A Class Dishonored: The *Dishonored* Franchise as a Critique of Victorian Idealism

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In "The Steampunk City in Crisis," Catherine Siemann suggests that steampunk fiction is written as "a city in crisis, a place where the imagined, steam-powered technologies create or address social problems and environmental disasters that echo historical ones" (51). In the appropriation of Victorian culture for steampunk, however, one component of that culture is frequently ignored: religion. Unlike other steampunk works, *Dishonored* (2012-2021), a game series by Arkane Studios, develops its central thesis by paying careful attention to the religious culture of Victorian England, bringing their spiritual experimentation to its natural conclusion. By taking this approach, *Dishonored* presents a much darker "city in crisis," one in which the technology and world events of this fictional universe —a regicide, a plague, and a coup—rather than spurring its citizens to action, leave them in a state of paralysis. In this portrayal, *Dishonored* presents a relevant critique of the Victorians in two ways. First, the Victorians are criticized for clinging to Christian virtues while also shedding that religious sentiment. Second, they are criticized for promoting empire, in the void left by the reduction of Christianity, as a bastion against the dangers of a changing global landscape. In this dual criticism, *Dishonored*, particularly through its gameplay, highlights how non-aristocratic Victorians may have coped with a disaster, exemplifying how the idealization of progress in both religious and imperial thought is steeped in privileged interests.

"To tell the story of Victorian Britain and to leave religion out—as was done surprisingly often for several decades and as is done by some historians in our own day—impresses us as an example of blatant disregard of evidence" (Arnstein et al. 149). This is the opening line of a long annotated bibliography—one among many—that describes the importance of religion in the

development and culture of Victorian Britain. Nearly everything, from its music to its literature to

its scientific inquiry, was hedged by, expressed through, or served as a commentary on religion.

While the cultural dominance of Christianity was unparalleled for a time in England, the Victorian

Age saw a revival of the "old gods" as Greco-Roman myths, the mystical arts of the pagans, and

the discovery of Buddhism in the East all heralded the festering of the otherwise tranquil pond of

Anglo-Christian hegemony.

Although religion was clearly of central importance to the Victorians, the most popular

genre that has arisen from interest in Victorian culture—steampunk—rarely interacts with the

religious sphere. Instead, the genre often focuses on the aesthetics of Victorian England and

speculative industrialization, the very act from which it gets its name. Writers often use this

aesthetic and genre to critique both the Victorian Era's myriad political and economic problems

while also bringing to light our own twenty-first century issues that correlate. As Margaret Rose

writes:

> We might look at steampunk as speculative fiction's revenge against such
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> arguments [about historical accuracy in literature] because steampunk is a fiction
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> that places a premium on minutely accurate historical detail, within flamboyantly
>
> wrong imagined pasts, in order to explore the ways in which the conventional
>
> historical sensibility sometimes gets it wrong. (319)

Rose continues by noting that steampunk often creates "this interplay between genealogy (the

Victorians are our distant forebears) and analogy (we are very much like the Victorians)" as a

common theme through much of steampunk literature (328). Thus, as Kristin Stimpson observes,

steampunk often extends a social and critical revolution into a battle against the very idea of empire

as a form of ideological power through its combination of aristocratic Victorian fashion melded

with the grease, oil, and metal of its myriad machinations (20). This conjunction gives the astute reader an insight into steampunk's core commentary on the importance of the worker in maintaining the politico-industrial empire despite them also being the target for oppression and discrimination.

The critique of empire typically unfolds in an urban environment, as it is the most prominent backdrop for steampunk fiction. Siemann states that

> Most frequently, the steampunk city presents itself as a sketchily defined backdrop, the generic gaslit surroundings of an alternative historical London or its analogue. However, the steampunk city that comes vividly to life on the page, that transcends the generic, is also a city in crisis, a place where imagined, steam-powered technologies create or address social problems and environmental disasters that echo historical ones. (51)

The vision of a utopic steampunk world being deconstructed into a mechanical dystopia frequents steampunk narrative. And yet, this focus on the purely mechanical and political often leaves out the importance, as stated at the beginning of this introduction, of the religious element of Victorian society, especially as it pertains to the identity and values of the poor and working classes.

