

Mood in Video Games: Intermedial Strategies and Narrative Experience

In my doctoral project, I examine mood-centered video games and the narrative experiences they afford. I understand mood as a sustained and pervasive tonal state – different from short-lived, object-oriented emotions – that arises from the aesthetic qualities of video games (Carroll 2003; Caracciolo 2017; Sinnerbrink 2012; Brenkman 2025; Salmose 2018). Drawing on enactive narrative theory (Polvinen 2023; Caracciolo 2014), which highlights the dynamic engagement between perceivers and narrative strategies, and bringing it into dialogue with intermediality (Elleström 2021; Jørgensen 2018), I explore how video games use intermedial strategies that tap into players' embodied and cultural backgrounds. These strategies activate experiential traces associated with specific moods, and I argue that the resulting moods shape narrative experiences that also point toward the broader sociocultural conditions in which the games were created.

My analysis focuses on two award-winning video games: *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013–2020) and *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019). I identify several intermedial mechanisms through which these games can evoke mood.

1. Latent materialities and media representations

Both games draw on the structures, materialities, and sensorial qualities of other media. In *Kentucky Route Zero*, an interior, enclosed melancholy is produced through theatrical staging, pop-up book imagery, deep shadows, and paper-cardboard textures. In *Disco Elysium*, oil-painting textures, an open-world layout, dollhouse-like cutaways, and overwhelming colors create a more diffuse, subliminal melancholy.

2. Audio dimension

Kentucky Route Zero, despite its ambient soundscapes, foregrounds quietness and encourages players to imagine listening. When voices or music do appear, they stand out and become significant. *Disco Elysium* contrasts this with extensive voice-over narration, voiced characters, and a strong soundtrack featuring location-specific leitmotifs.

3. Language presented as drama text through hypertext structures

Both games use poetic language and hypertext structures that shape the rhythm of reading, creating pauses and shifts of attention. Their dialogue systems often resemble drama scripts, reinforcing the need for further intermedial investigation.

From these strategies, mood emerges in ways that invite narrative experiences involving encounters with personal pasts (subjective memories, precarious experiences), collective pasts (media nostalgia), and contemporary ecological crises that link the video games to sociopolitical realities that created them (the haunted, petro-dependent and capitalist driven Kentucky in *Kentucky Route*

Zero and post-failed-revolutionary Eastern European setting in *Disco Elysium*). My preliminary conclusion is that these different intermedial strategies activate distinct registers of mood and thus offer distinct narrative experiences: a self-ironic, self-deprecating melancholy in *Disco Elysium*, and a more tragic, mournful, elegiac tone in *Kentucky Route Zero*.

Overall, I propose that mood, arising from experiential cognitive, cultural, and affective thickenings (Caracciolo / Kukkonen 2021), conjured in turn by the intermedial artifice of the chosen video games, opens new ways of relating to memory, be it personal or collective, and crisis.

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