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By **Christopher Isaac**

Contributor

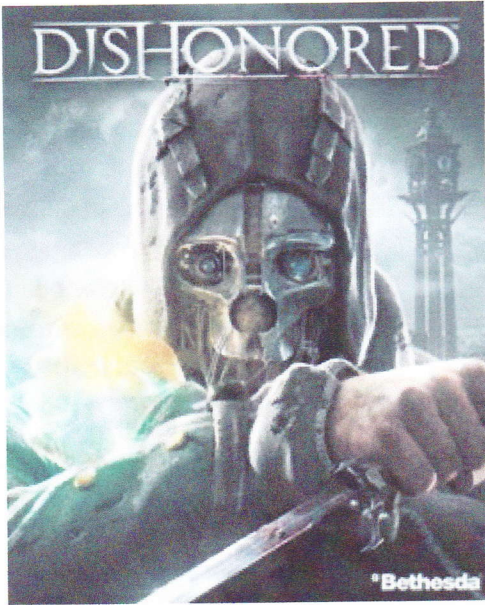


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When you look at what games people were anticipating last year, you'll have heard names like Resident Evil 6, Assassin's Creed 3, and Halo 4. But among all of these sequels Arkane Studios has decided to do something not often seen these days: make an original game.

Dishonored was released on October 9th, and has received a lot of critical acclaim since then, even getting nominated for game of the year from various award competitions. But of course you're wondering, does it live up to such hype? Well, let's start by discussing the story of this game.

You're placed in the role of Corvo Attano, a man who is framed for the death of the Empress who he was assigned to protect. I think you can all see where this is going. As the tagline of the game says, "revenge solves everything." So it's time for Corvo to escape captivity and start assassinating the corrupt regime that set him up. Sound a bit like Assassin's Creed? Well don't even expect that much, because the story here is honestly pretty cliché and predictable all the way through.

The game has an intriguing environment, featuring the steampunk trappings of trains and clock towers in a pseudo Victorian era time period, but it never really gets fleshed out beyond that exterior. There's a plague running through the city, and there're cartoonishly evil politicians that make the world wind up feeling like a mish mash of dystopias from other games and books and movies. Anyone who's read 1984 or V For Vendetta, and played games like the Fallout and Bioshock series will feel that Dishonored is pretty by the books. The game has a strong voice cast, featuring the likes of Chloë Grace Moretz, who will star in the upcoming remake of *Carrie*, and Lena Headey, perhaps better known as Cersei Lannister from HBO's *Game of Thrones*, but overall the game really lacks a distinctive personality. Also, the soundtrack, while fittingly atmospheric, is subdued to the point of being instantly forgotten.

So what actually makes this game worthy of being nominated for game of the year? The gameplay itself of course, which I can genuinely say is highly innovative due to tapping into a genre that has been pretty dormant for nearly a decade now: stealth games. The graphics in this game aren't the ultra

spectacular next-gen graphics you may be used to with new games. There's a reason for this: development time for a game can either be used on letting you see the individual pores on a character's face, or it can be used making great gameplay. Arkane Studios elected to go for the latter. I greatly approve.

You play from a first person perspective packing the usual steampunk arsenal of a sword, a crossbow, a pistol, and some grenades. But you can also purchase some Bioshock-esque powers that enable you to teleport, slow down time, and even possess people and animals. All of this is at your disposal as you set out in nonlinear levels filled with gun-toting guards, massive wolf hounds, and a variety of contraptions standing between you and one of the people that was in on the conspiracy to get you executed.

But perhaps you've noticed a contradiction here. How can this be a stealth game, you ask, if you're throwing grenades at people and possessing a guard to make his friends kill him? Well that's the beauty of this game. It lets you play however you want. If you want to run through each mission shooting and chopping at everything that moves, go for it. Do you want to play the entire game without killing anyone or even being seen once? You can do that too. The game even offers an achievement for it.

The missions themselves are impressive in how large and open-ended they are. If you've got a gate of electricity blocking your way, you can remove its power source to disable it, you can hack it so you can pass through safely while enemies will be vaporized upon touching it, or you can avoid it altogether by finding another route. That route can be over the rooftops, down a back alley filled with plague-maddened citizens who will attack anyone they see, or you can possess a nearby rat and scurry through a drainage pipe. Exploration yields variety, so it pays to take your time and check things out instead of rushing in.

Speaking of variety, each mission also usually has side quests you can complete that offer extra rewards, as well as runes and charms scattered around the level that you can find which serve as enhancements for your character. The first assassination mission took me about four hours to complete because of how much there was to do.

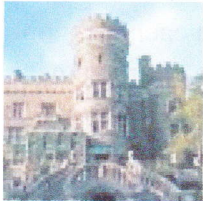
The destinations you travel to are fairly diverse as well. You'll start off breaking out of a prison, then later wade through a flooded city district to deal with a cult of assassins, and even attend the masquerade ball of one of your targets under the guise of a party guest. And once you've reached your target, you still have a choice how you want to remove him or her from power. A gun will dispose of any of them, but maybe you're feeling nice and want to go for a nonlethal option. In one mission you can eliminate a target by publicly disgracing him by playing a rather unflattering voice recording of him over the propaganda spewing loud speakers of the city. The choice is entirely yours, and will eventually reflect the ending you get.

But on the matter of choice, your play style choice is also going to determine how long your gameplay experience is. If you impose no limits on yourself as to what abilities you buy, and play each mission to kill, you'll probably only get around ten hours out of the game. If you're like me, and try to ghost the game (never get seen, don't kill anyone) then I got over twenty hours out of my experience. You can also get more to do by downloading the pack of ten challenge missions that was released in December, but admittedly you aren't missing much by skipping it. But at least two story-

driven campaigns have been promised for a release later this year, which will give Dishonored some more length, and hopefully provide some more depth to the game's world.

To wrap things up, I don't know if Dishonored is quite game of the year material, as its story, music, graphics, and atmosphere are all fairly generic. But what matters most, the gameplay, is fun and replayable regardless of how you choose to complete each mission. And as a stealth game, Dishonored offers the best stealth experience I've had since the last Thief game. So I'd definitely recommend this to anyone who's tired of unoriginal sequels, and wants a unique, enjoyable experience.

Dishonored is currently available for PS3, Xbox 360, and PC.



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