

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Dishonored
Platform: PC/Playstation 3/Xbox 360
Genre: Action/Adventure
Release Date: October 9, 2012
Developer: Arkane Studios
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Game Writers/Creative Directors/Narrative Designers: Harvey Smith, Austin Grossman, Terri Brosius, Ricardo Bore, Anthony Huso, Raphael Colantonio, Todd Vaughan, Christophe Carrier

Overview

Dishonored takes place in Dunwall, a sprawling industrial port city in a world of strange technologies and nightmarish sorcery. A deadly plague has been killing the citizens of Dunwall. Following the murder of the Empress, a brutal new regime takes control. In *Dishonored*, the players control Corvo, the late empress's bodyguard. After witnessing the death of the Empress and taking the blame for her murder, Corvo sets out to avenge her death and bring justice to the conspirators.

Characters

- **Corvo Attano** – The protagonist, Corvo, was once the confidant and bodyguard to the Empress of the Isles. The game begins with the Imperial Spymaster framing Corvo for the Empress' murder. A faction of loyalist plotters break Corvo out of prison, and he assumes a new identity as a masked assassin.
- **Emily Kaldwin** – Emily is the daughter and heir of Empress Jessamine Kaldwin. Corvo and the Loyalists attempt to restore her to the throne. She looks to Corvo as a father figure, and the player's actions have a noticeable influence over her values and personality as the game progresses.
- **Jessamine Kaldwin** – The Empress of the Isles. Her assassination sets off the events of the game. Many of her subjects idealize her as a just and kind ruler. After her death, her spirit lives on in the Heart, a grotesque talisman that serves as a guide for Corvo.

- **The Loyalist Conspiracy** – A group of working to undermine the new government by placing Emily Kaldwin on the throne. As part of their plans, they rescue Corvo from prison and employ him as their agent.
- **Hiram Burrows** – Corvo’s chief target at the beginning of the game. Formerly the imperial spymaster, Hiram Burroughs led a successful conspiracy to take over the city. He had the empress killed, kidnapped her daughter, and framed Corvo for the plot, then declared himself regent. His regime hastens the decline of Dunwall, setting the tone for much of the city’s ambiance of despair and oppression during the game.
- **The Outsider** – A mysterious otherworldly being who serves as an object of fear or worship for many characters in the game. The Outsider influences world events by granting diabolical powers to select individuals who catch his attention. Several characters in the game, including Corvo, have received the Outsider’s mark. The Outsider appears in visions to Corvo throughout the game, offering cryptic, sardonic commentary on his actions and questioning his motivations.
- **Daud** – The Empress’s murderer. A legendary assassin who, like Corvo, bears The Outsider’s mark. Normally cold and ruthless, Daud feels remorse for killing the Empress.

Breakdown

Dishonored tells a classic tale of revenge while evoking themes of horror, grief, guilt, intrigue, and oppression. Throughout the game, the player can choose how Corvo takes his revenge, and these choices shape the course of the overall narrative.

The story begins with Corvo powerless to stop the Empress’s death at the hands of supernatural assassins. A group of imperial loyalists breaks Corvo out of prison. They enlist him in their plan to overthrow the Lord Regent and restore Emily, the Empress’s daughter, to the throne. Soon after, Corvo gains additional help from the Outsider, who grants him magical powers. So armed, Corvo embarks on a series of missions to eliminate the Lord Regent and his allies and rescue Emily.

In most missions, the player can eliminate the targets in a lethal or nonlethal manner. While the lethal options are suitably visceral, the nonlethal solutions tend to be more interesting in a narrative sense. Each nonlethal option takes the form of a side objective that results in removing Corvo’s target without killing them. The nonlethal options frequently serve as an outlet for more poetic justice, in which Corvo orchestrates the disgrace and ruin of his targets.

More often than not, these options seem crueler than outright murder. Instead of killing the High Overseer, the head of a militant religious order, the player can have him branded a heretic. As a result, the former High Overseer becomes a homeless outcast and eventually succumbs to the rat plague.

After Corvo overthrows the Lord Regent, the leaders of the Loyalist Conspiracy turn against him and seize power for themselves. In the final missions of the game, Corvo settles the score with Daud, the assassin who actually killed the Empress, and rescues Emily from his former comrades. Ultimately, the player controls whether Corvo pursues justice or vengeance throughout the game. The two paths result in different but equally satisfying outcomes.

Corvo's actions throughout the game have a strong effect on the kind of ruler Emily becomes after her rescue. If the player completes the game by killing most or all of the targets, Emily becomes a tyrant. If the player spares the targets, Emily becomes a wise and benevolent ruler.

