A Group of Socialists Created a Hit Game That Tore Them Apart

Sept. 17, 2025

Disco Elysium is a detective story with the soul of a tortured poet. A role-playing game that gives you the freedom to be a psycho, a saint or a human car crash. After Harry Du Bois wakes up on the floor, he must make sense of both a vexing police investigation and the smoldering wreckage of his personal life.

Along with those central mysteries, the game's literary prose and serious politics resonated with an audience hungry for mature storytelling. The magazine PC Gamer ranks Disco Elysium, which was released in 2019, as the second-best computer game of all time.

Creating something so radical took a team of outsiders: a group of socialist punks and artists from Estonia who had never made a video game. Though the writers come from a leftist background — they thanked Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels at an award ceremony — no ideology is spared from their lacerating critique. In Disco Elysium, you meet capitalists, unionists, monarchists, fascists and communists, all of them flawed, and must decide with whom your sympathies lie.

The creators had no idea that their game, a far cry from the first-person shooters and sports simulations that dominate the market, would become a meteoric success and Estonia's most prominent cultural export in years. They also had no way of predicting how thoroughly everything would soon fall apart.

Disco Elysium has sold more than five million copies, an impressive number for fresh intellectual property by a new studio. But despite the critical and commercial acclaim, a sequel was canceled. A tangle of lawsuits were filed. And now five rival studios are working on games that could be viewed as the spiritual successor to Disco Elysium.

It is a sprawling, spiteful battle about who should profit from the creation of a lauded game and be able to continue its story.

"Once it was done and success arrived, all this bad blood and pressure that was held in had a chance to surface," said **Argo Tuulik+**, a Disco Elysium writer who now runs a competing studio. "Of course it's sad that it fell apart. But the way I started thinking about it in recent years was that it's a miracle that the team stayed together for so long."

There is a bitter irony that the key themes of Disco Elysium — class, labor, capital — would loom over the splintering of its own studio. That the competing voices narrating this real-world drama would come to resemble the warring personas of Harry's psyche. That a fan base

trained on the game's detective work would become real-world sleuths, attempting to unearth what really happened in forum threads and nine-hour YouTube videos.

"This was a group of friends who had never made a game professionally, who could not have got funding from legitimate channels and so had to make enormous compromises to get it out of the door, like hiring a financial criminal or selling off more of the company," said **Dora Klindzic+**, who worked at the studio for two years after Disco Elysium was released. "Then all the bad decisions started to pile up when the game actually shipped."

In Disco Elysium, Harry Du Bois (in the black trench coat) and his partner Kim Kitsuragi (in the orange jacket) must solve a murder case while

contending with Harry's deteriorating psychological state.

ZA/UM

D&D Meets Cop Show

The ZA/UM Cultural Association was a collective of leftist writers and artists who gathered in the Estonian capital of Tallinn starting in the late 2000s. They painted, made music and wrote edgy prose on a popular blog called Nihilist.fm. Some played tabletop role-playing games set in a universe of their creation known as Elysium. The steampunk world of urban decay, political turmoil and biting snow resembled their own Eastern Bloc childhoods seen through a cracked mirror.

The dungeon master was **Robert Kurvitz+**, sharp-featured with a sandy sweep of shoulder-length hair, who earned a reputation for his visionary imagination and ability to turn stories into exciting, interactive gameplay.

"Robert loved stories, so he thought to give the world stories back," said **Martin Luiga+**, a co-founder of the cultural association who played those early tabletop games and then edited for Disco Elysium. Kurvitz's storytelling gifts, he said, are an obsession with details and a talent for turning narrative into gameplay mechanics. There was also his powerful charisma. "He had intense energy and you got really carried away by his emotions," Luiga said.

With his friends, Kurvitz, now 40, created a world so rich

and layered that he decided to turn it into a novel, spending five years writing "Sacred and Terrible Air." After the book sold only 1,000 copies, he told GamesRadar, he lapsed into alcoholism.

Kurvitz had published the book with the help of **Kaur Kender+**, a bald, hulking figure with a maze of tattoos who was an enfant terrible of Estonia's literary scene. In the years preceding Disco Elysium, Kender was charged in a high-profile case with the production of child sexual abuse material because of a novella containing scenes of sexual violence against children. He argued that his work was a satirical exploration of the dark impulses of the human psyche, and was ultimately acquitted of all charges.

