Dark Play in *Dishonored*

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When first preparing a chapter for this anthology, I wanted to write a piece on the potential for dark play in games that allow players to respond to situations in different ways and see the consequences of their actions. Role-playing games like *Fable* (Big Blue Box 2004), *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Bioware 2003), and *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007) allow the player to choose to respond to situations in ways suitable to a world-saving noble hero or a ruthless sociopath with no concern for others. Such games have a particular potential for dark play because they allow the player to explore different approaches to the game fiction. Some games are subversive or immoral with respect to the norms of our society, some explore the darker sides of the human mind, and some merely represent a personality which deviates negatively from one's own.

Whereas all the games mentioned above have great potentials for exploring the effect of subversive behaviour on other characters in a playful environment, one game caught my attention because it draws the player towards dark play even when she is aiming to play the good girl. This was the first-person stealth-action game *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012). What is interesting about *Dishonored* is that it is an ambiguous game: it is normative because it favours a stealthy and non-violent outcome, but at the same time it actively uses mechanisms that pull the

player towards the path of vengeance. Through this combination, the game centres the player's attention on the actual possibility that all missions may have a sinister alternative to the expected outcome.

In this chapter I will present an analysis of the design choices made to support dark play in *Dishonored*. Through the analysis I will identify and highlight certain techniques used by the game in order to make the player focus on ethical reflection surrounding the choices of their actions. I will first discuss how the game can be said to support dark play. Further, I will show how the game corresponds with ideas in ethical philosophy, and I will show how the game utilizes other design approaches discussed in game studies and game design literature, and argue that the techniques identified may be used for designing games that deliberately focus on subversive play. Beyond being an in-depth study that shows a specific case of how dark play can be effectively implemented into a digital game, this discussion will also demonstrate how procedural and narrative game mechanics can be combined in game design that pursues a deeper level of meaning.

Gameplay in *Dishonored*

Developed by French-American Arkane Studios and released in 2012 by Bethesda Softworks, the first-person stealth-action game *Dishonored* is available for PS3, Xbox 360 and Windows PC. The player is Corvo Attano, the Empress' bodyguard who stands accused of her murder and the disappearance of her daughter Emily. After being freed from of prison by Empire loyalists, Corvo's task is to clear his name by installing the rightful heir on the throne. As Corvo, the player goes through a plot of internal intrigues that reveal the loyalists to be behind the

assassination and kidnapping, and must complete the game by confronting each of the conspirators.

The player undertakes nine assassination missions, all which can be experienced in different ways. *Dishonored* rarely uses dialogue trees; decisions are more commonly made through actions such as choosing whether to kill or not to kill, activating a certain feature, or by deciding to go to a particular location or not. Missions may be completed using a combat-oriented approach focusing on killing all enemies, or by using stealth, which makes it possible to complete the game without killing non-player characters. A combination of combat and stealth is also possible, where the player may choose to restrict herself to kill only the target enemies and enemies that attack first and otherwise avoid violence. After each mission the player is presented with a summary of the gameplay. A high body count will be evaluated as *high chaos*, whereas a low body count results in *low chaos*. Moreover, the level of chaos will affect the final outcome of the game. Completing the game in *high chaos* will result in the city of Dunwall becoming overridden by plague, and Emily will either die or become a tyrant dictator. Alternatively, the *low chaos* outcome is one where Dunwall prospers and Emily becomes a beloved empress who rules with Corvo at her side. Without having consulted a game guide or walkthrough the player does not know exactly how many kills will activate *high chaos* or the specifics of the outcome of the game. However, the player is informed by the game early on that a *high chaos* approach will lead to a "dark" outcome.

In this way, the game indicates that the *low chaos* approach is the favoured outcome. However, I will argue that the game also uses techniques that pull the player towards the use of violence against the main antagonists. It is by tempting the player to give in to vengeance that *Dishonored* is includes dark play.