It is in the seemingly empty space of religiously oriented steampunk that Arkane Studios' *Dishonored* franchise comes into being. Although it takes place on a fictional set of islands, the similarity to the British Isles is uncanny, and the Victorian influence is impossible to miss—the series even takes place during that world's nineteenth century. In fact, in an interview with Erik Kain of *Forbes*, the creators of *Dishonored* state, "As a team, we started out talking about historical London, the plague, gangs and the whaling industry, and as we added new elements like the supernatural and the 'steampunk' oppression technology, we slowly realized that we were creating

a new universe." Within the steampunk world of *Dishonored*, however, there is no Christian hegemony. Instead, there are only specious, folk-like beliefs with little order, or the secular beliefs of "The Abbey of the Everyman." Darko Suvin writes that most alternative fiction "is used to articulate different possible solutions of societal problems, those problems being of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world" (149). Arkane Studios wanted to create a world where the focus was on the folktales and the traditions of a semi-Victorian age; in doing so, they advanced a treatise on the value of stable beliefs when it comes to the larger stability of an empire, including the belief in empire itself, which was the Victorians' other obsession. After all, the Victorians saw themselves—and perhaps rightly so—as the pinnacle of political and commercial power at the time.

As stated previously, steampunk is frequently framed around the poor and working classes; however, steampunk is also frequently full of idealistic messaging, with an emphasis on hope, progress, and the exceptionalist attitude of the Victorians. *Dishonored*, in contrast, rejects Victorian idealism, criticizing the view for having no firm foundation through applying pressure to that culture in its steampunk setting on both the political and, uniquely, the religious front.[24] Duncan Bell, for example, suggests that one under-studied component of Victorian imperial thought is how it connects to their theology (295). *Dishonored* explicitly makes this connection, suggesting that the British Empire and Christianity are tied together in their emphasis on progress, whereby the Christian message for individual progress and hope forms the bedrock of the imperialistic venture of political and commercial progress. However, the crises presented by the game give the player the opportunity to see how an idealistic outlook formed largely by the

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[24] *Dishonored* is not necessarily unique in its rejection of Victorian idealism. Other games, such as American McGee's *Alice* (2000), have also tackled this concept. However, this paper does suggest that *Dishonored*'s focus on the shifting landscape of religious thought, and its subsequent impact on both imperial and class thought, is a unique angle from which both games tackle Victorian idealism.

aristocracy has no place in the worldviews of the poor and working classes, suggesting that the

vast majority of Victorians, despite the empire's prestige and power, would have cared little about

defending it.

Arkane Studios introduces this critique on two fronts. First, as mentioned previously, are

the occult and folk beliefs that some denizens of the Empire believe in—including most notably

the Outsider, who will be discussed in detail later in this essay—which, while removing

Christianity proper, also mimic many of the emerging religious systems of the period. Second,

Dishonored mimics the sweeping belief of aristocratic Victorian culture that "empire" itself—with

such aphoristic statements as "our nation will always prevail" or "the crown will give the people

hope" frequenting the dialogue of aristocratic characters in the games—can hold as a bastion

against the woes of a broken and fractured populace who fare no better under one crown of an

Empire than any other.

This essay explores *Dishonored*'s two-sided critique of Victorian idealism by first

exploring the changing religious landscape of Victorian England. Then, this essay explores how

this changing landscape maps onto *Dishonored*'s occult and pseudo-religious beliefs. With these

two pieces synthesized, it will then look at the major events of the two mainline games that point

to the importance of a belief in progress—whether it be manifested through religion or politics—

as a bastion against fear, relying on the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes as the definitive, though

often overlooked in Victorian political studies, commentator on this problem. *Dishonored* thus

successfully criticizes the Victorians first for clinging to the ideals of hope and progress while

simultaneously shedding their religious undercurrent, and second for the suggestion that "empire"

can stand against fear in the absence of that religious undercurrent. While we may think of the

Victorians as indomitable, this belief reflects a top-down view of the empire, rather than a bottom-

up one. *Dishonored*, in focusing intimately on the poorest of the poor—contrasting them with the

wealthy, who are the impetus for the games' plots in many of its acts—suggests that most of the

denizens of its in-game empire, much like the denizens of the Victorian Empire, would almost

certainly fall into the Hobbesian "state of everyman against everyman" had they faced a

tremendous crisis (76).

