

How Camera Is a Part of the Narrative in Kentucky Route Zero and Disco Elysium*

Vibhas Arora

2025-04-08

*GAME 471

Introduction

Both *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013–2020) and *Disco Elysium* (2019) are narrative-driven games that use unconventional camera movement, framing, and perspective to tell their stories. In video games, the “camera” refers to the player’s point of view onto the game world. Unlike typical games that hand full camera control to the player or mimic film cinematography, these two titles deliberately constrain and craft the viewpoint for storytelling effect. This artistic choice aligns with philosopher Jacques Rancière’s idea that aesthetics and politics intersect in determining what is perceivable in a given situation. As Rancière writes, “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak”¹ In other words, the way something is shown (or not shown) is never neutral. In *Kentucky Route Zero* and *Disco Elysium*, the design of camera and perspective is a narrative device that shapes what the player sees and knows, thereby influencing the story’s tone and themes. This essay will examine how each game employs camera movement, framing, and perspective to enhance its narrative, using direct evidence from developers and critics. The analysis reveals that both games turn technical constraints into purposeful storytelling—crafting viewpoints that reflect their characters’ worlds and comment on broader social realities.

Theatrical Perspectives in *Kentucky Route Zero*.

Kentucky Route Zero uses a striking visual style heavily inspired by theater and stage design. The player’s perspective is largely fixed, and the camera is not freely controlled by the player. Instead, the game frames each scene like a diorama or a stage play, with careful composition and movement. One of the game’s creators explained that *Kentucky Route Zero*’s visual approach drew on stagecraft: “Visually, we’ve taken a lot of inspiration from theatrical set design, in the way the environments are structured and presented”². This means the game often presents its environments in wide, long-shot compositions, similar to viewing actors on a stage. The influence of theater is evident in how scenes transition and how the “sets” are revealed to the player. Critics have observed that this theatrical framing leads to a unique use of perspective in *Kentucky Route Zero*. Jordan Youngblood notes that the game’s spatial and aesthetic style emphasizes a Jordan Youngblood observes that *Kentucky Route Zero* features “a confusion of perspectives. In each scene, the camera is not controlled by the player, and the characters are always dwarfed by the immensity of the spaces they occupy. . . . These techniques let the player see the same scene from different

¹Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14.

²PC Gamer, “*Kentucky Route Zero* Interview: Choice and Introspection in the Magic Realist Adventure,” *PC Gamer*, January 18, 2013, <https://www.pcgamer.com/kentucky-route-zero-interview-choice-and-introspection-in-the-magic-realist-adventure/>.

vantage points, but never in its totality”³. By preventing the player from ever seeing the entire environment at once, the game creates a sense of mystery and vastness. There is often more in the scene than the player can immediately see, reinforcing the themes of hidden depths and secret highways in the story. Large objects in the foreground—like building facades or girders—frequently obscure parts of the view, with the small player-character visible in the distance. This framing choice visually conveys how the characters are small figures in a much larger world. The player is kept at a remove, peering at the scene as if an audience member in a dark theater, which fosters a tone of contemplative distance and melancholy. Despite this distance, the game’s camera moves with purpose at key moments to guide the narrative. Yussef Cole describes that Kentucky Route Zero eschews the typical free-roaming game camera for a more intentional approach: “Instead of a disembodied camera tethered to the game’s characters... all motion and framing in Kentucky Route Zero is preconceived, purposeful, and done with rigid restraint. Moving between spaces recalls the scene changes of a play, with the fabric and architecture of the previous scene dissolving and falling away as new layers move resolutely into the light.”⁴. Indeed, scene transitions in Kentucky Route Zero often occur by literally shifting scenery. For example, at one point a house interior dims and a barn appears in the background as if the stage set has changed in front of our eyes, rather than a cinematic cut occurring. The camera might subtly pan or zoom not to simulate a player’s viewpoint, but to reveal a new facet of the scene or to follow the characters to the next “set.” This careful choreography of camera movement “in one unbroken moment” reinforces the theatrical illusion (Reed 2021). The game avoids quick cuts or first-person immersion instead it keeps the player aware of the act of looking. We watch events unfold at a slight distance, which suits a story about observation, memory, and things slipping just out of reach. The important part is the controlled perspective also aligns with the story’s themes of systemic power and personal powerlessness. By design, the player cannot simply look wherever they please; our act of seeing is governed by the game’s direction. In a sense, the game itself plays the role of a silent director, deciding what we get to witness. This can be interpreted in light of Rancière’s notion of the “distribution of the sensible” – the game’s design decides what is visible or invisible in the experience⁵. The characters in Kentucky Route Zero are working-class figures lost in labyrinthine economic and bureaucratic systems (a bankrupt antique truck driver, out-of-work miners, destitute families, etc.). The camera’s tendency to dwarf them in cavernous spaces or obscure them behind foreground objects subtly underscores their marginalization. We literally see them as small and obscured, which is an aesthetic reflection of their social

