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Up-to-the-minute  
previews and reviews

# Assassins and artistry

If you bought this copy of **Edge** from a newsstand, perhaps your attention was grabbed by the description of Arkane Studios' fantasy assassin sim *Dishonored* (previewed over the page). There are many more minds behind *Dishonored* than those who worked on *Deus Ex* and *Half-Life 2*, of course, but as pitches go, it's irresistible.

And besides, the influence of Viktor Antonov – art director of *Half-Life 2* – is identifiable from the merest glance at *Dishonored*'s concept art. In an industry where art is rightfully celebrated for its power to conjure impossible worlds into existence, and its ability to take the mundane and give it an unique visual signature of its own (the beautiful decay of *BioShock*'s Rapture, or the way *Katamari Damacy* turns ordinary objects into chunky pick-and-mix sweets), artists are often anonymous.

The first *Half-Life* is a classic, but its B-movie looks are a world away from the sophisticated blend of post-Communist, eastern European architecture and brutal futurist technology that defined City 17. *Dishonored*'s world is very different, but its visual design is based around a similar clash – 17th century fashions blend with the

architectural design of inter-war London – and Antonov's ability to capture the visual language of oppression is disquietingly familiar: buildings tower imposingly over the city, while the spindly legs of the Tall Boy enemies patrolling *Dishonored*'s streets recall City 17's iconic striders. It's a familiar talent, repurposed. And a reminder of the astonishing influence both art and artist can have over a game.

As for the other talent working on *Dishonored*, turn the page to discover the thinking that's gone into crafting *Dishonored*'s world – right down to the way in which its (rather unusual – and explosive) power source can be found in carelessly undefended batteries on its streets. One mind might be able to imagine a world, but it takes a team to put it together.

## MOST WANTED

### Rodea The Sky Soldier Wii

Yuji Naka's studio Prope takes to the skies on Nintendo machines after detours on iPhone and the cute but confused *Ivy The Kiwi*. For those who prefer low blood pressure, the studio's other Wii project, *Family Fishing*, looks much more sedate.

### Depth PC

Developer The Depth Team takes team deathmatch underwater with Epic's UDK. As a shark, it's your job to hunt and maul the divers scavenging for treasure, while divers need to play a careful game of hide, sneak and shoot to have a chance of staying alive.

### Planetside 2 PC

Sony unveils a sequel that looks every bit the... remake. The planet Auraxis looks gorgeous, the action looks fast, and the vehicles look like hovering slabs of metallic death. The rumoured PC-only release may be a sign that *Section 8* has pipped Sony to its own post, but either way *Planetside 2* looks to be shaping up promisingly.