The Realm Beyond the Real

During the nineteenth century, with the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*

(1859) and the arrival of Eastern mysticism and Buddhism through England's imperialist

expansions, the otherwise simple Christian orthodoxy that had reigned supreme in England was

shaken to its core. According to Jeffrey J. Franklin,

> This period [the Victorian Period] experienced what could be considered the second wave
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> of the Protestant Reformation, its individualization of faith, which had been building
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> momentum in Europe since the Enlightenment. Thus Protestant individuals, driven by a
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> widely perceived crisis of faith in orthodox Christianity, subject to modern science's rise
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> to dominance in truth-telling authority, and fully exposed for the first time in history to
>
> the panoply of world religions, generated an unprecedented proliferation of new and often
>
> hybrid religions and spiritualities. (1)

Typically speaking, this period is characterized as a battle between materialism—heralded by

Darwin's publication—and orthodox Christianity. Franklin asserts, however, that there is a third

side of this intellectual scape: the Spirit (2). With the influx of new ideas came an alchemical

combination of the spirit, the natural, and the religious, with each new player in the game looking

for that magical elixir that would grant its followers eternal life or, at the very least, an

enlightenment. This latter portion of the intellectual and religious landscape is the primary focus of *Dishonored*, shining through in its occultic systems.

The upheaval in orthodoxy also led to a reconstruction and reinterpretation of the myths and narratives that had been taken as historical canon, in the case of Christianity, and as moral fairy tale or grand delusion, as with Greco-Roman myth. The Romantic poets found myths fascinating, creating a muddling of "religion" and "myth" that found itself being attached to—and ripped from—other ideological totems of naturalism and materialism. It was during the elongated period of Romanticism and its lead-up into Victorianism that poets such as Percy Shelley, William Blake, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson all began to use myth as a mode of poetic writing, especially towards humanistic ends (Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) serves as a prime example).

Although the two periods have many stark differences between them, the exploration of myth and the revival of humanism stands as a thematic throughline. The sudden shift (in historical context) from myth as the grim reminder of humanity without the one true God to its conception as a beautiful tale of mankind's own attempts at the divine is startling. Margaret K. Louis states that "within a generation [of the beginning of the Victorian period] the status of ancient Greek religion (formerly less admired than ancient Greek literature and art) rose with startling energy in Victorian England. By the 1860s classical paganism had become vital to authors who had openly condemned and belittled it earlier in their careers" (338). These new insights into Greco-Roman myth also poured into a renewed interest in the "Mystery cults," which were ancient occult rituals—typically secret—performed by the followers of certain deities.

Orthodox Christianity was, unsurprisingly, terrified of the sudden influx of new ideas. By the end of the Victorian period, the once grandiose Church had become a place of dogmatism and

backwards thinking for the many who were leaving its sanctum. Although Protestantism had also

maligned the Orthodox Church, this new view of the Victorians was not to "reinterpret"

Christianity back to its alleged Biblical roots; instead, it was to cast it out altogether. The Romantic

writers and New Age spiritualists began turning their backs to the Church in some way or another,

either by directly going after Christianity through the metaphor of old myths or outright developing

new religions. As such, Deism, the belief that God started the universe and nothing else, became

widely popular once again, along with other, more occult beliefs (Franklin 11-12).

The fluidity of religion at the time reached all the way from the aristocracy down to the

lower classes. According to Hugh Mcleod's consolidated oral history research on the topic, while

church attendance remained relatively strong even into the late Victorian period, a general lack of

conviction was also quite clear (31-32). Christianity was losing its vice grip as the de facto system

of thought and, while we more readily see the spiritual experimentation common among the

Romantics and the aristocrats, these chimeric movements stretched all the way down the economic

chain. As such, the tumult of spiritual experimentation undoubtedly brokered important questions

relating to humanity's role (or lack thereof) in life which, in conjunction with a rapidly shifting

economic system, was a recipe for a crisis of identity in those most affected, even if many

continued to pilfer a metaphysical safety from Christianity's core tenets (Mcleod 34).

