Chapter 6:
Ludic Epistemologies and Alternate Histories
The Soviet Past in Role-Playing Games

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1. Introduction

This article explores the representation of the Soviet past and experience in contemporary role-playing games both in Russia and abroad. Scholars like Adam Chapman have argued the need to take games seriously as historical epistemologies, with a significant impact on how players enjoying such games perceive history (cf. Chapman 2016). My claim is that the epistemologies of role-playing games represent the Soviet historical experience quite differently from conventional academic and popular historiography by demanding that players take responsibility for the course and outcome of history as represented within the game. By making history playful, decoupling it from a commitment to the continuities and inevitabilities of history, such games paradoxically accentuate the role of personal agency.

Games appropriate history as a space for play with the experiences and identities any historical moment prescribes as possible, yet without necessarily demanding any commitment to accuracy: for instance, a medieval game setting might let you play as a knight, but what this means will be accurate in some respects (wearing armour and riding a war horse) and inaccurate in others (fighting dragons). Both the commitment to and the neglect of historical facts structure the fantasy – so you can have your horse and the dragon too. When games apply this paradoxical fantasy structure to the representation of specific and recent history, rather than vaguely defined distant history – for instance, setting the game in World War II instead of the 'medieval era' – the result is still both the verisimilitude of historicity and a departure from it (e.g., you fight against Hitler and his inner circle, but also defeat them with your own hands, and Hitler is a giant robot). The same dynamic of intermittent commitment to historicity applies however, so the appeal to history fuels the very fantasy calling for major changes to historical continuity. The more compelling a game's representation of a historical moment, the more interesting it becomes to intervene in it, to change what you know to have happened, and if to fail, then to fail meaningfully. History and historical continuity become territorialised in the

game as interactive and explorable ludic objects, comparable to the kinds of traversable boards or maps that historically territorialise everything from adulthood to economics in various board games (*Life*, *Monopoly*, etc.).

This territorialisation of history does not have to be particularly accurate or truthful. It can be very rudimentary: for instance, a first-person multiplayer shooter representing World War I trench warfare, would use historical elements (e.g., World War I-era uniforms and weapons) and offer a specific historical experience (harrowing trench-to-trench combat, bayonets etc.), but no context or historicity otherwise (the player's avatar is a disposable body with no identity, past or future, when the avatar dies, the player keeps playing with another avatar). At the same time, there are also more sophisticated examples, which engage with history deeply, using ludic identity and the personal memory of ludic phantasmagoria as though they were primary experiences. Players live another life and its history as though it was their own, however simulacral, and make choices meaningful to themselves, but also inseparable from the representation of history framing them within the game. Such representations attempt to territorialise the confusing terrain of history, to take ownership of it in a way that both explores what actually happened, and intervenes in it, potentially creating an alternate history, but in either case offering a fantasy of sovereignty within history.

2. Playing with Alternate Histories

In her book, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (2018), literary scholar and historian Catherine Gallagher argues for alter-histories as an important form of moral argument, citing the example of when in

> [...] prosecutions of war crimes against humanity [...] prosecutors often respond by instancing people in similar situations who refused to cooperate with the criminal actions. They thus construct norms for alternatives in which the victims might have gone unmolested if the perpetrators held themselves to higher levels of accountability. And they often further claim that convicting the perpetrators will set a precedent for the adoption of new norms by the agents of the state, who will no longer consider themselves immune to prosecutions. (8)

Gallagher concludes that "the counter-factual mode's ambition [is] to shape history rather than merely record, analyze, or understand it" (ibid.). Thus, games employing counter-factual modes are directly invested in a historical exegesis or an ideological reckoning and are anything but frivolous in tackling the subject of historical memory and trauma. As historical representations, they can easily be faulted for being entirely focused on entertainment, with no interest in engaging with actual historical events as anything beyond a colourful backdrop. However, if Gallagher's argument is taken seriously, they should also be considered as shaping history and taking responsibility for it in a way that is not strictly about entertainment, or is about entertainment in a peculiar way – allowing for unusual fantasy realisation that is not simply oriented towards gratuitous violence, but towards viscerally imagining a historical moment, or even shaping

that moment with your own hands. After all, a game that only offers violence as a fantasy does not need to go to the trouble of creating historical verisimilitude – there are plenty of such games set in zombie apocalypses, alien landscapes, abstract terrains and other settings that are not overdetermined with historicity. Instead, what becomes apparent is that there is a reciprocity in historical games: they produce historicity because the player demands it, needs it to realise a fantasy of historical agency.

This argument resonates strongly with philosopher C. Thi Nguyen's thesis about games as a whole, laid out in his book *Games: Agency as Art* (2020), where he writes:

> The designer creates, not only the world which players will act, but the skeleton of the players' practical agency within that world. The designer designates players' abilities and goals in the game. The designer's control over the nature of the players' agency is part of the game. The game designer sculpts the game's activity. The game designer crafts for players a very particular form of struggle, and does so by crafting both a temporary practical agency for us to inhabit and a practical environment for us to struggle against. In other words, the medium of the game designer is agency […] games are the art of agency. (17)

For C. Thi Nguyen, games' use of agency, however truncated, is the medium's definitive formal feature, but in the case of games attempting to territorialise history, Gallagher's model of the alter-historical becomes particularly important. If both scholars' arguments are valid, then such games not only engage agency, but moralise it with rhetorical appeals towards shaping history. If for Nguyen games are a medium of agency, historical games turn the full weight of that agency to the problem of what can be learned from history and what pleasures can be wrung from engaging with a distant historical moment.

3. Agency and Role-Playing Games

Role-playing games (hereafter RPGs) are a type of game that grew out of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's tactical fantasy dungeon-crawler *Dungeons and Dragons* (hereafter *D&D*) (1974), but today embrace a much vaster and more diverse set of possible games, play-styles and genres. There are both table-top RPGs and computer RPGs, but computer RPGs grew from the table-top legacy and often emulate or aspire to emulate table-top experiences, as table-top RPGs allow for far greater improvisation and freedom on the part of the player. Every table-top RPG works through collaborative storytelling constricted by a set of rules, which are either interpreted collectively, or in the case of computer RPGs, programmed into the game, with the game designers scripting the story and whatever choices it will permit. In a typical table-top game, one player takes charge as the 'Game Master' (hereafter GM) and describes a world and its inhabitants, troubles and obstacles, using the rules to arbitrate interactions within it for the other players. The other players use the rules to create characters (hereafter PCs for 'Player Characters') in that world, and play as those characters, making decisions and changes in the world represented by the GM.