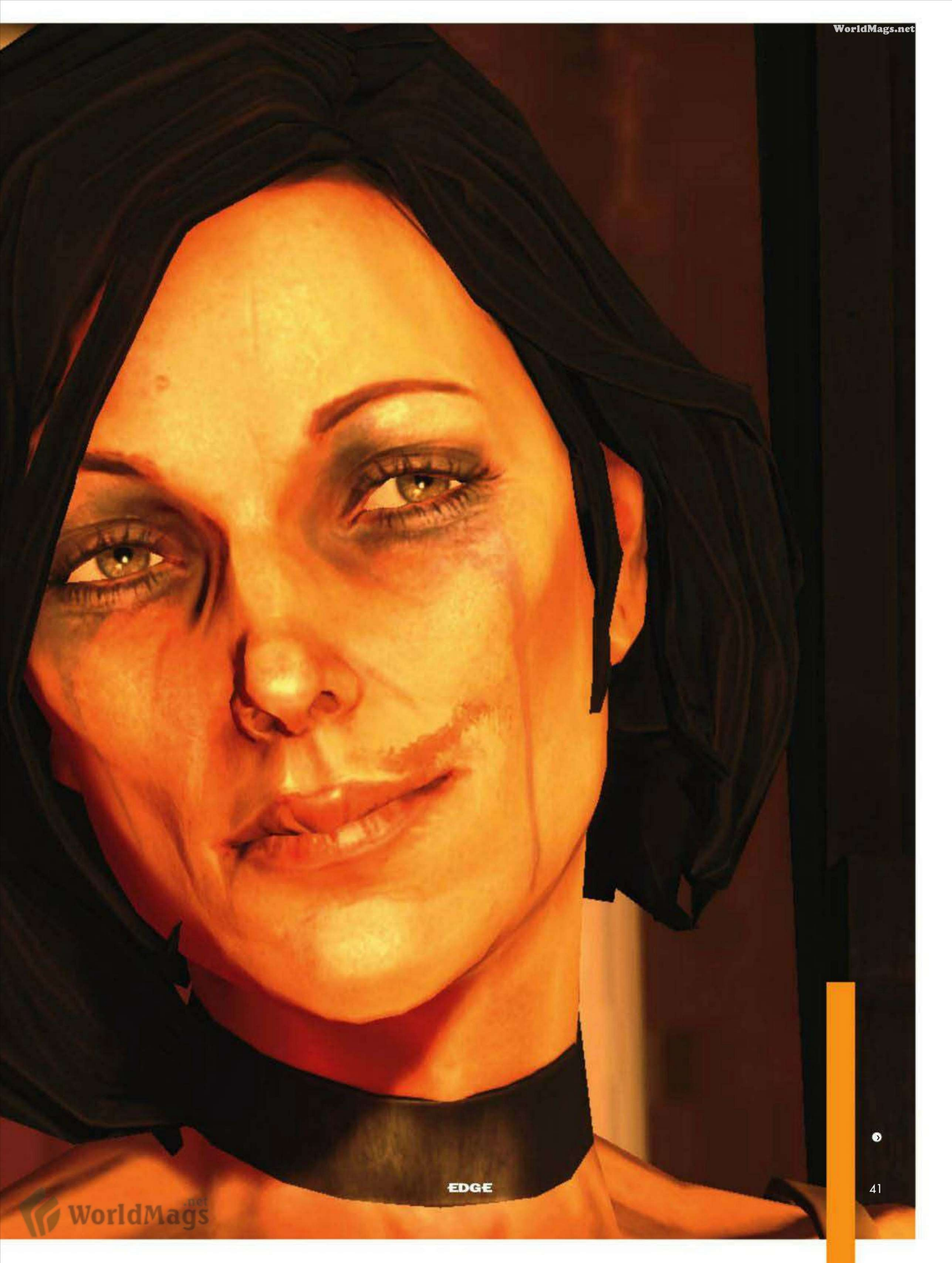
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# DISHONORED

For an assassin, revenge is a dish  
prepared to your personal taste

<b>Publisher</b>	Bethesda Softworks
<b>Developer</b>	Arkane Studios
<b>Format</b>	360, PS3
<b>Origin</b>	France/US
<b>Release</b>	2012

*Dishonored's* characters are deliberately rendered to look angular and vague, the design team admitting to having no interest in minute levels of detail. Instead it's more about deep, artistic brush strokes than individual pores and pixels



EDGE



## DISHONORED

BELOW Guards will attack the thugs that infest the shadowy alleys of the game, but they're not on your side – in fact, they often protect the targets you've been assigned to kill. Take them out quietly, or risk fighting heavy reinforcements



Meet *Dishonored's* equivalent of the Big Daddy. Known as Tall Boys, these striking enemies have their design roots in a mechanical horse-and-carriage concept dropped during development



**D**ishonored might be a game about murder, but that doesn't mean that killing people will be easy. "Modern games have got increasingly insulated. They protect the player," claims **Harvey Smith**, game designer on the new assassination simulator. "The player can do this one thing, but it never spills over into this other thing. We deliberately go in the opposite direction." Arkane Studios is creating something that can't be pithily summarised, where execution feels less like a hobby and more like a task that requires meticulous planning. And even then, things will still go wrong.

This firstperson action game takes place in an alternate future, with players controlling an imperial bodyguard wrongly accused of killing the empress he swore to protect. Your job is to take revenge by assassinating the men who framed you. Your primary tools are a sword and crossbow, but the as-yet-unnamed main character has a supernatural aptitude for murder, with the ability to teleport, bend time and possess living things. Combining these skills with a reactive, chaotic world leads to

some deliberately unpredictable consequences. "We author the player power systems and AI in such a way that they deliberately interact – sometimes messily, sometimes sloppily – to produce results that we don't even predict," Smith explains. "This is one of our favourite things in terms of philosophy – we're always going for a simulation; systems that run. It's a different philosophy than in games where every situation is scripted, and every player will have the same experience." Compare this with the likes of *Black Ops*, whose players could complete the opening level by firing their weapon only once, during a scripted sequence, and Smith's point seems even more pertinent. The goal is to make every *Dishonored* experience unique: "Our games are like when you and your friends maybe broke into an abandoned house and explored it – it's scary, and maybe nothing happens, or maybe something great happens; around the next corner you're not sure what you'll find."