Designing for Dark Play

What is dark play? Performance researcher Richard Schechner describes dark play as play that "subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules – so much so that playing itself is in danger of itself being destroyed …. [D]ark play is truly subversive, its agendas always hidden. Dark play's goals are deceit, disruption, excess, and gratification" (Schechner 2002, 119). This understanding is reflected by Zagal, Björk and Lewis who state that dark game design patterns "cause negative experiences for players which are against their best interest and likely to happen without their consent" (2013). For Zagal et al., dark design patterns are intentionally abusive, and their darkness is connected to the fact that they are meant to manipulate the player and create a negative experience.

This deviates from what I mean when I claim that *Dishonored* is designed for dark play. In this game, dark play is about exploring subversive or immoral behaviour and allowing the player to experiment with the sinister aspects of the human mind in a safe environment built around fictional events. This is what Zagal et al. describe as a grey zone because it is a part of the game activity, but would be considered unethical outside the game context (2013). Board games that include mechanisms of deception and backstabbing are typical examples of this, and dark play tends to be considered a dynamic element that provide a new dimension to play when implemented in a meaningful way. In a similar way, I consider dark play to be a positive aspect of *Dishonored* because it allows the player to explore ethical questions and see the consequences of their actions. Although Zagal et al. point out that players experience dark play as negative, it is important to stress that in *Dishonored* these are *positive negative experiences*, to use Markus Montola's words (2010). Sometimes negative experiences may be positive when they happen

inside the frames of play: you can gain new insights about yourself and human behaviour, intensity and reflection. In this sense, *Dishonored* is in concert with Doris C. Rusch's plea for games that tackle the human condition (2009).

However, *Dishonored* reflects Zagal et al.'s ideas of dark play in certain ways. It is indeed a part of the game's design to somewhat manipulate the player, but this happens on a *fictional* rather than on a *game mechanical* level. The game mechanisms are not designed to trick the player or make the player act against their own best interest, but the fictional consequences of the player's actions are not always foreseen and may be different from what was expected. The consequences are in most cases not emergent, but fixed by scripted events. In addition, the game often tries to push the player into killing the target enemies rather than opting for a non-lethal solution, even when this may be in opposition to their preferred stealth-oriented play style. This pressure happens through fictional contextualization as the player is given information about an enemy character that may create antipathy for that character. For this reason, I propose that the darkness of *Dishonored* in most cases is connected to fictional representation rather than to procedural rhetorics, which is to say, the use of computational processes for argumentative purposes (Bogost 2007, 28-29).

Biased on the Side of Low Chaos

My claim is that *Dishonored* favours a *low chaos* approach to the game, at the same time as it pulls the player towards justifying a certain degree of violence motivated by vengeance. In the following, I will show how the game taps into ethical philosophy in order to do this. This will be the starting point for a discussion of the most central techniques the game uses in order to

address dark play. I will argue that the focus on dark play is established through a conflict between virtue ethics and consequentialist ethics.

Virtue ethics in *Dishonored*

As an approach that values a low degree of violence, *low chaos* may be described as based on an ideal of moderation, where the player seeks a balanced approach in which he would do as little harm as possible to others. This is consistent with *virtue ethics*, a tradition in ethical philosophy that focuses on the traits of a person's character, and where virtuous actions and behaviour are defining for whether or not one is an ethical person (Mizzoni 2010, 23). A virtuous person is one who seeks moderation and acts in accordance with cardinal virtues and thus is able to balance between behaviour that would be harmful to others, and behaviour that would be self-destructive (Aristotle in Mizzoni 2010, 24).

Some scholars see virtue ethics as particularly fruitful in connection with games because it focuses on the ethical reflections of a moral subject (Sicart 2011, Reynolds 2002). This is not only relevant for games where the player must make choices. According to Miguel Sicart, players are reflective beings that act both according to their moral perspectives as well as according to strategies and the goals of the game (Sicart 2009, 111-112). This means that game situations must be evaluated, not necessarily according to the consequences that the game system produces, but according to the player's reflection and interpretation (Sicart 2009, 123). In this sense, a game that represents or forces the player to take clearly unethical actions may very well be an ethical game as long as it encourages ethical reflection (Sicart 2009, 124). This makes virtue ethics relevant, not only for games in which the players are involved in the decision-

making process, but also for games where the player does not make the choices while she must observe the protagonist acting in contrast with accepted ethical behaviour.