All players roll polyhedral dice to generate random numbers, establishing the failure or success of their actions on the basis of the dice rolls and rules. In computer RPGs, the computer handles this aspect of the game. In both cases, the aim is to make the storytelling unpredictable, creating the drama and the pleasure of the game. While everyone involved has some fantasy of how the narrative ought to develop, the dice create the possibility of surprise (e.g., the players might fail to achieve their goals completely, and instead of a cinematic victory, suffer a crushing defeat). This makes the narrative interesting to the players, since they themselves cannot conclusively say how the game will end, and thus the risks they take within the game feel authentic and meaningful. Similarly, moral and ethical choices feel significant because they are not controlled by chance and allow for the expression and exploration of identity.

In *D&D*, players took the part of adventurers exploring a fantasy world full of treasure and dangerous monsters. *D&D* identities were limited by the genre of fantasy, but nevertheless became complex explorations of moral agency, with players able to play both traditional heroes and villains, or otherwise 'evil' characters, and pursue expressly evil goals within the game – e.g., raising armies of monsters to destroy society. This incorporation of moral and ethical dilemmas is consistent with other role-playing games, even as they represent totally different contexts, genres, or identities: from science fiction to contemporary life.

Gallagher historicises the origins of the alter-history to the work of Gottfried Leibniz, arguing that for this Enlightenment philosopher, the creation of alternate histories was an important way of imagining and rationalising the subjectivity of God:

> [...] [Leibniz] posited a new mode of being for all of those unrealized possibilities by locating them in 'possible worlds.' The invention of these realms was a way of reconciling the fact of evil in this world with God's omnipotence, omniscience, and unfailing beneficence, as well as with the freedom of both divine and human will [...] The Theodicy thus inspired later writers to combine counterfactual history with religious apologetics, explicating historical events, especially the most apparently incomprehensible and horrific, as preferable to other possibilities; and it also gave the enterprise its comparative emphasis [...]. (2018: 18–19)

Alter-history in Gallagher's reading of Leibniz tries to capture the perspective of God, anticipating or imagining an omniscience so as to understand and even justify it, gaining a clarity about real history. In games, however, this is further complicated by the player not only imagining this omniscience, but embodying it, through the ability to remember different outcomes in the same game, saving and reloading and other practices common to digital games. In table-top games, you subordinate yourself to chance as a player, but still exercise a divine perspective – for instance, if a character drinks wine from a goblet, they do not know if they have been poisoned or not, but the player playing them does with certainty, as the GM told them, and indeed they are likely responsible for making a note of it and keeping track of the poisoning in the game (or cheating and 'forgetting' about it until reminded by the GM). The divine gaze sought by alter-history, and the personal, individual gaze empowered with sovereignty by RPGs, here hybridise into a vantage point that combines the traits of both, despite their apparent irreconcilability.

You are omniscient, capable of quantifying and leveraging every aspect of your identity into shaping history as a sovereign agent, but you are also limited and prejudiced, locked within the historical contingencies and political inevitabilities spelled out on your character sheet. In a historical RPG, you are both the player who knows how history really went, and the PC, caught up in a whirlwind of historical events and desperate to change them to their will. This treatment of history entangles it in several contradictory modes of representation, interactively collapsing politics, ideology, history, and private subjectivity together. What is the goal of such a venture? Is it to clarify or obfuscate? To force history to make sense, or force the player to make sense of it?

4. The Objects of Study

I am going to explore four RPGs all of which represent Soviet histories and alter-histories, offering post-Soviet landscapes as a comparable terrain to the haunted dungeons of *D&D*. These games are all by East European designers, and all equally full of dangerous trials and weighty moral decisions, tailored to the ideological and historical trauma of the Soviet experience: 74 (1980s, 2017), *Red Land* (*Krasnaia zemlia*, 2011), *Atom RPG* (2018), and *Disco Elysium* (2019).

74 is a board game, initially created by anonymous Soviet nonconformists in the 1980s, and then donated to Memorial, which published 74 as both a board game and political work of art. It asks players to play through the whole of Soviet history, keeping a kind of familial record of the historical traumas experienced by the player's avatars.

Red Land is a historical RPG set in the revolutionary period of 1917–1924, where a magical anomaly gave everyone's political ideology magical weight, pitting Red revolutionary mad science against the angel-summoning of the White army, while demonically-possessed revolutionaries realise the metaphor in Fëdor Dostoevskii's *The Possessed* (*Besy*, 1872) literally. The warring ideologies are accentuated with magic, allowing for an exaggerated examination of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary values.

Atom RPG is a post-apocalyptic role-playing computer game, an explicit ode to the classic American series of post-apocalyptic role-playing computer games focused on 1950s America and the Western landscape (*Fallout* (1997) and *Fallout 2* (1998)), but about the USSR and the Soviet landscape. Like *Fallout, Atom* is loaded with historical references to the post-Soviet 1990s, effectively imagining the post-Soviet world as an apocalypse and demanding that the player make meaningful choices for the future of this world.

Finally, *Disco Elysium* is a critically acclaimed and philosophically complex mystery computer RPG created by an Estonian anarchist collective (ZA/UM), which imagines the post-Soviet world through the figure of an amnesiac policeman coming to terms with the complexities of ideology and identity in the wake of the collapse of communism under neoliberal forces.

I have chosen these four because they represent a vast spectrum of role-playing experiences and media, but all focus on Soviet and post-Soviet history as a central object of play and inquiry, and all directly hold players responsible for this history, whether as passive witnesses (who nevertheless have a responsibility to witness), or as active

shapers, whose intervention not only explores history, but changes it, or responds to it with sovereignty and urgency regarding the contemporary moment.

The RPG as a genre promises a range of agency within the phantasmagoric world shaped by play, or perhaps even sovereignty over it – an allure key to the entertainment that they offer, as well as to the power fantasy. Faced with a nemesis, the PC might defeat them in combat, trick them with a clever ploy, join them in building their evil empire, perish while trying, or leave altogether. All options consistent with the emergent narrative are within the player's range of agency, limited only by their ability to narrate the decision, and carry it out using the power that the game mechanics offer their character – from martial skill to magic spells. RPG computer games have historically attempted to maintain this legacy: for instance, the aforementioned Fallout series is particularly notable for having multiple possible means of resolving challenges within the game (memorably, in *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) persuading a reaving army that their economic model is unsustainable).