It was Kender's idea to turn the world of Elysium into a video game, leading Kurvitz to write a one-page synopsis: Dungeons & Dragons meets '70s cop show, a story set in a poverty-stricken ghetto with serious moral themes and socioeconomic depth. They were inspired by computer role-playing games like Baldur's Gate and Planescape: Torment, which prioritized writerly storytelling and player choice over graphical spectacle.

"I remember going to the door to let him in," **Aleksander Rostov+**, Disco Elysium's art director, has said of his early discussions with Kurvitz. "He looked me dead in the eye and said, 'My friend, we failed at so many things. Let us also fail at making a video game.'"

The game’s fictional city of Revachol recalls the Eastern Bloc home of its creators. While exploring a run-down urban landscape, the player encounters communist revolutionaries and police brutality.

ZA/UM

Playing a Great Novel

A production cycle that would last five years began in 2015 in a squat in the Old Town neighborhood of Tallinn, where the roof leaked and the electricity would sometimes cut out.

As the contributor most familiar with the economics of culture, Kender, now 54, was asked to raise money from investors. “Video games are art and business combined, and that’s the perfect place to be,” he said. He personally

financed the first year of the new studio, also called ZA/UM.

“I sacrificed everything to make Disco Elysium,” he recalled. “I sold my Ferrari, my Bentley, even my apartment where my kids were living.”

A ragtag band of socialist art punks had turned into a conventional business with shares, venture capital and dozens of employees. **Margus Linnamae+**, who made his fortune from pharmaceuticals and owned one of Estonia’s biggest newspapers, became Disco Elysium’s lead investor.

In 2017 and 2018, most of the team moved to England to be closer to an established gaming industry. Kurvitz declined to comment for this article, but Tuulik described the production pace as grueling but satisfying.

“At least a year before release,” he said, “it was already very clear that we had something really special on our hands.”

When Disco Elysium was released on Oct. 15, 2019, it won over players with its mature storytelling, grimly beautiful art style and the melancholy grandeur of its soundtrack, by the band Sea Power.

“I think people naturally gravitate to anything that has a strong sense of integrity,” said **Justin Keenan+**, the principal writer on the game’s expansion. He added, “The

quality of the writing, art, music and voice-overs all say: Here's a complete work of art, rather than simply a commercial product."

Experiencing Disco Elysium is like playing a great novel. It is unashamedly intellectual and hopelessly in love with language, with over a million words of dialogue. Through its rich characters, the register flows between surreal humor ("You're a man with a fork in a world of soup"), noirish poetry ("This is all you have, but it's still something. Streets and sodium lights. The sky, the world. You're still alive.") and quiet dignity and compassion ("Every school of thought and government has failed in this city, but I love it nonetheless").

Gameplay is mostly a series of dialogue choices that shape the version of Harry you want to be. Disco Elysium challenges you with moral ambiguity and humors those who experiment with chaotic play styles.

"If there's no combat, no lizard-brain loop for you to return to over and over, the only thing drawing you into the game, into the world, is the quality of the thoughts it generates inside your head," Keenan said.

At the center of it all is the melancholy figure of Harry, whose demons are vividly realized as competing voices that represent different facets of the detective's personality. He anchors the game as a study of decline — of his body, his mind, his past relationships, the entire city

around him and its political systems. Most games are power fantasies. Disco Elysium is an exploration of failure.

Moral decisions during the investigation — such as whether to trust a necktie that regularly chastises your actions — continuously shape Harry's character and affect the game's outcome.

ZA/UM

Conflicting Narratives

When ZA/UM released the game's expansion in March 2021, which added full voice acting and four new missions where players can deepen their exploration of Harry's political choices, it was working on a sequel and appeared to be riding high.

Then it became clear all was not well.

A short blog post about the dissolution of the Estonian cultural association that Luiga published in 2022 revealed that Kurvitz, Rostov and **Helen Hindpere+**, another writer on the game, had involuntarily left the company. Kender, one of Disco Elysium's executive producers, was fired not long after.

Kurvitz and Rostov claimed in a statement that the investors Ilmar Kompus and Tonis Haavel had illegally taken control of ZA/UM and then fired them for asking questions. "The company we built has been looted," they wrote, arguing that "money that belonged to the studio and all shareholders" was instead "used for the benefit of one."

(Kurvitz and Rostov have sued the studio in an unresolved case; Kender filed and then withdrew his own lawsuit.)

At the time, the studio said the employees were fired for legitimate reasons, including failure to produce work, toxic management and attempting to illegally sell the studio's intellectual property.

In a statement to The New York Times, ZA/UM said "the departure of previous team members in 2021 could have been handled better, and we learned a lot from that incident and implemented several changes." It noted that no employees have left to join the rival studios.

