity. Yet in *Disco Elysium*, a rift is shown, on the one hand, between the ever-flowing subjectivity of the present and past "selves", and, on the other, the subjectivity of the now is itself presented as polyphonic. The detective has multiple abilities that quite literally converse with each other all the time. They are characters in the game that not only react to what's happening but argue with each other and sometimes even emit their own worldview projects that can be internalized by the

avatar, thus forming the contents of a so-called Thought Cabinet. Choosing one thought doesn't close the possibility of any of the others. This results in a character that can be an apocalyptic prophet, a disco megalomaniac, a mystic, and a boring cop at the same time. Solidification of identity is never allowed to happen, no matter how the story of the game ends, due to the constant agonistic tension between self-deprecating irony and the pursuit of purpose. The game offers a typically postmodern fragmentation and loss of identity but does not stop there. It also clearly values the pursuit and longing for a coherent self, even though it's well aware of its impossibility.

A thought titled "Volumetric Shit Compressor", gained after the detective tries to keep himself from vomiting for the second time after looking at the dead body he's supposed to investigate, reads:

Problem: Your shit is *apart*, and it's rather unbecoming of a cop and a human being. It's supposed to be the opposite of that: *together*. Compressed in a small area. To achieve a solid level of shit-compression, squeeze your butt-cheeks together for 30 minutes. Do something similar with the two hemispheres of your brain. Talk to people—maybe that will help.

Solution: Bizarre scientific news from Revachol West today, where a police officer's shit has been observed at a pressure of around 495 giga-decimals. These metallic hydrogen levels of shit-togetherness were thought to exist only at the center of collapsing stars, not law officials. It remains to be seen how long the shit-singularity lasts.

There is an ontological fragmentation isomorphic to the subjective one. The Pale—a natural feature of the world in the game—is an achromatic phenomenon and a sort of separative tissue of matter without visible features that covers the larger part of the surface of the Earth. It ceaselessly expands, causing a suspension of the physical, epistemological, and linguistic qualities of things not by destroying them but by increasing entropy and making everything mix with everything else. It is but a transition to the impending annihilation that threatens to destroy reality from the inside out, through a series of metastases—two-millimeter holes in the fibers of the world.

The Pale bears traces of a certain post-communist heritage of the game and its Estonian developers—the game world shows the grim af-

termath of major projects of Enlightenment on a national, societal, and even civilizational level. The only people able to navigate the constantly self-annihilating terrain are members of the Moralintern—the ruling political power of Elysium that once held humanist values but has since turned into a representative of an ultraliberal global corporate wealth. Opposite it stand the “old-school” communist union bosses who manipulate workers for their own gain. The body of the Moralintern mercenary around whose corpse the criminal plot is built serves as a central metaphoric figure for ontological and political decay.

Despite that, it’s precisely around these microscopic holes where spiritual institutions spontaneously emerge and where the characters in the game find their own islands of meaning, both separately and together. The protagonist meets different kinds of weird and/or decadent individuals, some of whom represent irreversible degradation like drunkards and addicts, some fragments of a dying culture—an artist and a bookseller—and some of mystical hope, like a dice master and a family of cryptozoologists. The detective and his partner help a couple of ravers turn an old church into a nightclub that almost gets destroyed by the otherworldly dance moves of the protagonist. A futile search born out of empathy for the family of cryptozoologists bears real fruit. The detective meets the Insulindian Phasmid—a cryptid that has remained undiscovered for centuries due to its ability to disguise itself among the reeds. The meeting with the Phasmid is the culminative center of the whole game where all of its themes come together:

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: The moral of our encounter is: I am a relatively median lifeform—while it is you who are total, extreme madness. A volatile system, ominously new to the planet. The Pale, too, came with you. No one remembers it before you. The cnidarians do not, the radially symmetricals do not. There is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants that you are going to destroy us all.

YOU: Wait, the Pale is human-made?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: It is a nervous shadow cast into the world by you, eating away at reality. A great, unnatural territory. Its advent coincides with the arrival of the human mind. You are a violent and irrepressible miracle. The vacuum of cosmos and the stars burning in it are afraid of you. Given enough time, you would

wipe us all out and replace us with nothing—just by accident.

YOU: ...how?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: We suspect it will be something like the oxygen holocaust that wiped out anaerobic life 2.6 billion years ago—when organisms first started breathing. Only much worse.

YOU: Worse how?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Everything your eyes touch goes back there—behind the nerve mirror. What if you blink? Are we still here? (Please don't blink.) What if you misplace us all one day—or just forget?

YOU: But I *want* to blink and undo 12 billion years of matter expansion.

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Simian butcherer... Soon, one of you will close your eyes—and open them to see that none of this ever existed.

YOU: Then all we can do is beat our fists against it? Day after day. With no answer.

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: You can also eat it. If it's a leaf, you can put it in your mouth. Yum yum. Or a reed.

YOU: So you look like a reed, and you eat reeds?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Yes. They don't mind.

Disco Elysium does not resolve the problems it stages but inhabits them through a formal and thematic rendering of rupture. The failure of the grand narratives and modernist utopias isn't simply replaced by post-modern polyphony and cynicism. Instead, the two cohabit in the game as endemic tensions that are constantly reenacted in both its story and gameplay. The acceleration Lyotard ascribes to the generational dialogue between artists and artistic movements is here contained in a singular artwork. *Disco Elysium*, then, can be regarded as paradigmatic for metamodernism not because it offers a resolution but because it proclaims a renewed kind of seriousness—one that knows it may be absurd but insists on saying something anyway.