This leads to a ready contradiction in RPGs focused on or set in real history: a player in a fantasy game who just defeated a tyrannical dragon-king and liberated their kingdom is still within an internally consistent phantasmagoria – there are always more dragons to slay. But what if the game is historical, set in 1938, and the player characters just overthrew Stalin? How does the narrative of the game proceed from there, without exiting or rupturing the very historical context that originally defined the game's setting? There is an intrinsic friction as sovereign choice grates against the specific and stable circumstances of history necessary for organising a historical narrative or setting.

The private experiences of the PCs do not always collide with history in this fashion. Indeed, if we imagine the game described above playing out, before overthrowing Stalin, the players necessarily first inhabited the Stalinist setting for a meaningful period of time, both in the game and out of it, in their solitary day-dreams, and collectively, meeting for a few hours every week, establishing their world, their PCs' relationships and values, overcoming challenges and likely only overthrowing Stalin at the conclusion of a prolonged narrative arc. There would likely be tense coded conversations, close brushes with the KGB, perhaps a terrifying interrogation or the brutal death of either a player or someone close to the players. Players tend to consciously bring in familiar literary and cinematic tropes, while the randomness introduced by the dice makes the narrative emergent (does your character live or die, trick the interrogator, or break?) The experiences shaped by such play are alternate histories, but these alter-histories are peculiar for having been experienced personally, with players inhabiting or surviving a phantasmagoria of Stalinism in the 1930s, that they themselves imagined; likely both inaccurate, loaded with images from other fictional media, and still paradoxically earnest in the attempt to capture the historical moment, or bring it to life in the collective imagination of the players. The unpredictability of the emergent narrative nevertheless makes the experience feel less like literature or theatre, and more like life, defying scriptedness with turns of fortune or misfortune driven by the dice. Consequently, rather than feeling as though they have read a history, players feel as though they have lived one.

5. Witnessing History: Memorial's 74 and the Suspension of Sovereignty

The first RPG I would like to discuss is not entirely an RPG. It is a board game with a track and does not allow for too many meaningful choices – for the most part, players roll the dice and move the appropriate amount experiencing historical and personal events. This, as I will show, is an important component of its rhetoric, supplemented by a device from role-playing games, where at the conclusion of the game, players are asked to narrate their PC's personal history under the USSR. All RPGs are structured around a certain freedom of choice, while 74 (1980s, author unknown), is consciously choiceless, offering no opportunity to take agency, other than through this finalising narration that turns the game into a kind of family history. At the same time, unlike the racetrack board games whose formal structure it adopts, 74's track does not represent capturable territory, but rather a full span of history: 74's space can only be passed through, never won.

The currently available version of 74 was released and re-designed in 2017 and made available for download or purchase by Memorial, the human rights organisation declared a 'foreign agent' in Russia in 2016, and which was ordered to liquidate by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation for alleged violation of the "Foreign Agent" Law on 28 December 2021.

The title 74 reflects the number of years that the Soviet Union lasted – the donated original was untitled. According to Memorial, 74 was made anonymously as a samizdat art project at some point in the 1980s ("74. Nastol'naia igra po sovetskoi istorii"). It is not clear how many copies of the original game were created, likely very few. The copy used as a basis for the 2017 release was gifted to Memorial in 2009 by Susanna Pechuro, who received it from Liubov' Kabo (ibid.). Memorial's 74 juxtaposes private existential experience and angst by framing it against the whole span of the Soviet experiment from 1917 to 1991, mapped onto a board game track. The overall structure of the game is a traditional racetrack, a genre of games commonly played by children who enjoy rolling dice until the game ends, but generally disliked by adults who want to make choices in their games. Here the game spatially begins in 1917 and ends in 1991, but everyone reaches 1991 in due time, making racing an unimportant part of the game, with the focus instead on the historical and personal experiences accumulated along the way.

In 74, players follow two courses – the personal and historical, with separate circular tracks marking off the chronotopes of the prison camp and the international trip, where player pieces may move due to events in the game. However, the major emphasis in 74 is on characters, as each player begins with a discrete profession – at first, Worker, Labourer or Past-Person (pre-revolutionary elite), and quickly accumulates new roles in response to historical events, becoming a Soldier, Expert, Chekist, Enemy of the People, or after de-Stalinisation, a Marginal.

Figure 6.1: Cards from 74 (2017)

Left: Chekist. Caption: Work in national security isn't for everyone, acquaintances behave carefully with you. In red: This character cannot go to jail. Arrest means execution by firing squad; Right: Enemy of the People. Caption: Political charges and the camps are a mark for life, and your health is ruined. In red: A player with this character cannot expend private life cards. All private life events affect the enemy of the people.

These accumulations of identities are accompanied and shaped both by historical events and private events which appear as the PCs traverse both the historical and personal tracks. Private events are by-and-large tragedies or problems, while historical events are not necessarily tragic, except insofar as they represent historical trauma. Thus, for instance, the card "1937: The Great Terror" demands that players roll a six-sided die, going to the camps on one to five as an Enemy of the People, or becoming a Chekist on a six. This means players fundamentally have no control over the vicissitudes their alter-egos suffer from history. This is clearly a device, as one of the consequences of becoming an Enemy of the People is being subject to all, rather than only some events on the personal track (and these tend to be terrible). In effect, the game models the experience of the Enemy of the People by having them experience more of the game directly – an intensification of the normal play experience – you are swept along by the waves of history more powerfully than the other players, but all of you lack control over where history sweeps you – to a camp or into the KGB – and that is the point.

This type of representation transforms the basic epistemology of the game into a personal narrative generator – players do not choose to join the repressive apparatus or perish heroically, it happens to them automatically, due to the roll of the dice, but chance here produces the distinct feeling of authenticity. It is no longer a stranger that dies in the camps or joins the repressive authorities – your fate is in play. The designers drive in this implication with their end-game rules which request that players go around the table

telling their personal and typically tragic story of the Soviet experiment by reading their identity cards in sequence and filling in the details via improvised narration. This twist resonates with role-playing games, creating a fascinating situation where the delivery of an ideological or rhetorical message is not couched in a pedagogical tone of knowing authority, but offered first to chance and then to the players themselves for articulation. This recitation of the family history is a player's only opportunity to express their agency within the game, allowing for the greatest freedom in either coming to terms with their PC's actions and experiences, or framing them in a meaningful way. What seemed to be a representation of history as a torrent of chance and fate, detached from personal choice or responsibility transforms at the end, suddenly holding players personally responsible for witnessing and memorialising their alter-history.