ZA/UM continued to design games, but in February 2024 news spread that it had canceled at least two of them, including another expansion and a sequel that Tuulik, one of the game's writers, said "would have blown Disco Elysium out of the water." The company also laid off a quarter of its staff.

"While Elysium certainly deserves further exploration, both for creative and commercial reasons, we decided to pursue alternative projects at the time," ZA/UM said in its statement.

Where did it all go wrong? Just like in the game's detective fiction, there are conflicting narratives, contradictory accounts that echo the sparring voices in Harry's head.

Some say ZA/UM was cursed by Disco Elysium's success, which created too much pressure to produce a similarly praised sequel. Another theory is a clash between brilliant but chaotic creatives and efficiency-minded managers. Then there is the possibility that a lot of big personalities with personal demons, including depression, alcoholism and egomania, managed to put tensions aside to create a groundbreaking game but never focused on establishing a sustainable studio.

Or perhaps beginning the development of Disco Elysium in a place like Estonia, with little industry infrastructure, required deals with dodgy investors — Haavel, the game's

other executive producer, was convicted of investment fraud after a failed development in Azerbaijan — that came back to bite the studio.

After disagreement about who deserves credit for Disco Elysium's success, several of its key contributors have created new studios, each with a spiritual sequel in development.

ZA/UM

A Five-Way Fight

Most of the five games that Disco Elysium alumni are working on will not be released anytime soon, if at all. But that has not stopped fans from closely following the interpersonal conflicts and creative arms race.

ZA/UM

Justin Keenan+

The furthest along is ZA/UM, whose next game, Zero Parades, shares Disco Elysium's painterly art style and themes of politics, failure and reckoning with the past. Players control a female spy who is asked to reunite former collaborators for an important mission.

"Disco was a great first draft for a new type of game," said Keenan, the narrative director of Zero Parades. "Now we need to show what the next draft looks like."

Red Info

Robert Kurvitz+ Aleksander Rostov+ Helen Hindpere+

Red Info, a studio established by Kurvitz, Rostov and Hindpere, has $10 million in backing from the Chinese

tech giant NetEase and is partnering with Chris Avellone, a renowned games writer who worked on Fallout 2 and Planescape: Torment. But it has announced no specifics about its first project and declined to answer questions because other Disco Elysium creators were being interviewed. A spokesman said the other studios looked “like a circus to us and we do not want to participate in that circus.”

Dark Math

Kaur Kender+ Margus Linnamae+

Karmo Ruusmaa/Dark Math Games

Kender used a multimillion-dollar investment from Linnamae, Disco Elysium's lead investor, to start the studio Dark Math, whose first game, Tangerine Antarctic, is a science fiction story set in a resort in Antarctica in 2086. Its trailer, released when the game was called XXX Nightshift, closely resembles Disco Elysium in layout and in that there are different voices in your character's head. But Kender said he was planning to switch to a third-person perspective, differentiating it from the Disco formula.

Longdue

Martin Luiga+

The fourth studio, Longdue, is early in development on a game it plans to release in 2028 called Hopetown, which tells the story of a journalist exploring a mining town inspired by South Africa. Its lead investor, the tech entrepreneur Riaz Moola, had no involvement in Disco Elysium but has brought on Luiga and Lenval Brown, who voiced that game's narrator.

Moola said that Longdue was trying to do more than "just copy and paste Disco," and that he had a positive take on the successor studios. "It would be sad if all that Disco Elysium made was Disco Elysium 2," he said. "This is actually better for everybody."

Summer Eternal

Argo Tuulik+ Dora Klindzic+

Summer Eternal, another rival studio, has not announced any details about its game and is the most embattled. It was formed by Tuulik and Klindzic, who left Dark Math after disagreements with Kender and then contributed to Longdue's story for Hopetown before departing under acrimonious circumstances. (Tuulik has been in legal disputes with Moola and ZA/UM over noncompete clauses and copyright.)

"Everyone who made Elysium should be able to work with and benefit from it," said Tuulik, who is planning to run Summer Eternal as a worker co-op because he wants to prevent any one person from gaining too much power.

That the real-world drama has not eclipsed Disco Elysium itself is testament to its enduring power. Fans eager for easy resolutions may need to learn a lesson from the game — that there is no ultimate truth, no neat conclusion. Like Detective Harry Du Bois, they must patch together meaning from the ruins and try to move on.

Produced by Tina Zhou and Rumsey Taylor.