Strongest Element

The best narrative element in *Dishonored* is its imaginative, unique setting. The writers infuse the bleak, oppressive city with a sense of depth and history through impressive visual design supported through clever writing and world building. Through bits of overheard dialogue, or scraps of text that the player finds in books, the dark, mysterious world of Dunwall comes to life. These sources flesh out the larger world of Dunwall, and make the game a richer experience.

Unsuccessful Element

The developers of *Dishonored* opted to leave Corvo silent, to encourage the player to project onto the protagonist. This is a common practice in games, as seen in titles such as the *Half Life* series, *Bioshock*, and in many role-playing games. In *Dishonored*, however, the choice is detrimental to the narrative, because it contrasts with what we know about Corvo's background.

The game offers us glimpses into Corvo's personality through the way other characters react to him. We also know a few key facts about Corvo's background. He is common-born, but managed to raise himself to a position of power in Dunwall's heavily stratified society. He served as Lord Protector to the Empress, the first foreigner in the empire's history to attain that rank. The other characters respect him. Emily sees him as a father figure.

We know enough about Corvo to assume that he should be a fully fleshed character, with his own desires and motivations, and this makes the game's handling of him quite jarring. The Loyalists who recruit Corvo may be well-connected political players, but none of them held the title of Lord Protector. One would think that Corvo's former position would leave him with plenty to contribute during the many scenes where the Loyalists discuss their plans. Instead, he just listens and mutely accepts their orders. It seems highly unlikely that a man in Corvo's position would have nothing to offer the loyalist cabal except his sword.

Highlight

The clear highlight of the game was the sixth mission, Lady Boyle's Last Party. In a game full of memorable moments, this mission is a clear standout. In this mission, Corvo infiltrates a lavish costume ball and the player has to use clues and subterfuge to discover the identity of his target.

In addition to offering a change of pace in terms of gameplay, Lady Boyle's Last Party gives the player a fascinating glimpse at the other side of life in Dunwall. For most of the game, Corvo travels through the seedy underbelly of Dunwall, trafficking with outcasts and criminals in plague-ravaged back alleys. The wealthy and powerful hide in well-guarded mansions behind thick barriers and armies of guards.

The scenario of indifferent nobility hiding from a plague is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's classic short story, *The Masque of the Red Death*. As with Poe's story, a frightening masked visitor walks among the revelers, bringing the horrors of the outside world into their decadent refuge. In this case, the player serves that role.

In a brilliant stroke of subversion, Corvo's signature guise, by now feared across the city, grants him free passage. The partygoers assume that the outfit is a tasteless but timely joke.

This glimpse into the lives of Dunwall's elite social circles stands as the game's strongest moment in terms of gameplay and story.

Critical Reception

Dishonored's story received generally positive reviews from critics, though most reviewers responded better to the game's setting than to its plot.

The game received a score of 91 from IGN. In his review, Cam Shea stated "It's a fascinating world with a memorable cast, not to mention an interesting overarching tension between mystical pagan magic and industrialization, but all these elements never really feel like they come to fruition." Susan Arendt at The Escapist gave *Dishonored* five stars, noting that "Its story of political intrigue and betrayal is told at exactly the right pace, balancing information with action in a way that keeps you interested, but not overloaded."

Dishonored also received nominations for a Story award at the 9th British Academy Video Game Awards, Outstanding Achievement in Story from the DICE awards, and Best Narrative at the 13th annual Game Developer's Choice awards.

Lessons

- Setting is a powerful tool for enhancing and establishing narrative. The developers of *Dishonored* took the time to write interesting and well thought out lore for their game world. As a result, the overall experience of the game is much more rewarding.

- The choice to leave the player character mute can offer benefits or adverse effects for the story. In the case of *Dishonored*, the protagonist's silence left a gap in the narrative.
- Exploring sources of inspiration outside of normal fantasy tropes can lead to a more satisfying experience for players. *Dishonored* set itself apart with a setting based more on the Industrial Revolution than in romanticized feudalism. As a result, they crafted a setting that stands apart from other games.
- Leaving some mysteries unexplored can capture the player's imagination, and lead to a more rewarding overall experience. *Dishonored* left the players with countless tantalizing clues about the world outside of Dunwall.

Summation

With *Dishonored*, Arkane Studios created a compelling narrative that rewards analysis. *Dishonored's* setting is also worthy of attention. Not content to recycle tired fantasy tropes, *Dishonored* features a unique and memorable setting. While interesting characters often get more immediate attention in a game narrative, *Dishonored* proves that a well realized setting can have just as strong an impact on a game's narrative.