74 is not about simulating the Great Terror – it is about simulating the life of ordinary people as the Great Terror passes over them, as they are threatened by the authoritarian apparatus or co-opted by it. Its epistemology is drastically different from the vantage point of traditional history, but it is equally different from that of the personal journal – juxtaposing the two, collapsing one into the other and, most significantly, investing the player with the obligation to make sense of it – to take up a fictional epistemology and make it compellingly their own. Sovereignty of choice appears to be a wilfully missing factor from the game play of 74, a fantasy that consciously will not be indulged. But isn't sovereignty the utopian promise of such games and their experiments with identities?

6. Exacerbating Politics with Magic: *Red Land's* Experiment with Ideological Identity

Numerous games from the post-Soviet world, however, have attempted to experiment with allowing sovereignty, even an excess of sovereignty that derails and destabilises history, once more relying on the devices of role-playing games, and thus the central device I located within 74: the juxtaposition of history represented as set in stone, or as an uncontrollable current, and the opportunities for agency offered by personal or private alter-histories. *Red Land* (2010–11) by "Shtab' Dukhonina", a Russian collective composed of Egor Borskovskii, Konstantin Trofimenko, Mikhail Shalupaev, and Ivan Ian'kov, is a particularly interesting example, because it further empowers this personal vantage point while exploring a discrete temporal territory – the Revolution of 1917 and the civil war that followed – through a role-playing game.

Red Land uses *Savage Worlds* (2003), an RPG rule system designed to be genre-neutral, accommodating every imaginable narrative, from superheroes to regular people's experiences, as a basis. *Red Land* adds its own content and tilts the *Savage World* system to represent the October Revolution and ensuing civil war. The rules thus encompass historically appropriate identities, professions, skills, weapons and munitions. However, *Red Land* also adds a supplementary magic system structured around the four playable factions within the Red Land: the "Reds" or Communists, the "Whites" or Monarchists, the "Greens" representing the vantage point of villagers advocating a traditional way of life, and the "Blacks" representing either anarchists or professional criminals. Players are to choose their PC's faction, and there is no obligation to choose the same faction – so

players could both be collaborating and opposing one another, depending on the sort of story they are all interested in telling. Similarly, the role of magic is entirely up to the players: it is possible that a given group will either focus on magic or ignore it altogether. Nevertheless, the magical system complicates and accentuates the representation of the historical civil war. Ideologies are materialised and literalised here: for instance, a player whose character is a White cavalry officer, who in a moment of crisis prays for salvation from the godless Reds, might find an actual angel manifesting in accordance with the rules of the game.

This is the case for all the ideologies involved: Red magic relies on 'scientific' experiments using historical materialism and a lot of human blood, Marxist cyborgs and vampire-locomotives. White magic relies on summoning the ghosts of the Imperial past and terrifying Biblical angels, as well as on strict parochial social hierarchies. The magic of the "Greens" is all about rejecting industrial modernity for the united forces of Pan-Slavic witchcraft and paganism. Black magic is not represented as magic at all, rather as incredible luck that allows criminals and anarchists to escape prosecution but is also fuelled by actual demonic possession – an apparently conscious literalisation of Fëdor Dostoevskii's *The Possessed* (or *Demons*) on the part of the designers. The designers also added dozens of texts: faux-newspaper clippings, manifestos, underground agitation and others, both imitating historical materials and supplying alter-historical plot hooks and details hinting at the supernatural or magic.

Rather than playing conventional slay-the-dragon adventures, the game focuses on the historical events and scenarios of the Revolution and civil war. Instead of becoming knights and wizards, players become Bolsheviks agitating in revolutionary Petrograd, a band of Cossack bandits on the front, commissars rooting out counter-revolutionaries, a folk uprising in the shtetl – or any other conceivable scenario appropriate to the setting and exacerbated by the presence of ideologically-charged magic. Gameplay requires a particular commitment to a historical verisimilitude. In games like *74*, a roll of the dice is all it takes to become a Chekist or a political prisoner, in *Red Land* each player has to ask themselves what it means to be a Chekist or a political prisoner, and then act accordingly, as part of the collective fiction developing in the course of play. This verisimilitude is absolutely vital here, because otherwise you might as well be playing *D&D* and asking yourself what it means to be a wizard or elf – identities not intrinsically limited by 20th century political ideology and its onerous demands. It is the intensity of Revolutionary politics and the specificity of the historical moment, and the identities it allows and fosters, that define *Red Land* as a setting.

Historical consistency in *Red Land* is a double-edged sword. It delimits agency, for instance, by forcing players to act as a Bolshevik or White officer of noble birth would (or how they imagine they would), acting out their character's identity both to their benefit and their detriment. However, this consistency also permits meaningful interventions in history: successfully assassinating Lenin, or indeed making him immortal, or any other such acts are possible, provided the players act consistently with the established rules and fiction. This is in marked contrast to *74*, as the agency allotted to players is far greater, and with the addition of magic, so is their power to make an impact on the world. What if Lenin is attacked by the player characters and the ghosts of the monarchy that they summoned? What will the USSR look like under the rule of Baba Yaga?

Figure 6.2: Flavour text composed of fictional newspaper clippings about occult subjects, juxtaposed with appropriated Revolutionary-era posters and photographs. Red Land, p. 151

Red Land opens up history into a kind of playbox, providing opportunities for both actions that feel historically accurate, and that make history radically protean. *Red Land* attempts to territorialise history, turning it from a vast an unknowable territory of endless complexity, into a personal map and narrative shaped by gaming sessions and memories of various ludic accomplishments (e.g.: "remember when we helped Baba Yaga save Lenin's life at the Kremlin in 1924?") producing a multiplicity of alter-histories. As the space territorialised by games is necessarily composed of role-played characters inhabiting phantasmagoric historical chronotopes, the subjectivities shaped by *Red Land*'s territorialisation of history almost necessarily cross-contaminate personal vantage points and the vantage points of governmentality, producing an odd hybrid.

