

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Dishonored 2

Platform: PC/ PS4/ Xbox One

Genre: Stealth Action- Adventure

Release Date: November 11, 2016

Developer: Arkane Studios

Publisher: Bethesda Softworks

Creative Director: Harvey Smith

Game Writers: Sandra Duval, Terri Brosius, Austin Grossman, Susan O'Connor, Cara Ellison

Overview

In the steampunk world of *Dishonored 2*, the player assumes the role of either Lord Protector Corvo Attano or his daughter Empress Emily Kaldwin to sneak their way back to power after a coup ousts Emily from the throne. Infiltrating the dusty city of Karnaca, the player must uncover the origins of the usurper Delilah and gain allies to retake power. Each level focuses on a specific target the player must eliminate in order to regain control of the kingdom. This non-player character (NPC) focused mission structure allows for deep character development for each target as well as an opportunity for the protagonist to grow through comparison. With a mission for each major character, level design becomes a major storytelling device. Level flow and architecture define the characters. Spaces become psychological reflections of motivation. As the player traverses, their experience parallels the struggles of the level's associated NPC. Character development in *Dishonored 2* occurs through level design – the experience of the space is the story of the NPC.

Characters

- **Emily Kaldwin** – One of the possible player characters. The rightful Empress of the Empire of the Isles, Emily is overthrown in a coup and must regain her kingdom by dealing with the insurgents. If the player chooses, she can bear the occult powers of The Outsider, wielding them to navigate the darkest places in Karnaca.
- **Corvo Attano** – The other possible player character, and Emily's father. The playable character of the first *Dishonored*, Corvo is again thrust into seeking revenge on those who ousted his daughter from power. As Royal Protector and Spymaster, Corvo blames himself for not stopping the coup before it started. He is wrongfully accused of being the Crown Killer, a serial murderer killing in the name of Emily.

- **Meagan Foster** – Once a member of the group of assassins who killed Emily’s mother, Megan is the stoic, silent custodian of the player’s temporary home, the Dreadful Wale. Consumed with regret for her past, Megan pays penance by helping the player organize their revenge missions against the agents of the coup.
- **The Outsider** – A mysterious, power granting individual whose true intentions are a mystery. He visits the player characters in their dreams, pulling them into the Void, his home. The Outsider appears as an unassuming man, but constantly flickers in and out of vision, conjuring memory and space from nothing.
- **Delilah Copperspoon Kaldwin** – Claiming to be Emily’s aunt, Delilah orchestrates the coup against Emily and becomes Empress. Driven by revenge against the father who saw her as illegitimate, Delilah made a deal with The Outsider to wield the same power that Corvo and Emily use. Cunning, calm, and self-assured, Delilah surrounds herself with devotees to do her bidding.
- **Duke Luca Abele** – Selfish, power hungry, and short-sighted, Luca Abele is the current Duke of Serkonos and the leader of the coup. He ignores the needs of his city, preferring the extravagant comforts of wealth. He is also deathly paranoid, preaching about his fears over the Karnaca city intercom system and hiring a body double in case of an attempted assassination.
- **Kirin Jindosh** – A brilliant, troubled mind, Kirin Jindosh invented much of the technology of the city and its robotic guard force: the clockwork soldiers. Jindosh is open about his quest for perfection at any cost and has little care for ethics. He loathes his former teacher, Anton Sokolov, from whom he seeks unrequited validation.
- **Anton Sokolov** – An ally in the previous *Dishonored* game, Anton Sokolov is an inventive genius in his later years. He seeks to finish his work in peace but is willing to aid the player character for old time’s sake.
- **Breeanna Ashworth** – Leader of the coven of witches in Karnaca, Breeanna is a worshipper of The Outsider. Her only desire is to please Delilah, who she believes will get her closer to meeting The Outsider. She encourages hierarchy and competition in the witches she commands, making them fight for her attention.
- **Aramis Stilton** – Raised in poverty, Aramis amassed a fortune in the Karnaca mines and became a reluctant member of upper crust society. Kind hearted and generous, he seeks to help the poor and sick, but must fraternize with the political elites to do so. In one of these balancing acts, he allows Duke Abele, Jindosh, and Ashworth to resurrect Delilah in his home. Witnessing the ritual caused him to go mad.
- **Paolo** – Leader of the Howlers gang, Paolo terrorizes and extorts the people of Karnaca to make money. He seeks to overthrow Duke Abele to instate his own version of peace. His occult tendencies have put him at war with the other major organization in Karnaca, the zealous Abbey of the Everyman.
- **Vice Overseer Liam Byrne** – Seeking highly regimented peace and order, Vice Overseer Liam Byrne is a leader of the Abbey of the Everyman. His desire to rid the city of occult worship gets in the way of his mission to peacefully control the city.