One way *Dishonored* stresses its bias towards *low chaos* is by explicitly commenting on the player's actions. It achieves this by, for instance, using non-playing characters as moral compasses. An illustrating example is the boatman Samuel. In the transition to the very last mission of the game, "The Light at the End", Samuel makes a value statement about the player's approach. In a *low chaos* play through, Samuel will give Corvo a motivational speech, provide hints about how to traverse the last mission, and even stress that "it's been a pleasure serving with you". If the player has approached the game in *high chaos*, however, Samuel will express disgust at Corvo's actions, and abuse him verbally with the final statement, "I'd wish you good luck, but I'd be lying." Then he will use his flare gun to warn Corvo's enemies.

The Empress' daughter Emily is also a central moral compass in that her behaviour will change according to play style. As Emily's protector and father figure, Corvo has a great influence on her, and the level of chaos will change her attitude accordingly. In *high chaos* she will for instance be very interested in how many people Corvo has killed, and state proudly that she will also aim to be feared when she becomes Empress. Also Emily's drawings will be influenced in a similar way: in *high chaos*, she will draw disturbing pictures of Corvo, either wearing his mask or holding a bloody sword. If the game is played in *low chaos*, however, Emily will be humble and caring when talking about the future and her drawings will be cheerful and loving, featuring a smiling Corvo and the title "Daddy" (Drake 2012). In this sense, the game is designed with a clear bias not only towards *low chaos*, but also towards the player as a virtuous being that does not let herself indulge in virtual violence.

Consequentialism in *Dishonored*

The game's evaluation of *low chaos* as the preferred play style is also illuminated through another school within ethical philosophy, namely *consequentialism*. This theory claims that ethical value is based upon the consequences of an action, rather than the intention behind or the virtues of the agent (Darwell 2002, 1-2). As a game where the player can make choices and see the consequences of their actions, the philosophy of consequentialism is strong in *Dishonored*, and this philosophy also contributes to stressing *low chaos* as the preferable approach to the game. This becomes clear in a tutorial screen titled "Assassination and Nonlethal Takedowns" that appears in the first mission after the introduction, "Prison Break", where the player is informed that "using stealth and a nonlethal approach has benefits: fewer rats and weepers, some characters react favourably, and the final outcome is not so dark". The player is thus informed that their actions have consequences in the gameworld, and that stealth will be positively evaluated by the environment. We later learn that packs of rats will attack Corvo and eat knocked out, but still breathing, enemies. We also learn that "weepers", zombie-like humans infected by the plague that haunts Dunwall, will attack on sight. These elements combine to show the negative consequences of a *high chaos* approach on gameplay and Corvo's ability to traverse the game environment.

In the case of the spreading of the plague, the game uses computational procedures in order to show the consequences of the player's actions. A computational procedure refers here to the computer's "defining ability to execute a series of rules" (Murray 1997, 71), or use of algorithms to model the behaviour of objects (Bogost 2007, 4), but we could also say the game engine is built to simulate what will happen in the plague-ridden city when the number of dead increases. In addition to simulating the plague, procedurality is also used to calculate the final

outcome of the game, as the sum of the actions taken in the game will result in different endings. This shows a clear bias towards *low chaos*. Whereas the *high chaos* ending is one where the player does not meet the main objective of the game, which is to clear Corvo's name and put the right heir on the throne, it also creates a grim ending to the narrative as it puts Dunwall into turmoil and plague. *Low chaos*, on the other hand, is a happy ending where the player reaches the main goal and where the city thrives. Although some prefer tragedies to happy endings, the very negative consequences of the *high chaos* ending are indicative of an ethical valuation of the two outcomes.

These examples demonstrate how *Dishonored* uses procedures in order to stress a specific bias towards *low chaos* as opposed to *high chaos*. We are for this reason talking about *procedural rhetorics* – "the practice of using processes persuasively" and "authoring arguments through processes" (Bogost 2007, 28-29). Through procedural rhetorics the player learns that there are consequences of her actions, and that the consequences of being reckless and violent is not only more rats and weepers, but also a city in turmoil, and the corruption and possible death and exile of Emily and Corvo.