While not explicitly addressing the Victorians (though he did have a particular distaste for

the British), Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Christianity's greatest critics, suggests that much of

Europe was couched in this half-grasping at Christianity. From this observation Nietzsche invokes

his now-infamous "death of God," itself a simple treatise: if one is to remove God from mankind's

beliefs, one must have a legitimate alternative for it; otherwise, one is liable to see individuals—

and perhaps even a society—collapse into nihilism. He characterizes the problem in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889):

> When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out
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> from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident: this point has to
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> be exhibited again and again, despite the English flatheads. Christianity is a system,
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> a *whole* view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of
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> it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole . . . . (515)

Dishonored takes up the Nietzschian warning about the death of God through removing Christianity from its core. In doing so, *Dishonored* presents an affirming view of Nietzsche's warning by showing how a society built on the ideals of hope and progress begins to collapse when faced with great crises, especially when it cannot make appeals about the nature of the world through a stable religious outlook (this latter point is also emphasized by Hobbes, which will be discussed later). It is through this that Victorian society itself is critiqued for stepping away from convicted religious belief while seemingly hedging its bets against the terrors of a world in crisis. Of course, the Victorians attempted to fill the void left by the loss of Christianity with their political and commercial exceptionalism—that is, through empire—but, as *Dishonored* portrays through its narrative and underlying lore, this replacement falls short. Keeping in mind this religious contextual background, attention can now be turned to the Empire of the Isles.

The Empire of the Isles: Developing A Godless Britain

The *Dishonored* franchise takes place on the Empire of the Isles—a conglomerate of four neighboring islands ruled by a single monarch but managed by individual governors and a parliament. Although there are four, two are the predominant locations for the main games in the

franchise: Gristol and Serkonos. Gristol is the seat of the empire, featuring the capital city of

Dunwall and other landmark cities that the player occasionally visits through the games

("Gristol"). The city of Dunwall, which is humid, mostly gray, and full of ancient architecture even

in an industrially advanced society, is a clear stand-in for London or any of the other industrially

massive cities during the Victorian period. Serkonos is of a more mediterranean design, although

one of the major cities the player visits—Karnaca—has been extensively mined for its silver and

is now the home of sandstorms. The other two islands, although important in the historical context

of the game, do not factor into the overall political or social order within the period when the player

is present.

As one moves through the steampunk cities, steamboats, primitive electricity, and all

manner of clockwork gadgets dot the landscape. Given that the series takes place entirely on small

islands, the citizenry gather the resources for making their electrical equipment by hunting whales,

steeping the great beasts in their culture. Experimentally, there are weapons of steampunk design,

including foldable swords, clockwork explosives and robots, and a "wall of light"—an invisible

electrical fence that vaporizes objects on contact while active. Most of the industrialization of the

series points toward a militaristic end, with the occasional fusion of technology and the occult,

such as a clockwork-enhanced heart possessed by the spirit of the dead empress Kaldwin.

Per the history of the series, the War of the Four Crowns—a conflict between each of the

Isles—took place in the early seventeenth century, ending with Gristol as the head of the empire

("War of Four Crowns"). This conflict is likely a stand-in for Britain's actual Civil War(s), which

occurred between 1642 and 1651. Both wars ended with similar values put in place: a unification

of the kingdoms, a renewed parliament, and a semblance of religious order. Although there are no

active imperialistic endeavors within the Empire during the period of the game, as Stimpson notes,

the clockwork machinations—as with most steampunk—work together to create a sweeping

aesthetic and ideology of "empire" (20). In fact, this aesthetic of empire becomes a sticking point

in the plot as, though The Empire of the Isles is not seeking outward endeavors, the first game

presents an attempt to re-militarize the Empire so that it can spread as an Imperial power farther

afield.