This freedom means that every obstacle can be approached imaginatively; players can



mix powers to produce results the design team didn't consciously plan. One example we see has the hero entering a room full of guards, pausing time and filling the frozen air with crossbow bolts; when time resumes, three satisfying headshots play out. "That's an example of emergent techniques and approaches that the level designers found that we didn't even know," notes co-creative director and president of Arkane, **Raphael Colantonio**. *Dishonored's* unpredictability has already lead to some deliciously evil results during development: Smith explains that it's possible for you to pause time after a guard fires his gun, possess him and then walk him in front of his own bullet. "When time

BELOW The outfits of *Dishonored* are based on 17th Century designs and pulp adventure stories from the 1930s. Everything is vaguely recognisable, with a layer of mythology that gives the game a baroque, otherworldly look



## Environmental hazards

Rats are literally everywhere in *Dishonored* – they even help to form the mythology of the world. “One of the important things that’s going on is the rat plague – it’s killed half of the city, and so a lot of the fiction is related to the rat plague: how the government has reacted, how the people have reacted,” Colantonio explains.

“It was based on the second plague in London, but we wanted to get rid of the history – if you want a lot of originality in a game you have to remove it. The idea was to build a universe,” states art director **Sebastien Mitton**.



LEFT You won’t find any faces from the Arkane staff here – many of the characters are based on real people photographed in British pubs. An anatomy teacher worked on the concept with the studio to develop *Dishonored*’s weathered and brutal-looking inhabitants

resumes, the guard’s own bullet kills him. It’s like a time-travel suicide,” he quips. Compared to the cactus-killing thuggery of *Bulletstorm*, *Dishonored* looks like a more refined form of butchery. Your skills aren’t limited to offensive use, either. Smith explains: “People figured out how to layer, like we put in a rat swarm and we put in possession, but we didn’t think that people would sometimes be summoning a swarm of rats, then possessing one of them. So rat swarm plus possession becomes a mobility stealth power, not just an attack power.” Razor mines – anti-personnel devices straight out of the *Hellraiser* films – can even be strapped to the rats for a murderous crescendo.

**Events take place** in a grim authoritarian future. It’s a world with all the layered subtleties of *BioShock*’s Rapture, and much like that game the environment is as important as the hero you control. “We spent six months looking for the right kind of fiction that combines something subtle, something that’s familiar and something

really crazy and mystical,” notes visual designer **Viktor Antonov**, art director for *Half-Life 2* and the designer of *City 17*. “The first thing was a city, claustrophobia, something that’s threatening and dark in the tradition of Arkane’s titles, and plague. We wanted to do something that was based on London and England, and then that’s very often associated with steampunk and with Jack the Ripper, so we wanted to get a different aspect of London.” Every element of the design has been meticulously considered – it’s a dictatorship full of looming shadows and oppressive watchtowers which tells a story without it ever needing to be explicit. While straightforward references have been deliberately avoided, the team aimed to create a world similar in richness to Mervyn Peake’s *Gormenghast*. “That’s a really cool fictional England,” Antonov notes. “Mixing time periods from the ’20s to the Renaissance era with baroque touches. This was the kind of fiction we wanted – elegant, sophisticated and crazy at the same time, but believable.”

The mythology is so advanced that even





## DISHONORED



The game is inspired by old Europe, but with added layers of technology that turn it almost steampunk

potential power sources have been endlessly debated by the team. “That was a big drama”, admits Antonov. “Should we have electricity? It’s: ‘No, that’s too modern, and we’ll look too much like this and that,’ and eventually we stuck to whale oil. You have a physical source – you actually have a tank that you carry with you.” These tanks of whale oil are present throughout the game, acting like massive batteries for the Wall of Light, a crackling security device that symbolises the oppressed society. “They discovered not too long ago how to render this whale oil in a way that provides a very volatile power source,” Smith explains. “They’re in the middle of what we call an alternate industrial revolution – and so they’ve got these Tesla-like devices like the Wall of Light that you have to figure out how to bypass.” It’s possible to find blueprints for the Wall of Light, allowing you to hack the walls and turn them against the guards, much like *BioShock*, or you can heave out the batteries and use them as incendiary devices. Wherever there’s the chance to give players a choice, Arkane is implementing it.