However, whereas procedures are used to stress the consequences of the player's actions in the cases above, many of the consequences are not the result of procedures. Often consequences do not emerge out of a gameplay process, but are narrated as fixed events based on a specific choice that is being made. These scripted consequences are a source of ethical reflection because they are sometimes unforeseeable, which suggests that there is no clear relationship between a virtuous action and its consequences. The presence of such scripted consequences, which may or may not be related to the intentions behind the action, is particularly powerful because the game uses fiction and narrative to go beyond what the procedures in this

game can do, and because it challenges the ideological framework of both virtue ethics and consequentialism in this game.

Consequentialism as a source for ethical reflection

Although both virtue ethics and consequentialism are used to stress the *low chaos* bias in *Dishonored*, something interesting happens when the two are combined in the game. Whereas the game on the surface asks the player to be virtuous and avoid unnecessary violence, a question about what actually is unnecessary violence in this game arises when coupled with utilitarian consequentialism. *Utilitarianism* is interested in how the consequences affect the individuals involved and states that an ethical good action is that which creates the greatest overall value, or secures the greatest benefit for most people (Darwell 2002, 3). In *Dishonored,* this perspective becomes important in several contexts. It is perhaps most apparent when considering whether to kill a target or not, in the spreading of the plague, and in the evaluation of the overall outcome of the game.

However, often there is a conflict between virtuous behavior and the actual consequences of an action. In some cases the player may act in accordance with what appears virtuous, for instance by deciding not to kill a target, but then it turns out that the consequences are different from what the player might have expected. An example is the non-lethal fate of the corrupt Pendleton brothers in the mission "House of Pleasure". In addition to being involved in the killing of the Empress and holding her daughter Emily prisoner, they are sadistic owners of slave mines. The player may not feel much remorse for killing them, but the manager of the slave mines offers to deal with them non-lethally. This way, the virtuous player has the option to spare two lives, which may appear as the more favourable outcome. Not until after she has accepted to

go through with the non-lethal option does the player learn that the Pendleton brothers have had their tongues cut out and been sent to their own mines as slaves.

This new information about the actual consequences puts the situation in a new light, but as the player does not know about the consequence of making this choice this is not a true ethical dilemma. An ethical dilemma is understood to mean "an unavoidable choice between two or more competing and equally important ethical principles that are in direct conflict within an ethical system" (Schreiber et al. 2009). The player does not have to decide between giving the Pendleton brothers a miserable life in the slave mines and killing them. Instead the player is given the choice between sentencing them to life or death. Virtue ethics generally would consider a person who kills an unethical subject, because the act of killing is never virtuous or balanced but extreme, this is a relatively straightforward choice from this perspective. From the perspective of utilitarianism the situation may be more complicated. Both options are doubtlessly unethical if we consider a subjective, hedonistic form of utilitarianism that stresses an individual's happiness and absence from suffering (Darwell 2002, 3-4). However, utilitarian consequentialism may consider both options as good from a broader perspective: removed from society, they will no longer make other people suffer. If taken to the slave mines, they may even still be of use to society.

A different example that poses a true ethical dilemma can be found in the mission "Lady Boyle's Last Party". This mission demonstrates a case where the non-lethal option is not ethically favourable, but contrary to "House of Pleasure", here the player is informed about the consequences of each option before making the choice. The mission's target is co-conspirator Lady Boyle, and as an alternative to killing her Corvo may kidnap her and hand her over to Lord Brisby who is secretly in love with her and wants to keep her locked up as part of his twisted

idea of a relationship. The difference from the example with the Pendleton brothers is that in the case of Lady Boyle, the player will sentence an innocent person knowingly to a very dark fate indeed. Again, being locked up may be favourable to dying, but this is a more sinister choice because the player is aware of the grim consequences. In this sense, the ethical dilemma is more obvious here because it gives the player a conscious and informed choice between death and life in captivity and potential torture. However, if we look at this through the spectacles of virtue ethics, we see that the favourable option would be to leave her fate to Lord Brisby, because she would stay alive. However, from the perspective of consequentialism, it would be possible to argue that the consequence of such a fate would be so grim that death would be preferable.

