

**Careless Whispers:**  
Hints of Queer Possibility in the Spaces of  
Dishonored

Rob Gallagher

*Dishonored* (Arkane, 2012) is an accomplished example of the videogame as virtual playground. Teleporting across an exquisitely realized, quasi-Victorian cityscape as they expose the crimes of a decadent empire's corrupt ruling class, players experience both the kinesthetic pleasure of fluently navigating space and the semiotic pleasure of piecing together narratives of treachery, intrigue, and injustice. As this description suggests, in many respects *Dishonored* remains a conventional (if unusually stylish) masculinist power fantasy. However, the game also turns out to be commendably alert to the ways in which gender, class and sexuality shape social life and spatial practice. As such, *Dishonored* spurs us to consider how gamic modes of 'spatial storytelling' might be adapted to serve queer ends.



For a mainstream action game *Dishonored* is unusually diverse and developed female cast.

If this article seeks to substantiate this claim, it also aims to throw light on the process whereby games come to function as critical playgrounds, spaces for hermeneutic performance and conflict. In this respect, this essay is a contribution to an ongoing debate as to the role of videogame criticism and its relationship with the mainstream (or “AAA”) games industry – a debate increasingly cast in terms of representation and power, identity and exclusion. Essentially, the question is this: at a time when new platforms, tools, and modes of dissemination are enabling independent and amateur game producers (including a growing culture of queer and feminist game makers<sup>1</sup>) to find audiences for innovative, expressive, resolutely non-commercial games, why should conscientious critics continue to pay attention to a mainstream that has made only halting steps toward “meaningful inclusion,”<sup>2</sup> remaining content, for the most part, with representing, catering to, and employing what feminist game designer Porpentine pithily dubs “the proverbial straight white dude”?<sup>3</sup>

While this question is undeniably valid, it risks leaving us with a reductive model of videogame criticism’s history, whereby critical engagement with “mainstream” games is dismissed as an embarrassing phase we have thankfully outgrown. Once upon a time (or so this account goes) advocates of

gaming's expressive potential had no option but to look to commercial titles for a basis on which to develop their theories. As Parker astutely argues, AAA "prestige games" like *Bioshock* (Irrational Games 2007), which courted a mass audience while also incorporating intertextual allusions and mature themes designed to pique the interest of more "sophisticated" players, performed the important function of providing hubs around which critical communities could coalesce.<sup>4</sup> However, *now* we can see that commercial games are unworthy of serious discussion, and that if we ever thought they were, this was the fault of critics so keen to see gaming's cultural legitimacy affirmed that they inadvertently overread texts which, in retrospect, "never really deserved the praise [they] received."<sup>5</sup>

While this account certainly has a basis in fact, it also bears the hallmarks of what queer theorist Eve Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading," a critical approach which seeks to pre-empt disappointments and nasty surprises by treating mainstream culture with unwavering skepticism and suspicion.<sup>6</sup> For Sedgwick such a stance is, however warranted, ultimately counter-intuitive unless it is supplemented with a "reparative" approach, based on opening "dominant culture" to new interpretations, audiences and possibilities.<sup>7</sup> By foregrounding the ambivalence at the heart of attachment, Sedgwick offers a theoretical framework for discussing whether and why it might be okay to enjoy AAA games. By extension, Sedgwick offers me a framework for exploring my equivocal enthusiasm for *Dishonored*, a game which I have chosen to discuss not because I think it deserves to be unreservedly celebrated, but because, at least when read reparatively, the game reveals strange and suggestive continuities between AAA videogame culture and certain currents in queer and feminist art and thought. Equally, this reading of *Dishonored* illustrates Sedgwick's claim that maintaining rigid distinctions between queer and straight, the mainstream and the marginal, may be both less easy and less productive than it seems. Of course, some may see this argument itself as a means of legitimizing my continued investment in the products of an ethically and creatively bankrupt industry, a symptom of "self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo"<sup>8</sup> perhaps, or of the kind of "cruel optimism" that, for Berlant,<sup>9</sup> keeps us invested in toxic cultural fantasies. As Lauteria<sup>10</sup> has shown, however, attending closely to notionally mainstream games reveals them to be rife with ideas ripe for queer appropriation. So it proves with *Dishonored*, which for all its flaws provides a useful point of departure for imagining queerer and more inclusive virtual

playgrounds.