Of course, this peace was not destined to last. The two mainline games in the series subject

this hard-fought empire to the worst political problems imaginable. In the first game, an internal

plot successfully sees the reigning Empress Kaldwin assassinated, her only daughter kidnapped,

and her right-hand protector Corvo—the player's character—framed as the killer. In the second

game, set fifteen years after the events of the first, a usurper from the outside, Delilah

Copperspoon, prodded along by the Duke of Serkonos, takes control of the throne by witchcraft,

claiming her own bloodright to it as the illegitimate daughter of the late emperor ("Delilah

Copperspoon"). The player, as either the now-mature Emily Kaldwin or Corvo, must restore the

throne as they seek revenge on Delilah for her coup. Additionally, as an undercurrent in the first

game, a rat-borne plague—brought there by the game's main antagonist—sweeps the streets of the

bustling city centers the player traverses. While similar in potency to the black plague, it has the

additional quirk of turning the rats it infests into rabid flesh-eaters with a particular taste for

humans. In the second game, a plague of flesh-eating insects ravages the isles, although they are,

overall, less threatening than the rats.

Despite the grand, tragic events, the games are sparsely populated, featuring only a small

handful of characters—most of whom are very wealthy—for the player to interact with. In the first

game, the player interacts with only a dozen or so characters who seem upset by the queen's

assassination, the princess's kidnapping, and the appointment of the lead of the queen's guards. In

the second game, a similar scenario happens where, even though a full-on coup occurs, only a small handful of people seem particularly torn up about the change in command.[25] As such, the "city in crisis" of *Dishonored* is political, tempered by a lack of religious conviction, and is based, rather than on industrialization and its problems, on the lack of volition from the citizenry when faced with major events. Thus, the game focuses on the citizens' seeming inability to be spurred to action in the name of their country.

The Abbey of the Everyman

Core to the world of *Dishonored* is the Abbey of the Everyman, a spiritual order that functions like the Catholic Church, with a full hierarchy and "spiritual" scripture. The description given by the creators on the game's website states the Abbey believes that "the universe is unknowably vast and swarming with all manner of dangerous spirits and forces, most of which are hostile to man's existence" (Bethesda). Additionally, the Abbey has no deity or traditional worship system; instead, its beliefs are based on a secular set of commandments known as "the Seven Strictures," as well as on cosmological events ("The Abbey"). The Strictures themselves are all based on typical moral virtues that stretch beyond the Christian and include the following do-not-haves: Wandering Gaze, Lying Tongue, Restless Hands, Roving Feet, Rampant Hunger, Wanton Flesh, and Errant Mind ("The Seven Strictures"). Instead of a dedication to God or even to the Order itself, the Strictures are simply a guide to good living based on real-world historical understandings of what is typically deemed good behavior.

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[25] One could look at this as a limitation of the game, but this would be too hasty. Even if the game could not handle hundreds of revolutionaries on-screen at once, they could be mentioned in dialogue with other characters. This effectively never occurs in either game, outside of a few brief mentions of some aristocrats sympathetic to the cause and who provide money for it. In fact, only one ending across the two games implies unrest and civil uprising in the populace at all. Thus, the lack of interest from the poor and working classes is seemingly intentional. Even if the intent is to focus attention on the player's actions and choices, this still provides a backdrop of unwillingness in others to restore order to the empire.

Through the Abbey, Arkane Studios presents a secularized alternative to the typical Christian set of tenets—a not uncommon practice in the liberalizing industrial culture of Victorian Britian (McLeod 35). In fact, the Abbey functions as an enemy of sorts in the first game, due to the player being framed for the murder of the empress, and as an ally in the second due to their personal concerns with the major antagonist of the game being a witch ("The Abbey"). Players thus decide for themselves whether the Abbey is a positive or negative force in the Empire of the Isles.

The Void and the Outsider

Given the stated interest in folk tradition by the creators of *Dishonored*, in the void left by the absence Christianity, the denizens of *Dishonored* also flock to traditional occult tendencies (Kain). If, then, the Abbey of the Everyman is the norm in *Dishonored*, the worship of the Void is the occult. The Void functions as an alternative dimension in *Dishonored* and is likely the plane of the afterlife. What is particularly interesting about the Void is that it is a dimension that seeks a divine entity to represent it on the mortal plane ("The Void"). During the events of the game, the divine inhabitant of the Void is the Outsider, who both aids the player by bestowing them with magical gifts while also discussing some of the morally ambiguous scenarios in which the player often finds themself.