These examples show the conflicts that arise between consequentialism and virtue ethics in *Dishonored*, which contributes to creating an experience of dark play in the game. They also show how the game uses scripted events rather than procedurality to create consequences based on fictional characters' agency and the narrative goal of the game.

A motivation for vengeance

The examples of the Pendleton brothers and the Lady Boyle can be viewed differently if we consider that Corvo is likely to be motivated for vengeance. As the target of a setup framing him as a traitor, Corvo has a good reason to want vengeance on the conspiracy behind the Empress' murder and his own imprisonment. A plot twist that leaves him twice betrayed emphasizes further motivation for vengeance.

The situation in the game clearly can be understood as *vengeance* as it has its origin in wanting retaliation for an actual offense and injustice committed not only against Corvo but also against the Empress and her daughter. The player may also turn this into *revenge*, which can be

understood as more of a personal vendetta motivated by the desire to see the conspirators suffer for the suffering they caused Corvo (Uniacke 2002, 62-63). In this context the difference between the two is that while revenge is generally considered morally and ethically improper because the perceived injury may not be connected to an actual offense (Uniacke 2002, 63), vengeance may be justified under certain conditions because it is connected to an actual offense (Uniacke 2002, 65). For this reason, virtuous Corvo would not pursue personally motivated revenge, but might find his actions justified due to the offenses committed and thus seek vengeance. Vengeance may however in any case be understood as connected to a dark emotion because it is associated with a negative and often powerful sensation about wanting and believing that retaliation will make up for the injustice caused.

As Corvo is subject to a kind of injustice that seems to validate a desire for retaliation (Uniacke 2002, 63), and because there is a government conspiracy that is responsible, there is little chance that justice will be served through official channels. Thus, Corvo's vigilantism may appear justified as a fictional motivation. However, because all targets can be dealt with non-lethally, the player may ask herself which kind of vengeance is sweeter: to kill Corvo's enemies in cold blood; or deal with them in a non-lethal way, thereby stressing that Corvo is a virtuous person who pursues his search for justice through rational means. However, because he is a trained bodyguard and now an assassin, it is unlikely that Corvo would approach this situation as a pacifist. The choice between lethal or non-lethal retaliation may also depend on how much suffering the player wants to inflict on Corvo's enemies in the name of vengeance.

From a different perspective, a vengeance-oriented player may of course also use utilitarian consequentialism as a justification for killing the conspirators, based in the idea that the world would be better off without conspirators trying to overrun the system by way of killing

their political opponents. However, this may also lead to conflict for the consequentialist thinker: if all conspirators and their accomplices are killed and unable to participate in more schemes, would this lead to an increase in the plague? The player's choice of actions is, in this sense, not only based upon an evaluation about what is the right behaviour from the point of view of a virtuous player. The choices are also based upon an evaluation and understanding of the consequences that each action has.

Techniques for dark play

The main reason why *Dishonored* manages to implement dark play is because it is an ethical game by design through how it encourages ethical reflection (Sicart 2009, 124). However, it is only as long as the values are coherently presented to the player that ethical reflection can be achieved (Sicart 2009, 58). Whereas *Dishonored* favours a *low chaos* approach, it is indeed an ethical game because it also tempts the player into acting in opposition to this approach, and thus encourages reflection with regards to the player's choices of actions. It also supports ethical reflection by stressing fiction and narrative and combining them with procedural rhetorics in a way that opens up for unexpected and unintended consequences. These aspects work together in creating a strong sense of dark play because they reach out to our abilities of imagination and empathy. It is important to stress that the players who act upon the game as an ethical game are accepting a certain kind of mindset. This implies that a player may choose to ignore the mindset and the fictional consequences, and play the game with only the computational procedures in mind.