In *Red Land*, governmentality becomes a portion of your character profile – your commitment to the Reds, Whites, Greens, or Blacks and their respective political and governing ideologies is primary and definitive, describing your identity and, perhaps more importantly, your magic, which translates directly to agency within the world of *Red Land*. Within a game of *Red Land*, the PCs define the world and ideology alike: if all of the PCs are, for instance, communist revolutionaries, their narrative arc within the game will become a synecdoche for the entirety of the communist side within the Revolution and Civil War – they will be the heroes and their stories, successful or tragic, will frame the representation of their chosen ideology. They, and only they, end up defining what revolution-

ary communism looks like for everyone involved in the game. In a group where the player characters have mixed ideologies, this effect will only be intensified: a communist revolutionary, White spy, and an anarchist bandit playing together will consciously treat each other's PCs as direct representatives of their respective ideologies, accentuating their political differences for the sake of ludic drama, or having their political arguments inflect the decisions made during play. It is this ludic epistemology – the merger of individual fantasy and a governmentality located in some alter-historical phantasmagoria that I am denoting 'ludic sovereignty', to stress that I am both sceptical of how genuine this sovereignty is and compelled to call it that because of the complexity of the fantasies it evokes.

7.   Responsibility and History: *Atom RPG* and Making Choices

Atom RPG (2018) by the Atom Team, a multinational game indie-development studio based in Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and Latvia, is an excellent example of the complexity and ambition of role-playing games' attempt to represent not only history, but genuine responsibility and agency within history. *Atom RPG* was successfully funded with a small Kickstarter campaign, but was published on nearly every platform, including iOS and the Xbox, a fairly impressive feat for a small indie title. *Atom RPG* uses the RPG form to attempt an exegesis of a confusing and difficult-to-represent historical moment: the collapse of the USSR and Perestroika. *Atom* is unambiguously an homage to another alter-history series of games: the 1990s American RPGs *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*, both predicated on a post-apocalyptic future as imagined in the 1950s – ray guns and talking household robots alongside cannibal gangs and radiation. *Fallout 1* and *2* were set in Southern and Northern California, respectively, as alternate American histories told largely through the landscape, whose recognisable names (Reno, San Francisco, and others) jarred with their post-apocalyptic terrain and mutated inhabitants. *Atom RPG* represents the same sort of post-apocalyptic world-building, but in Eastern Europe. The international team of designers did not follow *Fallout* in depicting a specific geography, instead attempting to capture a temporal terrain.

At first glance, their approach is to scatter various geographical references, making the territory of the game both recognisable and not. For instance, one of the major cities in the game is Krasnoznamensk, which is west of Moscow, while the starting hub is the village Otradnoe, near Sochi, but they are within walking distance in the game. The names do not reference the actual locations, instead acting as broad Soviet-style signifiers: Krasnoznamensk translates as "Redbannerton", the village – as "joyful". These names are chosen as generic markers of the socialist world. Visually, *Atom RPG* evokes an immediately recognisable East European terrain and Soviet architecture and naming conventions, one both totally phantasmagoric and familiar.

Instead of the 1950s, this alter-Russia is supposed to be the 1980s (following a nuclear apocalypse and the detonation of multiple atom bombs), yet in its jokes and references, *Atom RPG* instead allegorises the first post-Soviet decade. Such contemporary references were already present as small easter eggs and jokes in *Fallout*, but here they are exacerbated to the level of major factors in the game's plot. *Atom RPG* refers constantly to such

diverse sources as Vladimir Sorokin's postmodern novella *Monoklon* (2010), post-Soviet hip-hop, Perestroika-era cults, and the Russian literary canon, all framed as encounters within a post-apocalyptic landscape, and effectively representing the collapse of the Soviet Union as an explorable geography.

One of the first non-player characters who can join the PC is the protagonist of *Grandfather Mazai and the Hares* (*Dedushka Mazai i zaitsy*), Nikolai Nekrasov's 1870s narrative poem commonly assigned to and read by Soviet school children. In the poem, Mazai is an old man who rescues hares from a spring flood. Here, he (and his hares), is the aging Soviet intellectual, fixated on the literary tradition and living ethically while still trying to build communism. In another scene, the protagonist goes to see the dead Lenin, or rather Lenin's mummy, who turns out to be faking his death (or just impersonating Lenin) for profit – Lenin lives! Immediately adjacent to Lenin is an obvious reference to Mariia Devi Khristos (born Marina Tsvihun), leader of the prominent early 1990s cult YUSMALOS, who is depicted in *Atom RPG* in her recognisable pose of offering a blessing to the audience.

So, what exactly is happening here? The player is exploring a post-apocalyptic Soviet wasteland, in a game set in an alternate history of the 1980s, but keeps encountering references to the post-Soviet world of the early 1990s, its politics, jokes, cults, and ideologies. *Atom RPG* is using the personal vantage point of the role-playing game as a mechanism for exploring and understanding the contradictory and messy post-Soviet moment and taking a sovereign position within it.

In one of the most telling scenes, the player encounters a madman who calls himself "Monoklon". In a scene directly parodying the scene in the New Testament, when Christ encounters a man possessed by enough demons to call themselves "Legion", the player avatar can choose to exorcise the Monoklon into a herd of pigs, by calling upon the spiritual power of communism, in a kind of perverse rite that sacralises socialist materialism: "By the will of the presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Part of the Soviet Union, leave this proletariat, oh unclean ones! Begone!" In Vladimir Sorokin's novella *Monoklon*, the narrative proceeds as a dialogue between several wealthy and sophisticated individuals in their mansion. Towards the very end of the narrative, the mansion is suddenly invaded by armed people, who seem to have some sort of police authority, but speak in an utterly incomprehensible tongue, that nonetheless is unmistakably the language of brutal and immediate violence. The reference to Sorokin's novel evokes it as a representation of epistemological collapse – of meaning disappearing under a wave of violence, of words no longer making sense except as supplements to violence. The player's paradoxical ability to exorcise the confusion through the magic of communism is meaningful here.

