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GAME REVIEW

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Set 15 years after the underdog adventures of Corvo Attano, *Dishonored 2* starts in the city of Dunwall long after it fell to ruin thanks to the infectious rat plague. The coup that saw the city's Empress murdered and Corvo framed has also passed into history. Emily Kaldwin, the Empress's daughter, now rules the empire – she's stronger and wiser and has Corvo, simultaneously her bodyguard and father, loyally at her side.

It's about 5 minutes before you witness yet another heinous betrayal. This time, the witch Delilah – who you'll know if you spent time playing the original game's two brilliant expansions – has come to Dunwall accompanied by the Duke of Serkonos. She plans to rule Dunwall for herself. The ins and outs of her motivations I'll leave for you to discover.

You then have a big decision to make. This is a series renowned for its level of choice and its various branching narratives, but your most important choice is who you want to play as first. You can be Corvo once again, if you please – this time he's fully voiced, which gives him far more personality, but his path is not where *Dishonored 2*'s most original ideas lie. For those, Emily is your best choice – she comes complete with an awesome tale of revenge and entirely new powerful abilities that feel unique.

Dishonored 2 may start in the now-less-grimey Dunwall, but it soon moves to the Duke of Serkonos's home, the sprawling metropolis of Karnaca, a southern city with warmer climes and entirely new challenges to contend with. In place of the rat plague, Karnaca has been subjected to infestations of blood flies – huge glowing carnivorous flies that make their nests in dead bodies and abandoned apartments. In lieu of Dunwall's towering bipedal Walkers, Karnaca's greatest mind, the inventor Kirin Jindosh, has created an army of clockwork soldiers – huge imposing robots with four blades for arms, which pursue you with terrifying determination.

Dishonored 2 has its own spin on things, subsequently surpassing the lofty aesthetic heights of Dunwall. Get to a viewpoint high up and you'll gaze across the city's hundreds of roofs, with huge towering windmills providing the population with power. The clear stand-out is The Clockwork Mansion, perhaps the greatest 3D level in gaming history. It's as much a puzzle gauntlet as it is a stealth playground – an enormous, multi-faceted masterpiece that moves in and around itself to reveal hidden pathways, new rooms and entirely different

options for approaching your objectives. It's constantly shifting, and you'll have to navigate around countless clockwork soldiers to get to your target. At one stage, having found myself behind a wall, I dazed at how individual moving mechanisms began working away whenever I moved rooms around. It's incredible – the sheer level of intelligence in its design and the meticulous detail in its presentation are, in a word, perfect.

The game never quite hits the complex standout heights of the Clockwork Mansion in its other levels, but they're still absolutely brilliant. There's one, again in a large ornate house, that forces you to travel between time periods. You navigate between the dilapidated version of the present and the opulent version in the past, working out different environmental puzzles and seeing what you can affect in the present by tampering with the past.

Then there's the Grand Palace of the Duke of Serkonos himself – again, wonderfully realized and so rich in its many avenues, pathways and hidden passages that you can't help but feel you've always got more to find. *Dishonored 2* never lets up in its environmental beauty, and its creativity is equally matched. The moment-to-moment play is also familiar, but improved in various ways. You'll always have at least two options available for your key objectives. More often than not, you'll be out to kill a target, but you might be able to find other ways of disposing of them, or even saving them if you want to. These choices carry weight and the game reacts to you in subtle and large ways, whether it's the small conversation between a pair of guards about how you killed someone, or the way in which the entire story resolves itself.

This means multiple playthroughs are encouraged. Furthermore, exploring is richly rewarded. Venture into the many side streets, abandoned apartments and tunnels of Karnaca's large hub areas and you'll discover optional quests and currency to invest in whichever powers you want to play with. This not only means you'll see more of developer Arkane Studios' amazing world-building, but you'll also have more opportunities to experiment with Emily's myriad abilities.

The go-to options are Far Reach, which catapults her into hard-to-reach places, and her Dark Vision ability, which lets you see through walls and track enemy movements. Domino allows

you to link the fates of multiple enemies. Set one on fire and they all catch alight. It's hugely satisfying. There's also the ability for you to create a doppelganger, which you can even switch places with after a couple of upgrades to confuse and confound your foes. It's a constant playground for you to manipulate in super-fun ways, and it means that you're always thinking about what you can do with the tools at your disposal.

Dishonored 2 is the perfect type of sequel. Across its numerous incredible levels, it never abandons the core traits which made the 2012 original

so great: the satisfying stealth, the free-form verticality and the insane number of ways to play. But it's a more consistent, more inventive game, adding mechanical hooks to provide depth and creativity in every mission. The Clockwork Mansion will likely go down as one of the all-time best missions in gaming.

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