Breakdown

As one of *Dishonored 2*'s storytelling devices, level layout is a character development mechanism that constructs NPCs as foils to the player characters. A foil is a character who

contrasts the protagonist, or hero, to exaggerate their differences, creating space for reflection. An ancient form of storytelling, foils are used often in heroic cultural works. In his adaptation of Joseph Campbell's work, Christopher Vogler connects the characters in a hero's journey as being facets of the hero themselves [1]. *Dishonored 2* expands on this tradition by using targets as foils and their spaces as playable extensions of their values. When the player enters an NPC's mission, their choices are framed in the ideas the character represents. Playing the level lets the player inhabit the target's desires.

These desires are presented as obsession in the mission *The Clockwork Mansion*. The level focuses on the inventor Kirin Jindosh and represents his fear of failing to overcome a predecessor through his mansion's the maze of elaborate, combinable rooms. For Jindosh, this mentor is Anton Sokolov, the teacher he kidnaps and whom the player must rescue. The player can catch glimpses of Jindosh's struggle to be better than his mentor through private notes in which he admires "though it pains me to admit it, [Sokolov's] legendary creativity." However, the level itself presents jealousy as a playable struggle. Windows in the house can be opened to reveal the back areas – irregular, ugly, storage places behind the intricate façade. Squeezing around these areas allows the player to crawl through Jindosh's metaphorical dark places. In a house whose rooms change and move endlessly, these are imperfect areas that don't fit together. An "inelegant" solution, as Sokolov deems Jindosh's designs in an audiograph found in the house. Exploiting these areas gives the player glimpses into Jindosh's quest to be smarter than Sokolov – which he exerts through tight, unwavering control of knowledge. Jindosh speaks to the player over an intercom, commenting on how much he's deduced about them (if they don't show him their face first). Jindosh uses these comments to appear to know everything. Kidnapping Sokolov allows Jindosh to control his access to knowledge, allowing Jindosh to become smarter than Sokolov. This sets up the non-lethal option for taking out Jindosh – removing his control of knowledge through an electric shock that wipes his memory and leaves his knowledge scattered. In this state, he will never overcome Sokolov's legacy.

The player's journey through *The Clockwork Mansion*'s level design draws a connection between Jindosh's obsession to overcome a predecessor and the same desires in Emily and Corvo. Emily worries she will never live up to her mother's legacy as a just ruler, which she mentions in a cutscene, asking, "Am I the ruler my mother wanted me to be?" Corvo wrestles with the guilt of losing Emily again, as mentioned by *The Outsider* when they first meet, "You've lost another Empress." This begs the question: Can he save Emily for good this time? As a foil, Jindosh and his mansion exaggerate these flaws, reflecting a facet of the protagonists if they chose to go down the dark path of this obsession.

Another double-sided facet of the protagonists, devotion, is explored in the mission *The Royal Conservatory*. In this mission the player must navigate the hulking Royal Conservatory to eliminate Delilah's occult leader and witch, Breeanna Ashworth. The architecture of the conservatory mirrors the relationship between Ashworth and Delilah: devotion and worship of power. Under Ashworth's leadership, the conservatory becomes a shrine to Delilah's magic. Ashworth longs for the magic of *The Outsider*, worshipping Delilah in the hopes that it will bring her closer to ultimate power. She enacts her desire to rule over the other witches in the level, positioning her own quarters at the highest point. All entrances to the conservatory guide the player to these lesser witches first, forcing them to climb the hierarchy themselves. The lesser witches comment on Ashworth's supreme authority, with the witch Francesca warning another that if Ashworth hears insubordination, the offender will "lose an eye." This atmosphere is repeated in the spiraling structure of the building. An architectural feature found in many