This juxtaposition of the New Testament and Sorokin's postmodernist prose invests the jumbled setting with a clear purpose. *Atom RPG* represents the Soviet post-apocalyptic as concurrent with the post-Soviet day-to-day, as characterised by the fragmentation of meaning and sense, a multiplicity of narratives, voices and myths struggling for competition and creating a violent cacophony. However, the player's intervention in these narratives and their role as a territorialising agent, completing all the quests in one city and moving on to the next, clearing a particular zone of monsters and artifacts and moving on to the next, all the way until the conclusion of the game, allows a fantasy of or-

ganising and traversing the historical space represented. *Atom RPG* culminates with the player asked to choose to either empower the old forces of Soviet history, embodied by a cabal of authorities from the Soviet regime soldiering on in a military bunker in order to restore the old world, or support the new forces of post-apocalyptic change, embodied by a nomadic militant organisation capturing the post-apocalyptic world for the future. History here becomes condensed in a single decision enacted by the player if they successfully territorialise this strange new terrain.

Atom RPG tackles history as an impossible tangle of ideologies and utopian projects but offers this entanglement as a territory that can be travelled, captured, understood, and ultimately mastered. Sovereignty becomes a crucial factor here: in *Atom RPG*, you are sovereignly deciding how history ought to progress from the chaos of the post-Soviet 1990s, but the choice is reductive and achieved through violence. *Atom RPG* cannot articulate or imagine a sovereignty that is not made possible by the apocalypse – the collapse of all social structures, and a wasteland ruled by violence are necessary factors here. The end of the world removes those social institutions that *Atom RPG* ultimately asks you to judge – it is only possible to defeat the forces of the old Soviet world because the atomic apocalypse has locked them in a bunker. It is similarly possible to re-empower them. The players have to make the choice themselves.

8. Fragmentary Selves in Post-Soviet History

Disco Elysium (2019) the computer role-playing game by the Estonian anarchist art collective ZA/UM, is the unlikely case of a game developed as an art project, but that goes on to become internationally famous as both a cult hit and a bestseller with more than 40 million dollars in sales world-wide (cf. Game-Stats 2019). For an indie project developed by an Estonian anarchist collective, *Disco Elysium* was remarkably successful with both fans and critics, earning 10/10 reviews from virtually all prominent video game sites, and sweeping multiple video game awards in 2019. The primary writer behind *Disco Elysium* is Robert Kurvitz, who developed the elaborate setting and the history of the world within which the video game is set over the course of multiple table-top RPG campaigns conducted with friends in the last two decades and using an original RPG system designed by Kurvitz towards this end (cf. Apperley/Ozimek 2021).

Disco Elysium is not a typical role-playing game. It attempts a more ambitious ludic epistemology, exploring ideology, history, and memory from a non-violent vantage point and through doubling-down on the radical potential in the new and alternate identities and histories made possible by the role-playing game. There are no *D&D*-like monsters, or even combat mechanics in *Disco Elysium*: violence is possible, but it is represented as tragic, swift and devastating to every human being involved, and everyone involved (other than a hallucinogenic cryptid that is not easy to meet) is a human being. The game consists of territorial and psychic exploration. The protagonist is an amnesiac, possibly named "Harry", who awakens in a strange city from what turns out to have been a lengthy alcohol and amphetamine stupor, devoid of any memory of their world or themselves. You are told, however, that you are a cop, and are investigating a crime – a murder, in fact. The dead man still hangs in the courtyard of your motel when you awaken, it has

been a week since the apparent lynching. You are told you have been drinking heavily, singing, and screaming that you "don't want to be this kind of animal anymore" for hours during the night, and days on end. Nothing else is known, at least, at the start.

Solving the murder, and the larger mystery of who you are, is the premise and plot of the game, but the focus is on the self – on the protagonist's lost inner world, their broken life, that they are desperate to recover and understand. The protagonist is not a singular entity. The character sheet within the game splits him into twenty-four distinct attributes, all of them individually voiced within the game as separate personalities. Each has demands, insists on its own importance, chatters, and offers insights. Your Encyclopaedia bombards you with irrelevant facts and trivia, your voice of Authority insists you flash your badge and remind everyone you meet that you are the law around here, your Electro-Chemistry really wishes that you did more drugs, or maybe just had another cigarette, your Inland Empire intuits that the murder victim was killed by communism. Can any of them be believed or trusted? Do any of them represent the authoritative voice of the authentic self? The player can expend their experience to improve these areas, strengthening some attributes and their insights, while dampening others. Whenever they encounter a challenge that tests an attribute, the game visibly rolls dice, and even if improved with experience, failure is always a possibility. The game changes as a result, in each case, with success and with failure, and with each choice – as each "Harry" played is different – an authoritarian bully for one player, a warm-hearted empath for another.

The game also encourages Harry to adopt a political stance, offering unique content depending on if Harry chooses communism, fascism, neoliberalism or "moralism" (a parody of status quo liberalism within the game). The murder at the centre of the plot is also directly historicised and politicised. The lynched man is a representative of the neoliberal forces that destroyed the revolution. The local socialist labour union takes responsibility for his lynching but is not actually responsible. The real murderer is a man still fighting for the communist revolution, as far as he is concerned, alone and without hope. The neighbourhood has anarchists and nazis, capitalists and thieves, all invested and involved. The identity chosen by the player is unambiguously political and has a direct impact on how the city's history continues to affect its present. In one game Harry will solve the murder and become a homeless alcoholic, in another they might become an artist, or rejoin the police force, or quit drinking, or accuse the wrong person of murder. Harry's many potential selves reveal him to be a synecdoche of his city, and his multivalence and potentiality signal the same multivalence and potentiality as the rightful inheritance of the post-Soviet world, for better or for worse.

The game adjusts to all such playthroughs: whatever the protagonist chooses to do with themselves and their future is supported by the game's flexible narrative. The documentary film *Making Disco Elysium: The Importance of Failure* (2020) by Outcast Docs, makes the case that the roll of the dice – that central ludic device drawn from role-playing games – is strategically and conceptually important in *Disco Elysium* (cf. Outcast Docs 2020). The documentary argues that rather than treating dice rolls as prompts to either succeed, moving forward with the intended and planned plot where Harry solves the murder, finds his identity and returns to the police, or failure, where the game stutters, and the player needs to try something different to get back on track, the game leans into failure. Through failure, the game embraces all outcomes, even those that in other games would

represent the player's having failed to overcome a challenge or losing track of the 'proper' plot. In *Disco Elysium*, your failures accumulate as meaningfully as your successes, as points of contact, development and potentially growth for the ludic subjectivity that is Harry, and his voices and thoughts. This ludic epistemology constructed around failed rolls of the dice, allows ZA/UM to experiment with an antiheroic protagonist, tormented and vulnerable, someone whose personal life has failed, who is residing in a failed political state, threatened by global capitalism and a looming climate disaster, someone who will not be fixed by any solved murder, and almost certainly not by returning to the police force. Failure is crucial to the historical representation as well. The failure of the communist revolution to create a better world is key to the game's central problems and philosophical conflicts, thus the accentuation of failure as a ludic device must also be seen as a historical argument: the failure of the revolution is a ludic problem, play again and play it differently.