## Golden Cats, Queer Kids, and Tender Murders

I've chosen to approach *Dishonored* via a close reading of one of its environments, the Golden Cat brothel. Images of the Cat, or more pertinently, its employees, figured prominently in pre-release coverage of the game, raising concerns about Arkane's willingness to resort to cheap titillation to raise the game's profile among the straight male demographic. In practice, while aspects of the mission arguably pander to a voyeuristic male gaze, the environment also becomes a platform for some of *Dishonored*'s most direct engagements with gender politics, foregrounding the way in which gameworlds can support different readings depending on how and by whom they are navigated and interpreted.

Within the game's fiction our reasons for entering the brothel are, of course, above suspicion: working for a group loyal to the murdered Empress, we are charged with rescuing her daughter Emily from the nefarious Pendleton twins, titled slave traders holed up at the Cat. As this précis perhaps hints, *Dishonored* eschews gaming's dominant generic frameworks of science fiction, Tolkeinesque fantasy, and contemporary military melodrama, instead presenting a diegetic universe steeped in Victorian *fin-de-siecle* fantasy. Rife with aristocratic intrigue, weird science and occult mystery, the game draws on a literary tradition whose foremost exponents include Oscar Wilde, Arthur Machen, Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James. Whether or not Arkane are aware of the fact (and it seems admittedly unlikely), this is a tradition which queer critics have found particularly fecund when it comes to theorizing the emergence of contemporary conceptions of sexuality, space, secrecy and subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it should not surprise us, then, that *Dishonored* lends itself to consideration of how games can address these themes.



Pre-release promotional images of the Golden Cat. Fortunately, *Dishonored's* treatment of female characters is more thoughtful than these images suggested.

Divided into the opulently appointed suites in which clients are entertained and a considerably less sumptuous “backstage” area containing dressing rooms, offices and living quarters, the Golden Cat is, like most of *Dishonored's* environments, stratified along lines of gender and class. If “domestic space . . . has been largely absent from gaming” on account of its being understood to be a “strongly female domain,”<sup>12</sup> then the Cat testifies to *Dishonored's* refreshing attentiveness to the minutiae of domestic upkeep and the rhythms of everyday routine. Essentially a game about infiltrating spaces where you don't belong, *Dishonored* is similarly interested in the dynamics of cross-class contact, social mobility, and what Butler calls the “differential allocation of precarity,”<sup>13</sup> as becomes apparent once we have tracked one of the Pendleton twins to the Cat's steam room. Here we can overhear him being corrected on a point of parliamentary protocol by one of the “girls,” who asks, “Did you think I was born a courtesan, Lord Pendleton?” before revealing she was a politician's clerk until the political turmoil initiated by the Empress' assassination catalyzed her change of career. To be sure, it is a fleeting moment, but this and other similar vignettes suggest *Dishonored's* awareness of the way the rhetoric of emergency and the concept of the political “state of

exception” have historically been mobilized to consolidate conservative values and reinforce traditional gender roles,<sup>14</sup> an issue gamic dystopias seldom address.

The steam room scene is also representative of the way the game uses snatches of gossip, notes, diaries and graffiti as a means of exposition. *Dishonored* presumes the player’s willingness not just to scour environments for scraps of data, but also to actively collate and interpret the information they gather. Enlisting players to fill in diegetic gaps is a hallmark of the “narrative architecture”<sup>15</sup> school of game design, but *Dishonored*’s approach also links it to the queer autobiographical practices De Villiers analyses, practices grounded in the ability of arbitrarily organized fragments to mount “resistance to any larger narrative logic,” defying the reductive and prescriptive force of biographical tropes and securing a space for interpretive “play.”<sup>16</sup> *Dishonored* is refreshingly willing to leave questions unanswered and motives up for debate, perhaps most strikingly in the case of a wealthy woman of whom we can discover two things: that she is sexually promiscuous and that she is infertile, possibly on account of a miscarriage. Where a more heavy-handed narrative might impose a hypotactical relationship upon these details, folding them into a biography structured as moralistic cause and effect narrative (whether of promiscuity as futile search for consolation or miscarriage as punishment for moral laxity), here the paratactic distribution of data across the gamespace means it is for the player to judge the accuracy and the implications of the information they collect.