**As striking as** the environment is, it’s not just for show – the world feels alive. The ever-present rats are just one of the many dynamic systems in the game. “Big swarms of rats will move around – they’re very unscripted; if you get too close to them you can pull them away from whatever they’re doing, but if you run away from them they might be attracted to another body instead,” Smith explains. “Wherever the rats are, the way they move around the map, they represent threat.” The NPCs are equally as unscripted, with guards that stop to admire artwork or warm themselves by fires. The reactive gameplay means that there’s usually more than one way to circumvent a problem, allowing players to boldly dash into a room and cut down waves of enemies, or peer through keyholes, lift keys off guards’ belts and progress unnoticed. Even the use of stealth is distinct, recalling the acrobatics of *Mirror’s Edge*. “One of our goals was to make a stealth system that was not super-slow,” Smith explains. “A lot of people put the emphasis on not moving; we wanted a very active stealth, very mobile.”

It is, however, possible to progress without bloodying your hands. This is important, since your conduct will have lasting implications on the world. “It’s very true that the way you handle yourself will affect the outcome of the entire kingdom,” Smith says. Despite being a story of cold assassination, the morality system is more complex than simply choosing between options that are clearly labelled good or evil. “There is branching, which is not only based on what you do or what you don’t do; it’s more like an aggregate of things you did,” Colantonio explains. “We call that the Chaos system. In other words, the more you kill people, the more you disturb an area, and the chances of that branching happening will be bigger.” For example, repeatedly summoning swarms of rats in an already plague-ridden

**“People put the emphasis on not moving but we wanted a very mobile type of stealth”**

world will increase the level of chaos. Ghost through each level without slaughtering innocents, and the world will be a better place. “It maintains the greatest stability, and so a lot of the branches that happen later are what you would expect when things are more stable, more positive,” Colantonio says. “If things are more chaotic, it makes you think like life is cheap, there are more betrayals and more bad outcomes.” The aim is to encourage you to consider the impact of your actions.

*Dishonored* is already a game full of deliberate, intriguing paradoxes. It takes place in a world of jackbooted authority, but players are free to explore it however they choose. Modernist state surveillance equipment nestles incongruously against grimy Dickensian buildings. As a bodyguard you’re sworn to protect life, but circumstance means that you’re forced to become a murderer. It’s a layered, subtle construction that’s unlikely to protect players from their own lack of patience and where a mistake will lead to a brutal, ignominious death. Forget killing with skill – this is about killing with finesse. ■

## Q&A Raphael Colantonio

Founder, president,  
co-creative director,  
Arkane Studios



**How has the game evolved over time, and has it turned out to be what you imagined the project to be at its inception?**

When Bethesda approached us to make *Dishonored* they wanted us to do something that was true to the kind of games that we always liked to do in the past. We came up with this idea with them of doing something firstperson, very immersive, where stealth is important and choice is important, and the pace and the narrative are all player-driven as opposed to a long script. Bethesda was very supportive of this and Harvey [Smith] and I wanted to make this game. Back then we didn’t know what period it would be, whether it would be futuristic or past or present or alternate reality, and so we started with something very malleable, London-inspired, old-Europe. So that’s how it started and then we added more layers to the story, involved Viktor Antonov who was the art director of *Half-Life 2*, and Sebastien Mitton who’s the art director of this game. All four of us together we came up with this fiction which we hope is unique.

**Have you reached a point so far where you’ve looked at what you’ve done and realised it was exactly what you intended when you began development?**

It took a while to see it emerge – this is the kind of game that relies on the sum of mechanics that interact with each other and then when the magic came on board, it came to life. It’s like a simulation. And for us, the moment that we started to feel it’s coming is when you start to see those systems interacting and you don’t plan that. It’s a unique moment that feels like it belongs to the player. We just designed our system so there was a logic and this logic just applies in the context of the game. Those moments, when they start to come online – that was the moment we realised this was going to be a cool game.

**Morality is becoming increasingly sophisticated in gaming – how did you develop a moral framework that would work in *Dishonored*?**

Harvey Smith and I are very interested in morality and in challenging players’ morality in games in general. He did a great job in *Deus Ex* and we did some of that in *Arx Fatalis*. It’s just this idea that the player can arrive at a situation and make a choice – it’s really interesting. Like, am I going to kill this person? If he begs me, am I still going to kill him? And we support that; we allow you to not necessarily be evil. You have a mission, but there are ways around it if you don’t want to be evil – but it’s your choice. You know that, as you’re killing the target, you could have done something else – and this is important to us.



Fighting builds adrenaline, enabling you to unleash magical attacks. While it's possible to survive fights against limited numbers of enemies, many skills are more suitable for devious backstabbing

Tanks of whale oil are found throughout *Dishonored*, powering structures like the Wall of Light. It's possible to rip them out for use as grenades, or modify them to your advantage