Accordingly, rather than abilities or powers, Harry accumulates beliefs, which join the "Thought Cabinet". These have a mechanical function, improving certain skills or granting other advantages or disadvantages to represent the political, social and emotional conclusions that Harry draws from his experiences: everything from deciding to quit drugs, to deciding to embrace them, to obsessive, haunting nostalgia for a lost love, to direct commitment to the political ideologies of fascism, communism, capitalism and others. All these are available as potential avenues for Harry to believe, internalise, discard, or replace. No ideology or value system is represented as intrinsically superior (though fascism is clearly mocked and denigrated, while communism is treated with both cutting irony and a palpable hint of sadness – ZA/UM had no intention of making an apolitical game or hiding their leftist commitments).

The character-building systems and epistemologies of the role-playing game here become a poignant metaphor for postmodern identity and identity formation, for the necessity of making political and personal decisions without having moral absolutes or essential origins to rely upon. Harry is contingent and patchwork, his memories and identity shift constantly as he tentatively explores the world around him, lying about what he knows and does not know, or honestly acknowledging his amnesia, grasping for meaning and purpose in a world where both meaning and purpose are clearly mediated by blind chance, and the decentred accumulation of experiences and failures in your character sheet.

Disco Elysium reflects on these dynamics directly within the narrative. If the player decides to explore one of the major buildings in the neighbourhood's top floors, Harry discovers the abandoned studio of a company that once developed role-playing games about identity. A bare trace of their ludic epistemology remains in a 20-sided die that Harry finds and pockets, a small symbol of his own search for identity, and the contingent and random meaning that will necessarily emerge from it.

At the conclusion of the game, a minor plotline culminates in an easily missed but crucial encounter, when after hearing myths of a cryptid living in the reeds around the city, Harry actually encounters it; a marvellous, hallucinogenic mantid. The cryptid speaks to Harry, expressing profound sadness and grief at the terrifying human condition. Harry calls the creature "insane", to which it responds:

"No. *You* are. The moral of our encounter is: I am a relatively median lifeform – while it is you who are total, extreme madness. A volatile simian nervous system, ominously new to the planet […] 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. […] Everything your eyes touch goes back there – behind the thought mirror. What if you blink? Are we still here? (Please don't blink). What if you misplace us all one day – or just forget?" (ZA/UM 2019)

This encounter articulates the model of the self that emerges from the ludic epistemologies of role-playing games: tentative, decentred, the fragmentary portrait of humanity not united by omnipresent heroic narratives of unity and fantasies of domination and power. An experimental and vulnerable alternative self, shaped acutely by meaningful and painful choices, still fiercely powerful, ruthlessly engaged, capable of rethinking, reassessing, transforming, and awakening the world around it – as dangerous as it is full of promise, as rudderless as it is driven. *Disco Elysium* evoked a powerful set of both critical and fan reactions, from serious discussions about drug abuse and alcoholism, which the game portrays both playfully and with stark tragedy, to critiques of its political and historical message.

In an article called "A Year Later, I Still Cannot Stop Thinking About Disco Elysium" (30 August 2021) for Kotaku.com, a popular gaming website, Renata Price stresses that the fragmentations of Harry and the city of Revachol are intimate allegories of trauma, as it reverberates in both history and private memory:

Martinaise, the Revachol district within which *Disco Elysium* takes place, is sick. There is a body hanging from a tree, it has been there for over a week now. This is not normal for Martinaise, but for most people it is acceptable. Children, trapped in a haze of drugs and trauma, treat it like a plaything. The district has been sick for a long time. The Antecellian Civil War destroyed Revachol's monarchy, so the rest of the world destroyed the city. Following a successful communist revolution, the Coalition of Nations (the game's U.N. equivalent) unleashed a swift and violent campaign known as Operation Death Blow. Martinaise was one of its primary targets. The district was all but obliterated by artillery, and it has not recovered in the five decades since. This was the trauma that has since seeped into the bones of the city […]. (Price 2021)

Figure 6.3: Alexander Rostov, Disco Elysium, *main menu and loading screen showing the city from the vantage point of the murderer, 2020*

Harry is a synecdoche of the city and history of Revachol, the setting of the game that is as much a protagonist as Harry. Revachol's history is presented throughout the game: its communist revolution, both optimistic and terribly bloody, economically and militarily crushed by the 'Moralist' nations of the world, making Revachol a colony-state for capitalist enterprise. The district explored throughout the game still bear the traces of the bombardment, walls marked with the executions of the communards. It is also a city struggling for its identity and history between the push and pull of communist, capitalist, moralist and fascist pasts. Harry's identity struggles are thus a reflection of global issues – the personal is truly political here, and since the personal is the exact domain upon which the game focuses mechanically, its epistemology becomes an epistemology of political history after the collapse of communism. Just as the PCs in *Red Land* inevitably came to stand for their chosen revolutionary or counter-revolutionary ideology, so does each player's Harry-experience become a representation of the post-Soviet condition, and the trauma both of the communist experiment and its collapse.

Revachol's symbol is the statue at the centre of the game's urban centre. The statue is of the ex-monarch of Revachol, who was overthrown in the communist revolution. The statue was blown up by the communards, but during the counter-revolution, a Dadaist art group re-assembled the monarch's statue without restoring it, preserving the king in an on-going state of explosion. The patchwork king stands still, torn chunks of stone on metal wires, a symbol of eternal and unceasing revolution without resolution. This indeterminacy, in which players intervene through Harry's soul-searching and crime-solving, not only mirrors Harry's fractured subjectivity, but also invests it with distinct meaning, monumentalising the post-socialist moment when the king is neither overthrown, nor reigning, but is frozen in perpetual explosion and fragmentation, unable to either remain a statue or to become nothing. The indeterminacy turns this post-utopian or post-dystopian state into its own distinct era, as fractured and still as unitary as Harry himself, or as the player playing Harry.