³Jordan Youngblood, “Have You Ever Heard a Worm Sing? The Spectral Ecology of *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act V,” in *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis*, ed. L. Op de Beke et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024), 341.

⁴Yussef Cole, “Theatrical Spaces,” *Bullet Points Monthly*, March 18, 2020, <https://bulletpointsmoonthly.com/2020/03/18/theatrical-spaces/>.

⁵Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 13-14.

position. At the same time, the game invites empathy by occasionally pushing the camera in a bit closer during intimate moments, such as conversations in cramped interior spaces. There is a notable “lack of the distance that comes from seeing everything through a camera lens” in some scenes, creating surprising intimacy despite the overall detachment ⁶. In those moments, the player feels closer to the characters, as if sitting with them in the glow of a TV or around a bar’s counter, sharing in their quiet struggles. Thus, Kentucky Route Zero’s controlled framing can both keep the player at an artistic distance and break that distance for emotional impact, much as a theater performance might. The result is a narrative experience where how we see is as important as what we see. The camera becomes a storyteller, revealing and hiding information to pace the narrative’s mysteries and to mirror the characters’ journey through an otherworldly, dreamlike Kentucky.

Isometric Perspective and Ideology in Disco Elysium

Where Kentucky Route Zero feels like watching a play, Disco Elysium presents the player with an angled top-down view reminiscent of classic isometric RPGs. On the surface, Disco Elysium’s camera perspective looks more traditional, but it is used in an unorthodox, symbolic way to serve the story. The game is rendered in a painterly 3D world viewed from a fixed isometric angle. As one analysis explains, “Disco Elysium is presented through an isometric perspective, which means that the camera is locked ‘above’ the main character and looks down at the world in such a way that it appears three-dimensional. This might more colloquially be called a ‘bird’s-eye view’, with the addition of a specified and consistent angle.” ⁷. The player controls a detective, Harry, moving through the city of Revachol. We see him and the environment from a high diagonal viewpoint at all times; there is no option to rotate the camera freely or shift to first-person. This fixed perspective might seem like a mere stylistic homage to old computer RPGs, but the developers imbue it with narrative meaning. Helen Hindpere, lead writer of Disco Elysium, has discussed how the game’s camera perspective was a deliberate commentary. In an interview, Hindpere agreed that the “camera perspective is a good thing to point out” in interpreting the game’s themes. She explained that the default pulled-back view represents an “all-encompassing liberal media view as the lens through which we see reality in the West. So, it was conscious on our part as developers to make the camera perspective reflect that, offering a commentary on how so much of the media is liberal, but presents itself as neutral.” ⁸. In the fiction of Disco Elysium,

⁶Yussef Cole, “Theatrical Spaces,” *Bullet Points Monthly*, March 18, 2020, <https://bulletpointsmoonthly.com/2020/03/18/theatrical-spaces/>.

⁷Tim Anders, *Disco Elysium Through Modernism: An Investigation and Analysis* (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, University of California, Irvine, 2022), 7.