The Outsider functions largely as an omniscient narrator for the player's actions, as he seems to know the futures that come out of any action the player takes. *Dishonored* reinforces these alternative possibilities through the "chaos" system, itself a calculation of the player's actions (e.g. whether they kill guards, are caught during missions, etc.) and their willingness to spare or assassinate key targets. Depending on their rating, the player receives different dialogues and

endings to missions and the games themselves. No matter what the player does nor what type of

ending they receive, however, the Outsider continues with a tone that suggests all the player's

actions mean little in the long term for the Empire of the Isles.

Thus, the Outsider's most important role is as an ambivalent foil to the player's single-

minded pursuit of the restoration of the throne. The Outsider recognizes that the people are

effectively held together only by the shoestrings of a breaking empire and by belief that survival

is worth it. In fact, as explored in other games, the Outsider bestowed his gift on the assassin who

killed the queen as well as other characters that the player would consider antagonists, adding to

the ambivalent nature of the Outsider's desires. As such, the Outsider is a goad for the player, but

not into any particular moral direction. Instead, the Outsider simply implores the player to choose

how they wish to reshape the world through their actions in each scenario.

As should be clear from their descriptions and attitudes, however, both the Abbey of the

Everyman and the Outsider fail to engender the ideals necessary to give people hope against

seemingly insurmountable suffering. The Abbey, at base, is only a simplistic system of rules to

follow to live decently, rather than a bastion against the worst the world can give, while the

Outsider's nonchalance—or perhaps even amusement—at the chaos of the world gives no respite.

In both systems, we also see the titular versions of Victorian belief. In the former, Christianity's

common reduction to a set of rules to follow (e.g. the "Ten Commandments," loving one's

neighbor as oneself, etc.) is brought to its clearest conclusion, while in the latter the new interest

in the esoteric gods and practices of the Greco-Romans are synthesized into a single chaotic entity.

In both the real-world Victorian case and *Dishonored*'s, these systems fall short of

replacing the need for hope found in larger, more metaphysical religious systems. This is, of

course, explicitly reflected in the brutal world of *Dishonored*, where a plague runs rampant, and

the Empire is frequently at risk. Even the new technology, often the only bastion for hope or progress left, is turned toward war and oppression. Without this bastion, the denizens of the Empire find themselves at a loss. They are languid and solemn in their progression through life, with nothing to tie them to a belief that the state of the world might get better.

However, in both Victorian society and the Empire of the Isles, there is a second system of hope: imperial stability and progress. That is, though God may not save them, the power of politics and economy just might, providing an alternative impetus towards action. Empire, though, is not a safety net for every person. Both "mighty empires"— the historical British Empire and the fictional Empire of the Isles—prove(d) incapable of protecting and providing for their poorer classes. Though both empires may look stable from the top, their working-class pillars are cracked and marred from oppression and injustice, ready to break at the onset of a crisis.

The Sociopolitical Isles

Although *Dishonored* outright removes Christianity, the Victorians themselves were also transitioning away from Christianity as their primary hedge against the dangers of the outside world. It had been replaced by notions of empire, notably, according to Bell, through a revival of interest in Greek and Roman political thought, although some attention was also paid to the United States as a newer, more progressive version of those historical empires (737). The cultural zeitgeist surrounding empire during the Victorian period was fraught with existential angst, with fears— and hopes—surrounding Britain's continued trajectory upward or its potential imperial decline. Bell writes, "Since the prevailing assumption underpinning much social and political thought [for the Victorians] was that 'anything that does not progress is doomed to decline', and since empires stood in the political imagination as the most pertinent concrete examples of declension, Greater

Britain had to be yoked to the idea of progress" (738). In both religion and politics, progress was the *modus operandi.*

While progress does not ultimately have to be towards the better, both Christian orthodoxy and imperial messaging largely suggest that it will be if one pays careful mind to the tenets and strictures of those that had come before. However, progress and change are the ideals of the privileged class—the musings of those with the leisure to pontificate. The poor and working classes—a rapidly developing majority in the Victorian Empire—had no such luxury. In fact, this lack of luxury was frequently a point of discrimination between the "moral" aristocracy and the "immoral" working class. John B. Lamb writes, "In terms of the laboring population, statistical measurement quantified the poor in terms of moral and material lack, in terms of their inadequately furnished houses, their lack of religious 'progression,' and their want of education" (41). As Anne Baltz Rodrick explains, this material discrimination stems from, and is compounded by, an intellectual one, whereby the impetus for self-improvement played a major role in their moral value (45-47).