Much of the game's political conflict is centred around the murder that Harry investigates. The murdered man is a mercenary working for a moralist corporation, ostensibly killed by the local socialist union, who are striking against the corporation. The actual murderer, however, is an old communard, who never stopped fighting the long-since-lost war against capitalism and imperialism, dementedly continuing the lost cause from a nearby lighthouse with a sniper rifle. He murders the mercenary while he is in bed with a local woman, seeing their consensual affair as a symbolic violation of Revachol's political history. However, the socialist union takes the blame, claiming to have lynched the mercenary as a rapist, due to a complex triangle of desire between the socialists' lead enforcer, the murdered mercenary, and the woman in whose arms he died. Failing to solve the crime adequately leads the corporation to send a fully armed mercenary squad against the socialists and their union, with tragic consequences for the entire neighbourhood and city. Here the personal and political are inseparable, not on the level of ideology, but on the level of sex, life and death, as personal conflict mirrors or exacerbates political history, bringing back old traumas and staging huge issues as personal interactions.

Price writes of the communard assassin:

> You find an old man with a gun. He is broken by the world and full of bullets, almost like you, Harry. He lived the revolution, loved it actually. Married himself to it. And it was murdered. So he sits on this shitty little island, alone. He eats rations and watches the city through the scope of his rifle. He hates it. Every bit of it. He is a warning of what you might become. (Ibid.)

The old man is Harry if Harry hadn't lost his memory, hadn't surrendered to oblivion allowing for the clean, if broken slate upon which the game's narrative relies. The amnesia is structurally equivalent to beginning a new game here, with Harry wiped clean once more, but the player is not granted the same privilege as Harry, as they are repeatedly forced to make sovereign decisions within the game, remembering all outcomes, even as they reload or change their mind.

Disco Elysium affects the player through the constellation of two familiar epistemological vectors: that of the character sheet, which attempts to map personal identity, and that of the representation of the city itself, which is composed both of the explorable, interactive area in the game, and several aesthetic images of it within the loading screens and start screens of the game.

Aleksander Rostov, the primary artist behind *Disco Elysium*'s visuals, chose an expressionistic, even fauvist aesthetic of sweeping strokes, dissonant and unblended colours and physiognomic grotesqueries. The epistemologies of the character sheet and the visual dimension once more constellate the personal and political right from the start. The starting screen is a digital painting of a vista of Revachol, including all of the areas visited by the player during the game save one: the lighthouse where the communard and assassin is still fighting for communism one sniper shot at a time.

The assassin's location is identical to our vantage point in this image – we see Revachol as he would from his lighthouse – indeed, if we focus our eyes just to the left of the equine statue of the detonated king at the centre of the image, we will see a solitary sliver of light – the window of the hotel where the murdered man was shot. Our aesthetic gaze

upon the landscape can readily become the murderous scope of the political assassin, and once more the personal and the landscape become equally relevant epistemologies of a historical moment. Both the total fragmentation of a unitary self and the total fragmentation of ideological clarity become equivalent terrains that *Disco Elysium* embraces as fragmentary, as broken, and yet as ludically redeemable, mappable, reconcilable through the act of play, which renders all such complexity legible and redemptive as either character sheet, or map or both: "All of it in service of producing narratives strong enough to cope with trauma after trauma, and realising that, despite all the broken things inside of you, you can still touch and be touched by other people." (Ibid.)

Memory is thus a crucial axis and motif within the game – Harry loses his and comes to terms with the fact that he may well have lost it for a reason. The world is losing memory too, quite literally, as the world of *Disco Elysium* is suffering from a slow apocalypse at the hands of a devouring fog called "The Pale", which is strongly implied to be the materialisation of the weight of human history, a destructive and corrosive process of erasure. Memory is also a crucial formal device. The structure of the game is such that the player is often tantalised by a particularly ludicrous choice, with having Harry misbehave or act outrageously. Often after reading Harry's outburst, or otherwise unacceptable act, the player feels a bit troubled, reloads and tries a different approach. It is possible to do many reprehensible things in *Disco Elysium*, from internalising fascism, to striking a child, to attempting suicide to make a point in an argument. All these potentialities are sustained by the memory of the player, who makes bad choices, and then must decide to either stick with them, maintaining the narrative course, or reload, trying for a different Harry and a different sovereignty. This is fundamental to the game, and central to its philosophical argument – just as Harry must decide who he is, deprived of memory, so do you, the player who possesses the means to turn back time and try a different approach, must decide what your game is, and why you are playing it.

9. Conclusion

The representations of history in these games demand that the player not only make meaningful ideological choices but take responsibility for how these choices affect the world. In the process, contingent, and phantasmagoric ludic histories become allegories for examining and coming to terms with the complexities and contradictions of historical experience. Whether by allowing choices, or restricting them, turning history into a map, a district, or an individual, games make arguments about the histories they represent. Such ludic epistemologies do not produce authentic historicity. The alternate histories these games generate are necessarily allegorical and symbolic rather than factual. Nevertheless, through conduct and play their allegories become existentially meaningful, convincing the player that they experienced something authentic within the fiction, compelled and tested as they were by their own sovereign choices and the weight of their own memories.

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74. *Nastol'naia igra po sovetskoi istorii*, produced by Baryshnikova, Natalia/Vorontsov, Roman/Lomakin, Nikita/Starostin, Vasilii, Memorial, Tabletop RPG, 2017.
Atom RPG, produced by Atom Team, PC/Mac/Linux, 2018.
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Dungeons and Dragon, produced by Gygax, Gary/Arneson, Dave, TSR, Inc., Tabletop RPG, 1974.
Fallout series, produced by Cain, Tom, Interplay Entertainment, PC/Mac, 1997–2004.
Red Land (*Krasnaia Zemlia*), produced by Shtab Dukhonina (Borkovskii, Egor/Trofimenko, Konstantin/Shalupaev, Mikhail/Ian'kov, Ivan), Tabletop RPG, 2010–2011.
Savage Worlds, produced by Hensley, Shane Lacy, Pinnacle Entertainment Group, Tabletop RPG, 2003.

List of Illustrations

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Figure 6.2: Text composed of fictional newspaper, Red Land (2010–2011), p. 151.
Figure 6.3: Main menu loading screen from the Game *Disco Elysium*, designed by Alexander Rostov, 2020.

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