⁸Helen Hindpere, “Forward-looking Return: An Interview with *Disco Elysium* Writer Helen Hindpere,” *The Platypus Affiliated Society*, February 1, 2025,

the camera's vantage is metaphorically identified with surveillance drones (the Moralist International gunships) that hover unseen in the game's world. The standard perspective places the player literally above the action, looking down as an "objective" observer. This cleverly mirrors the mindset of the in-game authorities and the centrist ideology (called Moralism in the game) that claims to be just a neutral point of view. The game is subtly making the player aware that even an apparently neutral camera angle can carry ideological assumptions. By framing the detective's story from on high, *Disco Elysium* mimics how news media or history often take a top-down, supposedly impartial perspective – one that Hindpere notes is actually biased towards the status quo. The narrative then challenges this neutral facade as the player uncovers the political tensions in Revachol. While the camera remains distant, *Disco Elysium* turns the focus inward through its dialogue and mechanics. The player spends much of the game in conversation, not only with other characters but with aspects of Harry's own mind. The fixed external perspective contrasts with these internal dialogues. As a critic observed, "In *Disco Elysium* the world is exactly as it is; there's nothing you can do to change the facts of the case or the reality of the politics of the world – only your perception can evolve and change."⁹ This highlights a crucial narrative point: unlike many games, *Disco Elysium* does not allow the player to drastically alter the game world or its story outcomes. The murder mystery has a fixed culprit; the socioeconomic conditions remain grim. What the player can change is Harry's understanding of himself and his ideology. The camera's unchanging external view reinforces this idea by keeping the world visually constant. The city of Revachol around Harry doesn't transform based on player choice; what changes is the text and tone of Harry's thoughts, which the player influences via dialogue choices. Thus, the "perspective" that truly shifts is a psychological one. The game's visual perspective stays literally and figuratively above the fray, while the narrative perspective digs into the subjective, inner experience of the protagonist. The limitations on camera and outcome contribute to what scholar Seunghyun Shin calls the game's revelation of interpassivity. Shin argues that *Disco Elysium* "purports to reveal the illusion of an agency derived from interactivity", exemplifying "interpassivity—a condition in which either a piece of art or technology acts on behalf of the audience."¹⁰ In simple terms, the game intentionally prevents the player from exerting the usual level of influence (agency) over the story, to make a point about how much is outside your control. The player does not get a power fantasy camera that lets them see every angle, nor can they heroically solve all problems. Instead, like Harry, we are constrained and must piece together truth from limited perspectives. The isometric camera looking down on Harry can feel almost like an indifferent god's

<https://platypus1917.org/2025/02/01/forward-looking-return-an-interview-with-disco-elysium-writer-helen-hindpere/>.

⁹Austin Gallagher, "Detecting Stray Thoughts: Subjectivity and Perspective in *Disco Elysium* and *Psychonauts 2*," *Medium*, September 9, 2021, <https://medium.com/@austingallagher/detecting-stray-thoughts-19ef>.

¹⁰Seunghyun Shin, "*Disco Elysium* and the Intersection of Interactivity and Interpassivity," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 62 (Winter 2023–24).

view, watching a man’s personal and political struggles without intervening. This resonates with the game’s themes of impotence and complicity. Harry is a detective dealing with his own failures and the collapse of grand political dreams around him. The player, too, must navigate the story with only partial information and influence, which creates a deliberate tension. By denying players the omnipotence often expected in games, *Disco Elysium* uses perspective to underscore its narrative of grappling with difficult truths in a world that resists change. The camera shows us the scene, but it is up to Harry’s inner voice (and by extension the player) to interpret what it all means. In *Disco Elysium*, then, the camera movement (or notable lack of movement) and framing serve a double purpose. On one level, they root the game in a noir detective atmosphere – the streets and rooms of Revachol are laid out almost like a detailed diorama for the player to examine, evoking a sense of investigating a crime scene. On another level, the fixed perspective carries symbolic weight: it is the point of view of the establishment, so to speak, that the player must become aware of. Hindpere mentions that there is “no purely neutral observer point of view”¹¹, and the game drives this home by revealing biases in everything from the narration to the camera. By the end, the player may start to question the very lens through which they have been watching the story. This is quite a novel use of camera perspective in a game – turning an old-school isometric view into a narrative commentary on objectivity and ideology.