In quantifying the poor in terms of their lack of material as a symptom of moral regression, the aristocratic Victorians inadvertently also suggested that their own material well-being—that is, their privilege—is the de facto reason for why they have an upstanding moral quality. *Dishonored* picks up on this trait and teases it out through submitting the otherwise privileged higher classes to the woes of the poor—loss of their home, their source of safety and income, and their political power—noting how their "moral" activities fall away. After all, the player can, in *Dishonored II*, play as empress Emily Kaldwin—the most privileged person in the Empire—and act as a morally reprehensible monster in pursuit of the return of her material wealth in the form of retaking the crown.

Additionally, the recognition of the poorer majority lacking in power and interest is a notable problem both for Victorian idealism and the Empire of the Isles, though it is painted much more starkly in the latter. Although some, like Bernard Porter, have argued that this was an epistemic issue—that is, the non-aristocrats simply having no knowledge (or no need of knowledge) of the extent of Britain's imperial expansion—*Dishonored* suggests that an additional condition of their lack of interest in empire is in how the empire was failing them (19, 26-27). Thus, without the Christian bastion—and with no reason to believe in "Empire," given its oppressive effect on the poorer classes' ability to move upward and to stay safe—the denizens of the Empire of the Isles are at a loss as each major event sends the country reeling, threatening the stability that the very same Empire had fought so hard to create. Even though all three major crises across the two main games seem as though they would lead to civilian uprisings, few occur, with only a handful of allies existing in both games—most of whom come from the aristocratic class and therefore have a more vested interest in maintaining the monarch that had treated them so well. Stuck in the fear of death that surrounds them, the general populace is paralyzed, leaning on the only powers they know that can keep them safe: folk traditions and an immediate, unquestioned obedience to whatever new authority exists above them.

It is useful here to bring in the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes who, while not of the liberal tradition, provides the clearest framework for the potentially off-putting response of the citizens of the Empire of the Isles. Hobbes wrote during the British Civil War and, in his seminal work, *Leviathan* (1651), details a purely materialist account of political society and human nature. Within the text, he lays the groundwork for how and why political power develops, suggesting that the driving motivation for human community is fear—fear of death, fear of others, and fear of insecurity. This motivation then leads individuals to give up their individual liberties to a

sovereign, forming a social contract (80). As such, he ultimately suggests that the most proper form of government is an authoritarian one, whereby a sovereign can take as much power as necessary in times of great fear to protect the citizens who have bestowed that power upon them (127). However, if the social contract is strained to the extent that individuals do not receive their promised security against fear, that contract dissolves, and those individuals who once upheld the social order are now striving against it (144, 210-11). While Hobbes envisions this as civil war, *Dishonored* views this broken social contract as a crisis of will, in which those who give their power to the social contract simply do nothing to protect it from further disintegration.

Importantly, Hobbes also suggests that religion is a bastion against fear. He writes:

This perpetual fear, always accompanying mankind in the ignorance of causes (as it were in the dark), must needs have for object something. And therefore, when there is nothing seen, there is nothing to accuse, either of their good or evil fortune, but some power or agent invisible; in which sense, perhaps, it was that some of the old poets said that the gods were at first created by human fear . . . . (64)

Per Hobbes, religion is a bastion against fear only when it provides something to condemn as evil or praise as good. When religion fails to give this scapegoat, it fails as protection against fear. With *Dishonored*'s world having no such reasonable scapegoat (the Outsider comes closest, but even he is chaotic and impossible to pin down as good or evil), the only bastion *is* the regime.

