

Fatal Women in *L.A. Noire* and *Disco Elysium*

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Abstract

ZA/UM's *Disco Elysium* (2019) and Rockstar's *L.A. Noire* (remastered 2017) may appear to be only distantly related as detective fiction and noir thrillers. Yet I argue that they have much in common because they share many genre conventions, particularly in terms of the femme fatale. Both games follow classic conventions that define the femme fatale as a "bad woman" who deserves her fate. I demonstrate how critics and fans resist these conventions, creating new ways to understand this archetypal character.

Transcript

Note: this transcript was written by the author, and it was not copy-edited by *The Digital Review* or the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies.

Have you ever been playing a game and suddenly you are struck by how playable and NPC or a non-player character could be? Maybe you became curious and thought "hey, why can't you play as that character?" Good question and the answer often rests with the narrative genres that build games into worlds. As Patrick Jagoda says games alter our sense of reality – they build worlds we occupy. Yet may game worlds are remodeled and remixed genres that bring with them the ideological baggage of their most popular and durable forms.

I am going to call these durable genres (or forms of stories that have been retold sometimes over centuries – think tragedy, think westerns, think detective stories). These genres have conventions and characters that have become repeated so much over time, they are regularized and widely distributed across cultural fields – so much so they become the standard by which what's normal and natural is defined. And in video games, these durable conventions and durable characters drive game mechanisms (like game targets and actions) often reinforce anachronistic stereotypes or as Gerald Voorhees explains genre (and let's be exact here – rhetorical genre theory) it is a conceptual tool for studying historically contingent formations of text and practice. Here I'm going to argue that the noir genre (its most popular and entrenched form is the detective noir thriller adapted from the western in the 19th century United States) recycles the convention of the femme fatale. Perhaps the best way to describe this durable and rather misogynistic character is to use a classic game as an example: *L.A. Noire*.

Noir has conventions that are instantly to many audiences, across film, comics, graphic novels, television and of course video games. In these scenes from Rockstar's *L.A. Noire* (developed by Team Bondi and released in 2011 and remastered in 2017 – also the first video game shown at the Tribeca film festival), there's often detectives; "dames" in distress, dark alleyways, violent crime, corruption. You get the picture.

Much like the cultural work of the western, the noir thriller polices gender (pun intended). Let's get to the femme fatales in this game (yep, there are multiple femme fatales, each of whom is murdered by a serial killer).

Before I go on much further, I want you to know I am showing graphic violence against women in a couple of scenes. The reason for doing so is this: it's one thing to for me to say there is graphic violence as part of the gameplay and quite a bit of the violence in this game is enacted on women NPCs and it's

another to show the type of violence against women that occurs in a number of Triple A games. Did you know L.A. Noire has sold millions of copies (in both 2011 and 2017)? Games influence how we think, fantasize and behave. These scenes are short, but I believe crucial to understand the level of dehumanization here.

Set in 1947 Los Angeles (and credit where credit is due – Rockstar knows how to create atmosphere through player character travel, whether by horse or car), you play as social outcast (due to his intellect and ambition), Cole Phelps who rises through the ranks of the L.A. PD. If you want check out how masculinity operates in the game, take a look at my book *Manifest Destiny 2.0: Genre Trouble in Video Games*, this video is about femme fatales solely.

As per the American noir genre Femme fatales are punished and so it goes in this game, but really, most NPC characters who are identified as women are punished in one way or another. Please be advised, I am going to be briefly talking about pedophilia and rape here. For example, Cole Phelps is promoted to the homicide desk (and desks are really levels in the game) just after Phelps solves what the pedophilic rape of girl (Jessica Hamilton) who has run away from home to be an actress. This casting couch trope (and noir often brings in historical realities that informs the realism of the genre) involves a really creepy film producer, Mark Bishop, but one who traffics Jessica to win a part in Bishop's B movie is June Ballard. Women who are ambitious, like Jessica and June – who want more from life are punished. Or put another way through a patriarchal lens, women who are "conniving" get what they deserve and noir both exploits this ideology. Video games make misogyny playable.

Lauren Berlant among other scholars interested in queer and feminist theories identified this ideology as part and parcel of neoliberalism, which is not simply an economic theory, but a paradigmatic ideological juggernaut. Women perform as handmaidens – think of the trad wife. A (predominantly) white woman who fulfills a duty to safeguard the home, be the moral compass, and know her place: silent, subservient, knows how to make a sandwich. Femme fatales transgress this role and are punished.