Players are given a similar degree of license when it comes to neutralizing their targets, with various alternatives to guns and blades on offer. In Lord Pendleton’s case, attentive players will discover that they can tamper with the steam room’s pipework to cause a fatal “accident,” or else have the twins abducted and sent to work alongside the slaves manning their silver mines. While the game presents the latter scheme as a virtuous, poetically just alternative to murder, its inventive cruelty makes this framing seem rather disingenuous. Inviting us to indulge our inner sadist by meting out an exquisitely ironic comeuppance, this outcome also expects us to take a literally perverse masochistic pleasure in foregoing the most direct means of attaining our ends. In so doing it substantiates Krzywinska’s observation that gamic acts of “violent yet artful” aggression often assume markedly erotic and even strangely tender forms,<sup>17</sup> though the game’s designers seem either

oblivious to or unwilling to admit this fact.

One of the customary ways in which games legitimize violence is by mobilizing the fantasy of “the Child whose innocence solicits our defense,” a figure that, for Edelman, underpins our culture’s heteronormative politics of “reproductive futurism.”<sup>18</sup> Emily is a young character that can be found locked in one of the squalid rooms where the Cat’s employees sleep; however, she resembles this ‘Child’ much less than she does the precocious, inscrutable, unsettlingly “queer child” analyzed by Bond Stockton, a figure who first appears in Henry James’ 1890s fiction and continues to trouble us today by calling the very idea of innocence into question.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, rather than demanding we kill on Emily’s behalf, the game motivates us *not* to kill by altering her character so that she becomes cynical and selfish if we murder too indiscriminately. An interesting procedural spin on the trope of the queer child, who perhaps knows more than is good for them, and preferable no doubt to making us commit atrocities in the name of an idealized innocent, the system is nonetheless troubling insofar as it makes our empowered male hero arbiter of the girl’s fate. This is another instance of *Dishonored* deviating from videogame convention while stopping short of a truly radical break.

*Dishonored*, then, manifests an unusual and welcome willingness to think about domestic life, gossip, genre, gender and sex. Ultimately, however, the game remains very much recognizable as a male-oriented blockbuster “prestige game,” with some players interpreting its gestures toward gender politics as nothing more than a “‘feel good’ move” intended to make gamers feel morally superior to their foes.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, where Henry James was willing to make children, shop girls, heiresses, and queer men his stories’ “centers of consciousness,” in *Dishonored* they are only ever bit-players in the story of our white, apparently straight, male avatar. And while the game makes deft use of spatial storytelling to flesh out its world and characters, it arguably also panders to the dubious fantasies of “ontological privilege” that, for D. A. Miller, the detective novel indulges by rendering readers “safe from the surveillance, suspicion, reading, and rape of others,” while subjecting its characters to extremes of violence and scrutiny.<sup>21</sup>

Read reparatively, though, *Dishonored* primes us to see continuities between mainstream and more marginal game cultures that suggest it would be

wrong to write the former off as creatively bankrupt and devoid of relevance for the latter, foregrounding the queer potential latent in, for example, the similarly stealth-oriented *Hitman* series (IO Interactive, 2000-2012). If *Hitman*'s publishers have repeatedly resorted to sexist publicity stunts,<sup>22</sup> perhaps to pre-emptively undercut the idea that sneaking and peeping are somehow unmanly, then the games themselves place a marked emphasis on masquerade and the dynamics of performative "passing." By having players manage their avatar's appearance and bodily comportment in order to avoid detection, *Hitman*, in fact, offers a neat procedural primer on Butler's claim that identity is about internalizing and perpetuating the behavioral codes operative in different cultural contexts.<sup>23</sup> The queer dimensions of this scenario are underscored by *Octodad* (De Paul University, 2010), an absurdist riff on the *Hitman* formula in which we play as an Octopus struggling to pass as a human patriarch. While the game's moral ("it's tough being a real man") is asinine at best, *Octodad* uses stealth mechanics to convey an intriguingly queer kind of angst. *Gone Home* (Fullbright Company, 2013), meanwhile, draws on a similar gamic and literary lineage to *Dishonored* to craft a spatial story of familial anomie and lesbian love. Rooted in the domestic everyday, the game cleverly engages the tradition of female gothic addressed in *The Madwoman in the Attic*,<sup>24</sup> on which title it plays by hiding evidence of its heroine's fate beneath the gables of a deserted house. Like *Dishonored*, *Gone Home* suggests that the queer playgrounds of the future may owe more than we might have expected to the ostensibly "straight" games of today – provided, that is, we are willing to read those games reparatively.

## Notes

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**Rob Gallagher** is a Postdoctoral Fellow working at Concordia University's Technoculture, Art and Games lab. His research addresses the expressive potential of the video game, considering gamic constructions of identity and the terms upon which games speak to and about the body. Rob's work has appeared in publications such as *Games and Culture*, *Nyx* and *Alluvium*.