Conclusion

Although *Kentucky Route Zero* and *Disco Elysium* have very different settings and stories, both demonstrate how unconventional camera framing and perspective can become powerful narrative devices. *Kentucky Route Zero* uses a side-scrolling, theater-inspired camera to emphasize certain imagery and themes: the smallness of its characters in vast, surreal spaces, the layering of visible and hidden elements, and the gentle transitions that feel like stage scene changes. This crafted visual presentation complements the game’s exploration of memory, loss, and the invisible economic forces shaping people’s lives. *Disco Elysium*, on the other hand, adopts a classic overhead game view but repurposes it as a statement on perspective itself – what seems like a neutral angle in fact reflects a particular worldview, and the game’s story of a broken detective coming to terms with political realities is reinforced by that static, distancing viewpoint. In both cases, form and content align. The aesthetic decisions about camera are not merely for style; they determine “the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation”¹² in the game’s world. By curating what the player sees and how they see it, these games invite the player to engage with

¹¹Helen Hindpere, “Forward-looking Return: An Interview with *Disco Elysium* Writer Helen Hindpere,” *The Platypus Affiliated Society*, February 1, 2025, <https://platypus1917.org/2025/02/01/forward-looking-return-an-interview-with-disco-elysium-writer-helen-hindpere/>.

¹²Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14–15.

the narrative more thoughtfully. We are made conscious of our role as observers. The framing and perspective choices create a sort of dialogue between the game and the player: they force us to consider why we are being shown things in a certain way. This represents a political stance on storytelling. As Rancière suggests, “aesthetics is a delimitation of... the visible and the invisible” that in turn “determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience”¹³. Kentucky Route Zero and Disco Elysium each, in their own style, limit our vision to expand our understanding. By moving the camera with intention or holding it fixed in place, by framing scenes like artfully composed tableaux, these games use perspective to shape narrative meaning. The result is that players do not just consume a story they must actively perceive and interpret it, aware of the frame that guides their sight. This innovative use of camera and perspective as narrative devices is a major reason why both titles are celebrated as pushing the boundaries of video game storytelling.

/newpage

Bibliography

Anders, Tim. *Disco Elysium Through Modernism: An Investigation and Analysis*. Undergraduate Honors Thesis, University of California, Irvine, 2022.

Cole, Yussef. “Theatrical Spaces.” *Bullet Points Monthly*, March 18, 2020. <https://bulletpointsmonthly.com/2020/03/18/theatrical-spaces/>.

Gallagher, Austin. “Detecting Stray Thoughts: Subjectivity and Perspective in *Disco Elysium* and *Psychonauts 2*.” *Medium*, September 9, 2021. <https://medium.com/@austingallagher/detecting-stray-thoughts-19ef>.

Hindpere, Helen. “Forward-looking Return: An Interview with *Disco Elysium* Writer Helen Hindpere.” *The Platypus Affiliated Society*, February 1, 2025. <https://platypus1917.org/2025/02/01/forward-looking-return-an-interview-with-disco-elysium-writer-helen-hindpere/>.

PC Gamer. “*Kentucky Route Zero* Interview: Choice and Introspection in the Magic Realist Adventure.” *PC Gamer*, January 18, 2013. <https://www.pcgamer.com/kentucky-route-zero-interview-choice-and-introspection-in-the-magic-realist-adventure/>.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Shin, Seunghyun. “*Disco Elysium* and the Intersection of Interactivity and Interpassivity.” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 62 (Winter 2023–24).

¹³Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14–15.

Youngblood, Jordan. "Have You Ever Heard a Worm Sing? The Spectral Ecology of *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act V." In *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis*, edited by L. Op de Beke, J. Raessens, S. Werning, and