I'm going to talk about a series of cases Cole investigates as part of the homicide desk: Cole chases a serial killer over his time as a homicide detective and investigate five murdered women: Celine Henry, Deidre Mahler, Antonio Maldonado, Theresa Tarleton, and Evelyn Summers. The red lipstick murder, the golden butterfly, the silk stocking murder, the white shoe slaying, the studio secretary murder, and the Quarter Moon Murders. Please fast forward here by about 20 seconds if you do not want to see the brutally maimed body of one murder victim (and most of the murder victims follow this pattern):

I'm going to focus on Celine Henry as the first case, because her body is focused on quite a bit. Her body is nude, it's mutilated. But in this game, women are relegated to being bit players and all of these women are silenced. Phelps is the one who gives voice to their murder by investigating, by asking questions, by investigating.

And we end up interrogating the men in her life, the husband, the man she's having an affair with, her bartender. But all of these men paint a picture of a woman who was disturbed in the throes of alcoholism. She was an embarrassment, a problem. This is where Rusty Galloway says maybe her husband Jacob needed to take her in hand more.

She fails to be a good wife, because she didn't want to play that role. We find out she was a pilot and we see her depicted in a grainy photo. She had dreams and goals. They are muted by the fact that she did not perform her role as a white woman properly. She did not act as the moral compass of the home, because she was too busy having a good time and wanting to live her life.

And another warning – I want to show Cole’s casebook which is part of the rewards system. His notebook allows the player to collect “intuition” points that can be used interrogations to guide the player toward correct answers. It's where you can take a look at your evidence when you're interrogating someone, but also you get a picture of whatever you're investigating. And in this case, it's Celine Henry's naked body. The femme fatale, in this case Celine Henry is not simply a monstrous figure, but a monstrem, Latin for warning – she is a caveat and cadaver – a warning, which is a type of lesson. Women who misbehave will be punished. Now that L.A. Noire has set the stage (and let’s face it, Rockstar is not known for its feminist games that treat women with respect).

Let's turn to Disco Elysium, often considered a progressive game, a game that challenges the status quo through its meta-analysis of genre (it’s definitely a self-referential game). A game where if the player -character ideas, he is sent into social realism. But there is a point where L.A. Noire and Disco Elysium intersect. The homicides of these women mean nothing to the ending of the story. The power of genre, so to speak, seems to have compelled the game directors, writers, and developers to include femme fatales.

I’m going to focus on Klassje Amandou, a classic femme fatale and talk a little about Ruby the Instigator, her friend (and possible lover?).

Klassje is hidden in the upper part of whirling and rags, the hostel and bar that Harry. That is the central place Harry can go back to to rest or regain his strength. He also destroys his room in a drunken fit or rage. It's a central space to the game, a hub (players can pay rent and sleep; they questions suspects....and...ahem...sing terrible Karaoke....but I digress. It’s also where Klassje and Ruby conspire together.

We don't actually see this conspiratorial conversation and resulting actions (which I won’t reveal b/c I’ll spoil the game. Sure it was released in 2019 and was based on a novel by Robert Kurvitz, the lead creator of the game but I don’t really need to tell you the big reveal to make my point). These characters are quite popular on the Disco Elysium sub-reddit, probably because these NPCs have a really cool backstory that’s only talked about within the framework of the main player-character’s story arc. In other words, like L.A. Noire, these femme fatales have little to do with where the main character, Harry (Harrier) Dubois (or Dubois?) ends up. They were part of a cover-up.

We just don’t get a lot of info about these Klassje and Ruby...who are they beyond Ruby being a drug smuggler and union enforcer? Or Klassje as sexy corporate spy in a sparkly, silver jumpsuit, smoking seductively whilst answering Harry and his partner Kim’s questions? Did Ruby and Klassje have an affair? Redditors would like to think so. Is that because these are the only two women in the game that have any relationship to one another? There are interesting characters in the game – such as single parent and widower Lilienne who Harry can ask on a date and if he is successful, she gives him some kind of powerful sword. Or corporate executive Joyce Messier who gives Harry and Kim all kinds of critical info. NPCs as handmaidens and helpers.

These are interesting NPCs. But they don't relate to each other. They're just put in relationship to Harry and Kim. But again, the main intersection is that these games have these women in them, and they have nothing to do with the how the game ends, both games and very differently from where they begin, where you think they're headed.