In the following, I will concentrate on three techniques that all focus on ethical reflection in order to support dark play in *Dishonored*. To set up ethical paradigms against each other and

ask the player to make a choice based on their own reflection; to encourage ethical reflection situations where the player cannot interfere; and to design processes of fictional alignment and embedded narratives.

Technique 1: A combination of ethical principles and emotional motivation

I have argued that *Dishonored* plays ethical values against each other. This can be said to be the first of the techniques that the game uses to support dark play. I am not going to repeat the argument here, but allow me to show how these work together with the emotional motivation of vengeance.

Dishonored throws the player into difficult situations that are in conflict with each other when approached by traditional ethical theories. By actively combining virtue ethics with different strains from consequentialist ethics, the game encourages ethical reflection. This is further encouraged by combining ethical reasoning with the desire for retaliation against the conspirators. The player is thus tempted with acting out of vengeance or revenge, and must decide herself what ethical approach – if any – she should play by. The focus on *low chaos* combined with the fact that actions have consequences work as moderating principles which guide the player into evaluating every action she takes, and which encourage her to activate problem-solving skills that go beyond those of traditional shooters.

Actively forcing reflection through a combination of ethical problems and perspectives is not an uncommon way of including reflection in games. Role-playing games built around dialogue trees often do this. For example, *Mass Effect 2* actively uses this approach in particular in connection with the personal companion missions (Jørgensen 2010, 326). Here different ethical paradigms are often used against each other, but this may also be coupled with a conflict

between acting in accordance with an ethical system or in accordance with individual moral principles. Should the player choose to help a friend, or act in accordance with what may be better from the point of departure of a greater good? In this sense, the game is also asking the player to choose between acting in accordance with what she sees may be the morally right thing to do in each isolated case, and what may be the right action from an overarching ethical point of view.

To combine conflicting ethical principles with a personal or emotional perspective is central for designing a level of meaning to digital games, which is compatible with dark play. In *Mass Effect 2* the choices that are made become meaningful because of the close emotional links established between the protagonist-avatar and the companion characters, but they may not always be dark in the sense that they ask the player to explore the more sinister aspects of the human mind. In *Dishonored*, however, the vengeance motive invites the player to experiment with a kind of behaviour that is generally seen as immoral.

Technique 2: Subtracting and mirroring

According to Sicart, subtracting and mirroring are two procedures for ethical game design. Whereas *subtracting ethics* forces the player to reflect ethically upon the actions that the avatar carries out in the gameworld, *mirroring ethics* puts the player into an uncomfortable ethical position (Sicart 2009, 215-216). The use of such procedures is the second technique used in *Dishonored* to create an ethical experience.

In many games, subtracting ethics take place when gameplay forces the player to act in a certain way that may raise ethical questions on part of the player. To illustrate, Sicart refers to *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico 2005). In this game, the player may question whether killing

the non-aggressive colossi is the ethical thing to do, but because this is the only goal, there is nothing else the player can do (Sicart 2009, 216). Because there are very few situations in *Dishonored* where the player is forced into taking a certain action, subtracting is rare in this game. The best example is the mission "The Royal Physician" where the Corvo must kidnap the Royal Physician Sokolov. This is the only mission where the player is obliged to go for a non-lethal solution, and they must do so even if it may appear counter to their play style. Whereas a non-lethal solution may be the ethical thing to do from the perspective of virtue ethics, this is questioned by the fact that Sokolov has conducted questionable medical experiments on live human subjects. The player comes across a woman in a cage who, according to a nearby audiograph, has been infected with the plague as a test subject. The woman is clearly sick and wants the player to let her out. Here the player is faced with the dilemma of releasing her and potentially spreading the plague; leaving her where she is; or killing her to relieve her suffering. Regardless of what the player chooses, this leaves the player asking whether letting Sokolov live is the right thing to do. Because the player does not have a choice in this matter, a situation of subtracting ethics occur where the player cannot choose how to act, but is left reflecting on Corvo's action.