cathedrals [2], the conservatory is made of consecutive rings around a large open area. The encircling ambulatory and its hiding places encourage the player to travel in circles around the airy, light streaked, heavenly opening, conjuring a feeling of rising upwards. This spiritual structure equates the coven's ranks with ranks of a religious order – of righteous competition to be the most devoted to Delilah. As the player ascends, bypassing or killing the competition, they find Ashworth in the highest room above everyone else and can eliminate her, effectively taking her place as the most devoted to Delilah.

This replacement sets up Ashworth as a character foil. She and her mission use spiritual architecture to represent the dark side of devotion. The non-lethal path of dealing with Ashworth removes her magical abilities, preventing her from worshipping Delilah to the fullest. Delilah is equally devoted to Ashworth, as her statue will vow revenge on the player for the hurt they have caused her. This parallels Corvo's devotion to Emily and Emily's devotion to her father. A comparison is drawn – does Emily know what, or who, is worth fighting for? Does Corvo let revenge born from devotion make him just like Delilah? The trip to Ashworth symbolizes this character lesson by guiding the player through a spiritual structure that exchanges Ashworth's place in the Delilah devotion power hierarchy with the player.

Level layouts in *Dishonored 2* define NPCs as foils to Corvo and Emily. Each highlight and exaggerate a concern of the protagonists, presenting them with a choice and an example of how their lives would be affected. For Emily, these choices culminate in the ruler she will become. Both the obsession represented in Jindosh's mansion and the devotion encoded in Ashworth's conservatory represent the dark facets of Emily's relationship to her throne and how she could rule once she gets it back. For Corvo, drawing parallels between the obsessed Jindosh and the devoted Ashworth question his abilities as the Lord Protector and what Emily really means to him. These themes are repeated in the endings of the game. Depending on how lethal the player is, Emily and Corvo can follow the dark impulses set up by Jindosh and Ashworth, becoming tyrannical. These intricacies are important to building a cohesive, player centered world that the player manipulates and learns from. By tightly linking level design and narrative structure, the game thoroughly investigates the question of morality and rulership.

Strongest Element

The most emotionally effective moments of *Dishonored 2* occur at the intersection of level design and narrative progression. Usually this culminates in the discovery of an alternative take down method. Exploring a level reveals different choices the player can make about how to “eliminate” the level's target. Usually this involves a nonlethal take down option that has a different outcome on the world. In the case of Breeanna Ashworth's Royal Conservatory level, the player can access Ashworth's personal quarters by sneaking past her while she speaks with the game's main antagonist, Delilah. The conversation can be heard in the quarters above, introducing the player to Ashworth's devotion to Delilah. Rummaging through Ashworth's personal items reveals a close call she had with a broken piece of equipment. The incident almost took her magical abilities. The player has the option of recreating this scenario – rendering Ashworth powerless and useless to the main antagonist Delilah. Although the player did not kill Ashworth, the damage inflicted by losing her power, status, and the love of Delilah devastates the woman. This moment of palpable rage is set up by level design – the process of exploring Ashworth's space uncovers the narrative choices of the level.

Unsuccessful Element

When analyzing *Dishonored 2* through narrative level design, the linearity of the Void levels, in which the player visits the occult realm of The Outsider, lack the enigmatic qualities of the character they seek to explore. A fantastic realm of endless floating islands and pieces of memory, the player can only navigate Void levels by following a series of physically close waypoints at which The Outsider materializes to dictate exposition. This does not inherently detract from the story or the gameplay but does create a conflicting vision of who the mysterious, power granting Outsider is supposed to be. In a game about infinite the possibilities of traversal causing great change on the world, following The Outsider's rails feels awkward. The entire point of The Outsider's intervention in Corvo and Emily's lives is to give them the tools and information to see the many outcomes and paths they can chose for their fates. Yet there are no choices in the Void levels beyond the initial choice to accept powers or not. Imposing a single linear traversal path on The Outsider's world – which he says he can manipulate at will – makes The Outsider seem one dimensional. The player is asked to justify that a being who toys with the fabric of reality can only construct a single path to follow. The spatial representation of The Outsider does not match his narrative function, resulting in a character who lacks the mystery his design and dialogue claim.