Of course, classic noir move. But also it's a classic noir move to make women secondary to remove their agency. Disco Elysium game play depends on is skill checks and character sheets that are quite complex and have more to do with the organization of the mind, specifically Harry's mind. The

player can organize his thoughts and build different skills so he can interact with NPCs more effectively.

Players have to assess where they're going to apply these skills. Players assemble Harry's psyche and learn how he ticks.

Women, though, are mainly presented as fantasies in Harry's head. He tends to think of his ex as a deity of some kind, a Madonna figure.

Ruby and Klassje are NPCs designed to help guide Harry towards the final confrontation with the actual murderer. Klassje ends up being a liar, a cheat. That's how she's framed. And it doesn't matter how. Even though the story has an incredible number of branching narratives and dialog, as you can see here, we don't get that much with Klassje or Ruby. Yet are hot topics of discussion on Disco Elysium subreddits. For two characters that don't have a lot of background, that are really fleeting in terms of the trajectory of the game, they've generated a lot of discussion, and especially about their backgrounds, which we don't really know. We do know that Klassje had a torrid sexual affair with the murder victim, a merc named Lely.

When we meet up with Ruby, we find out that it's not Ruby. She committed the murders. She's just covering up for Klassje because Klassje is her friend. Is it because Klassje is also a refugee?

All of the speculative speculation points to the fact that fans are really pushing back against the genre, which is meant to simply display the surface level of women who are betraying their womanhood. Ruby is a criminal. She's a drug smuggler. She clearly has deep feelings for Klaus. Whether that's sisterly, whether that's because they are they've had a relationship.

Who knows? That's not really clear, although it's implied in the game.

The main thing to understand, though, is that we know they have a relationship of some kind. We know that Klassje lied and that Ruby is willing to cover up for Klassje, and that she did not commit the murder of the mercenary Lely.

We also know that Klassje is traumatized by Lely's death and the events surrounding his murder. She stays in her apartment where she can clearly see Lely's body hanging, rotting, even though it's dangerous for her there. What does that mean? Who knows? Because the goal of noir is to say these femme fatales are mysterious. We don't know their motives. We just know that they're not good women. They don't meet the standard set for them through durable genres like noir, detective fiction, the western and so on (I mean I guess we could go all the way back to Genesis).

My point is that fans are not willing to follow genre conventions, and genres are adaptable and flexible – fans are filling in the blanks through various online venues.

As Sarah Stang puts it - "players [fans] are dictating how the game's narrative should respond to their actions."

Fans seem to not want to be railroaded down certain narrative paths. The game has a lot of branching narratives and choices for Harry (although they are limited, not endless), but both Ruby and Klassje are not given many options when it comes to their end. If Klassje arrested, the implication is she's going to be murdered in prison because she's a corporate spy. If you let her go, she's banished from Revechal. She cannot return. Ruby, the instigator, doesn't have a great

end either.

When Harry and Kim corner her under the Feld Building, she has a weapon called a Pale Latitude Compressor that she uses to attack Harry and Kim - Harry and Kim are in extreme pain, but she doesn't want to hurt them (and she even says, I know you're pretty uncomfortable – she seems apologetic). Why is she like this? Why can't we learn more? As per genre conventions (and again, the genre can be changed, but durable genres seems to normal, even natural, there seems to be little to no exigence in this regard) there's only two ways this could end for her. Quick warning here – the following analysis discusses suicide.

One is Harry breaks the compressor and she points a gun at herself, and if you do not roll the correct check, she will kill herself. And so that's one end. The other end is if you don't break the compressor, she escapes. And so either way, the femme fatales are silenced, much like in L.A. Noire.

And what a missed opportunity – coming full circle from the beginning of this essay - we could have played as Ruby, tracking down Klassje, even just as a side quest. That would have been so interesting. Instead, these women are just silenced. And often we go into Phasma and Assassination Land, but on this subject I won't say anything more.

In both games, the femme fatales are complex characters flattened into two dimensional stereotypes. Rather than seeing these women as failures or as silenced by men or as victims of the patriarchy, all of that may be true. I think I'd rather at this point, start reading games through the lens of Helen Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa*, published in 1975.

An amazing essay that recasts Medusa not as victim to Perseus, who beheads her not as a monster, but as a laughing, empowered feminine warrior who defies the very values that she is supposed to follow. Shira Chess builds on Cixous' work in *Playing Like A Feminist* – published in 2020, Chess challenges patriarchal presentations of women in philosophies of play and playing. Many fans seem to be on board. And as critics, we can choose how to read these characters, because at the end of the day, fans are the ones who can give these women voice and agency if game creators won't.