Similar to subtracting is mirroring, but instead of leaving the player considering whether a mandatory action is the right one or not, mirroring deliberately forces the virtuous player into an uncomfortable ethical situation. Sicart's example is from *Manhunt* (Rockstar North 2003), where the player takes on the role of an ex-convict who is forced by a director to star in snuff films or get killed. Here the player must commit extremely violent acts which make most players uncomfortable (Sicart 2009, 116-117). In *Dishonored,* a similar experience is available to the

high chaos players, as game critic Oli Welsh points out (Welsh et al. 2012). He describes his *high chaos* playthrough in this way:

> All the killing has started to get less enjoyable, though. Not because it's hard, but because I'm getting too good at it.... Playing this game this way is making me feel a bit sick. I'm not sure why - I've stacked the corpses higher than this in countless other games with few qualms. I don't think it's the civilian kills either.… Perhaps it's because *Dishonored*'s world is neither amoral nor frivolous. The story's broad-brush stuff, but… the world-building is something else entirely. I'm really quite surprised at how horrible Dunwall is. It's an intensely grotesque, nasty and depressing place, and it's putting me in a dark mood. Going all Travis Bickle on it should be cathartic, but it's the opposite. I just feel like my feet are sinking further into the filthy quicksand. (Oli Welsh in Welsh et al. 2012)

Although the player is not forced to extremes like those found in *Manhunt*, Welsh's account describes how a violent play through may feel distasteful in quite a different way than other games where killing is mandatory. In this sense, the *high chaos* play through is one that raises ethical reflection in the player, something which is given extra emphasis by Emily's responses to your actions (Drake 2012). Also, perhaps more importantly for dark play, this description fits very well with Schechner's understanding of the concept: as a play activity that is subversive in the sense that it runs the risk of destroying itself as play (Schechner 2002, 119).

Technique 3: Fictional alignment and embedded narratives

According to Doris C. Rusch (2009), a design technique that can be used for emotional impact is fictional alignment. This technique is also central for games that want to give the player an experience of dark play. In games, fictional alignment means implementing game and fiction to make them operate together as a whole. Fictional alignment is to match game mechanics and fiction so that the game mechanics operate in a way that appears to simulate the fiction in a convincing manner, at the same time as fiction appears to reflect the game mechanics. An important part of fictional alignment is to make the player feel that the match between fiction and game mechanics is able to reflect actual, recognizable emotional states. With reference to *God of War 2* (SCE Santa Monica Studio 2007), Rusch shows how the game makes player and avatar emotionally aligned by allowing them to have the same experience of being overpowered and then depriving them of that power (2009). As the player unexpectedly becomes crippled with respect to what she is allowed to do in the game, the sensation is a reflection of what the avatar feels when Zeus takes away his superpowers as punishment for his hubris.

Fictional alignment can come into being through many techniques. *Dishonored* combines the role-playing aspect that asks the player to decide what kind of person Corvo is with embedded narratives that stress and reinforce motivation.

The question about what kind of person Corvo is has close ties to virtue ethics and the focus on the virtuous character of an individual. Is he a vengeful person who wants to set things right by killing the conspirators who framed him, or is he the better man that will try to find a peaceful solution? This also ties in with consequentialism, because the consequences of making this choice are also at work. What are the consequences of killing them, as opposed to not killing them? Without knowing the consequences, the player may consider *not* killing them to be a naïve approach: this would potentially leave it possible for them to come back for vengeance. But also:

killing one's political opponents – however corrupt they might be – is not a good strategy if one wants to be seen as the representative of a just and fair ruler.

After being framed for the Empress' murder, Corvo has good reasons to want vengeance. This is emphasized half-way through the game when Corvo is betrayed for the second time. However, the game also tries to reinforce and develop this motivation by using *embedded narratives*: that is, to distribute informational pieces across the gameworld environment (Jenkins 2004, 126). In *Dishonored*, the player may come across information such as letters and audiographs, or overhear dialogues, and thus get a better understanding of a certain character's motivation or background. In this way, the player may get a deeper knowledge of the gameworld and its inhabitants by accessing optional information. Whereas some pieces of information are available in locations that the player is likely to visit, other pieces are hidden and may be more difficult to find. Because this information may provide additional information about non-playing characters, they may work to illuminate certain situations and make the player's choices more informed. However, this information is also used to make characters more complex and human-like. In this sense, the information may also contribute to more complex decision-making processes. However, most often such information does not contribute to create an ethical dilemma or a conflict; on the contrary it tends to *reinforce* the player's existing perspective of an individual.