Highlight

The mission A Crack in the Slab is the prime example of how choices in a space represent conflict in a character. The player must explore the abandoned manor of former mine boss Aramis Stilton to learn how Delilah gained her occult power. Surprisingly, the player finds Aramis still alive in his home, although his mind his broken. To find out why, The Outsider grants the player a time travelling device to see the manor as it was on the night of Delilah's resurrection. This presents the player with a choice: Deal with Aramis by killing or saving him or leave him to his horrible fate. Reaching Aramis in the past is optional and requires traversing a difficult path laced with more obstacles than the path to the explicit goal of the level. This difficulty is heightened by removing the player's supernatural abilities, such as the rapid teleportation power Blink, from the level, which the player has possibly relied on since starting the game. Taking the hard path to find Aramis and potentially sparing him mirrors Aramis' internal conflict and the reason he was bound to a horrible fate in the first place. As a rags-to-riches man, he seeks to help the poor and sick mining community, but must curry favor with the uncaring, wealthy, occult, city leaders to raise funds. He could take the hard road himself and tell the leaders to leave his home – making it harder for him to raise money. Or he could take the presented path and gain riches quickly. The level navigation choice to save Aramis parallels Aramis' struggles to help his community.

Critical Reception

- **IGN – Lucy O'Brien:** O'Brien takes care to describe *Dishonored 2's* narrative world building as dense and the city of Karnaca “alive,” giving the player “a constant drive to explore.” While critical of the notes and audio logs the game uses to introduce NPCs, O'Brien praises the gradual character development of Megan Foster as “delicate” [3].
- **Polygon – Colin Campbell:** Campbell constructs a nuanced comparison on British history and elements of *Dishonored 2's* narrative. He comments positively on the number

of women in positions of authority in the game, but negatively on Delilah's stereotypical signifiers of evil [4].

Lessons

- **Exploring a space is exploring a character:** Navigating the world teaches the player about their options for changing Emily's rulership through the lenses of each NPC. When the player navigates through the *Dust District* mission, they see a town torn in half by two warring factions and their leaders. The Howlers and their leader Paolo bully and steal, but their side of town has music and a lively bar. The Abbey of the Everyman's side is somber and under tense rules - like the killing of weak overseers - but is orderly under Vice Overseer Byrne. By exploring both sections of the city, the player is given two views of how rules shape the world.
- **A constant character definition structure can lead to complex storytelling:** Even if a player is not explicitly aware of each level using its layout to define a character, they are aware of the consistency of having a main target. This pattern gives the player some expectations going into each level: I will understand more about this level's target as I progress; making navigation choices may reveal hidden information about a character that I can use in my elimination; and so on. The more expectations a player has about a level, the more room for complex character development. In the mission *Dust District*, there are two optional targets, one in each half of the level. Each half functions as a portrait of the targets and their political conflicts. Since the player is expecting to find alternative ways to take out the targets by exploring, the path leading to this information can be layered with more enigmatic story beats. This insures that the player encounters and comprehends complex concepts. The conflict of the townspeople, the financial history of the district, and their effects on individuals in the district are all explained in the portions of the level where these two sections meet - such as the underground soup kitchen between the warring sides. This level of detail is only possible through the understood conventions of the level-as-NPC-exploration structure.

Summation

Dishonored 2's story and level design are one and the same. There is no separation of gameplay and narrative. To play a level is to experience the journey of an NPC. Exploring opens new avenues for the player to advance the narrative, creating a compelling world. Navigating the world demands choices from the player, whose actions have a great impact. This is the core of emotional investment in characters and world - an example of the unique power of story in games.

References

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4. Campbell, Colin. "Class Politics and Social Divisions in Dishonored 2." *Polygon*, Polygon, 25 Nov. 2016, www.polygon.com/features/2016/11/25/13720392/dishonored-2-politics.