Thus, the player sees these two competing philosophies (Victorian idealism and Hobbesian fear) in *Dishonored* through the task of restoring the sovereign to the throne. In the first game the threat is internal, requiring the rooting out of dissidents while also dealing with the plague befalling the Empire. In the second, the threat is external, leading the player to execute key targets both

within and external to the Empire to destabilize Delilah's grip from the stolen throne. In both cases,

the player can receive a good or bad ending related to their "chaos" rating. In the bad ending of

either game, Hobbes's politics shine through, with Emily, amidst the chaos of the usurpations,

taking firm control over her government, acting in many cases as a tyrant. Only in the most positive

endings in either game does a humanistic Emily take the throne, restoring liberty to the citizenry

and doing her best to peaceably protect the Empire's interests; however, to what extent such a

libertarian outlook would survive is questionable.[26]

In conforming to the Hobbesian idea of human nature, *Dishonored* presents its strongest

critique. The Victorian period saw unprecedented stability for Great Britain; Arkane Studios

removes that stability. In conjunction with the removal of Christianity—that is, what Victorian

society was tending towards anyways—the game portrays how the Victorians may have had to

react—or may have simply not reacted at all—if Queen Victoria had been assassinated, if someone

had attempted to usurp the throne, or if they had been met with a war on their own soil. There are

some steampunk works that *extend* the life of Queen Victoria, which Rose notes as a recurring

theme in "petrolpunk" (an offshoot of steampunk), but Arkane Studios does the reverse (321).

Neither this nor the loss of the Christian message of hope is to be seen as insignificant; without the

message of hope, a tragedy one might have once believed was surmountable is now impossible.

The death of a monarch is but the goings-on of a world always on the brink of disaster.

The reason for this, however, as suggested in this section, is more than just religion. One

of the key components of the *Dishonored* games is how the player, a member of the privileged

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[26] *Dishonored II* has significantly more endings than the first game; however, these endings all rely on the player's chaos rating and their general style of play. This includes many endings where Emily does not take the throne, including Corvo acting as tyrant or other characters that the player meets throughout the game operating as regents. In all instances, however, these rulers are unelected, have unchecked power, and are accepted, in the Hobbesian sense of the relinquishing of rights to them, by the population, with only the reigning monarch or board of regents' own goodwill as the deciding factor between beneficence and tyranny.

class as either a royal or the right hand of one, navigates life from the slums to living among the

wealthiest aristocrats. Players interact with the sick and the poor as much as they do with great

scientists and entrepreneurs. The player is thus privy to the disparity between rich and poor, seeing

how the great, stable empire looks when one climbs down from the great towers and castles. While

pride in a great empire might spur some to action, the miserable and downtrodden, faced only with

the task of survival, would see no reason to save an Empire that was not successfully protecting

them against the woes of the world.

Nasty, Brutish, and Short

While we often view the Victorians as an iconoclastic culture, this privilege and title is

built upon our understanding of its most influential members. The poets, philosophers, and

aristocrats make up our image of this period of incredible imperial strength. Left to the wayside in

these analyses are those who lived below the towers: the poor, the sick, and the outsiders cast away

by their own society. Those below the towers were not hedged against the dangers and fears of the

world around them. While the game, much like historical texts, has limitations, the glimpses of the

Empire's darkest streets and greatest palaces, in conjunction with the more existential threats that

drive each game's narrative, establish quite readily the problems that face the citizenry. In each

instance of play, the player can usually help or hinder the persons they are interacting with in the

grand scheme of the plot, thanks to the games' multiple endings via the chaos system. More to the

point, the player, thanks to the Outsider, is given the power to change the trajectory of the world

in front of them. While no ending concludes without a monarch on the throne, some see Emily

moving towards relinquishing her powers and promoting the general welfare—even if, as

previously mentioned, her actions in the moment are likely colored by a materialistic selfishness.

Of course, much of steampunk centers itself on class in the Victorian period, with particular attention paid to the working class and the poor. However, these portrayals, in not attending to the religious history of the Victorians, feature a working class with the impetus to stand against their oppressors or any other trials they might face. In attending to religion, *Dishonored*, while also showing the poor and working classes, suggests that one would find no impetus among them. Faced with a crisis, *Dishonored* proposes that the gilded message of Victorian idealism—steeped in aristocratic privilege and with no place in the hearts and minds of most Victorians—would not have survived. It is perhaps our own retroactive understanding of the Victorians, as those who did not live or face the fears of the unprivileged of that time, that clouds our understanding of what they could have faced at all.

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