The item known in-game as "The Heart" is the most elaborate method of distributing this kind of information. This item works as a compass for locating important objects in the gameworld, but can also be directed towards a non-player character to reveal their secrets. The Heart is, for this reason, an important source for information in the game and one that contributes

to establishing each character as an individual with a background, dreams and personality. For this reason, it also works as a tool to motivate a less violent play style.

In the case of one of the Pendleton brothers, the Heart may reveal that one of them "was raised to believe the world is but a toy for him to play with", whereas the second brother "takes cruel pleasure in others' discomfort". This and other pieces of information may increase the likelihood that the player finds the brothers unsympathetic, and may make it less difficult to decide to kill them. Also, players who feel conflicted about sparing them but still do it for the sake of a *low chaos* outcome may feel a sense of justice when learning that these corrupt and egocentric individuals have been forced to work in their own mines (Bramwell in Welsh et al., 2012). When the information has a bias towards a particular outcome in this sense, it stresses Corvo's motivation for vengeance and helps the player make decisions that are in favour of taking vengeful actions. This is further emphasized by the fact that The Heart is implied to be a reflection of the Empress, as they are voiced by the same actor and The Heart also uses a first-person perspective in a way that suggests that it speaks with the voice of the Empress.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have carried out a case analysis of the design techniques used to support dark play in *Dishonored*. I have focused on dark play as play that explores and experiments with the sinister aspects of human behaviour in a safe game environment built around fictional events. *Dishonored* is, in this sense, a good case because it deals with vengeance as a central topic, and because it illustrates a dystopian interpretation of consequentialism in which the effects are, at best, ethically ambiguous regardless of the choices one makes.

In discussing the techniques used in *Dishonored* to create a framework for dark play, I have showed that the game uses ethical philosophy to model certain processes and narrative structures, as well as design techniques for ethical play identified by Miguel Sicart. In addition, the game uses fictional alignment through embedded narratives and role-play to engage the player in the game's fiction. I have also showed that the game pulls the player in two directions: it tries to uphold and reinforce a motivation for vengeance at the same time as it uses techniques that motivate ethical reflection in order to secure that the violence does not become too dominant. This makes *Dishonored* into an ambivalent game: in one sense, it is normative in how it appears to favour a *low chaos* approach, but at the same time, it stresses that vengeance is a valid approach and even tempts the player into giving into that emotion. However, because there is no difference in consequence between bringing the conspirators to justice violently or peacefully, the game does not actually argue strongly for one or the other.

The techniques used in *Dishonored* are, to a large degree, overlapping and infused with virtue ethics and consequentialism. In many aspects, virtue ethics and consequentialism are put against each other in order to provoke ethical reflection and create potential dilemmas. This is an effective way of addressing dark play in a game focused on narrative progression such as *Dishonored*. However, although it is also effective to have pre-scripted consequences designed to surprise the player; this is not an approach that necessarily works in all games. It is, for instance, easy to imagine that pre-scripted consequences would feel forced in otherwise emergent games. In such games, a more focused use of procedurality would probably be better, where procedural rhetorics and value statements would be more specifically simulated by the game mechanics.

The three types of design techniques for dark play identified in this chapter are, of course, not a complete list of techniques that can be used to design for dark play. However, they

demonstrate specific ways of supporting dark play in a case study. What is common for the techniques and may work as a general guideline for designing for dark play in the future is to be aware of whether one uses fiction or game mechanics in order to represent and simulate the experience of what is considered dark in the game. Using fiction may be the easiest and also most common approach, which works well in games of progression as well as in games of emergence (Juul 2002), and may indeed foster critical reflection. However, for the player to get into the experience of dark play, an alignment between fiction and game mechanics may be necessary through experiential metaphors and procedurality (Rusch 2009).

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