

Self-reflexive Simulacra. Visuality as meta-commentary

Hans-Joachim Backe

Center for Computer Games Research, IT University of Copenhagen, 2300 Copenhagen, Denmark, hanj@itu.dk

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Abstract

This paper discusses how contemporary digital games engage critically with the difference between implied and actual referentiality through their visuals. Digital games have a tenuous relationship to reality; in most cases, they are rather simulacra than simulations, offering a simulation-like situation that does not relate to any preceding reality but creates a virtual world preceded only in other fictional or virtual works. The visuals of mainstream, AAA games counteract this ontological disconnect through an overabundance of detail and flourish in a perennial struggle for photorealism. This paper discusses *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios/Bethesda Softworks 2016) as an example which, while generally adhering to this convention, introduces elements of subversion into its visual logic. It will show that there are various metaleptic ludic devices – such as virtual reality environments within virtual worlds and reality-changing paintings – with which contemporary digital games reflect subtly upon their own relationship to reality.

Keywords

Metalepsis, Metareference, Defamiliarization, *Dishonored 2*, Looking Glass, Agency, Genre

Introduction

Games are culturally situated artefacts. Coming from a humanistic perspective, studying them as such entails that their allusions and subtexts are analyzed, which regularly provokes suspicions of over-interpretation, or, more radically, declarations of the absolute subjectivity of all interpretation. To show that an artefact encourages recipients to pay attention to specific aspects of itself, it has been an established practice since the inception of Russian Formalism to point towards moments of rupture, alienation, or estrangement. What these concepts share is the idea that many elements of an artefact are conventionalized in their content or mode of representation to the point where they become transparent or even invisible, and that there are aesthetic devices to counteract this.

There are many such devices, yet one of the most ubiquitous and powerful are in-game images, an as-of-yet largely under-studied phenomenon in digital games. By in-game images, I mean pictures (and to a lesser degree films) in digital games which are represented as pictorial material within the gameworld, as opposed to textures, skins, etc. which are semiotically coded as natural surfaces of objects. The most common types of in-game pictures are paintings, photographs, commercial posters and billboards in gameworlds. In many, if not by

now most games in virtual world, various types of images act as illustrations of the morals and aesthetics of their worlds, and more often than not, they carry more than the apparent, face-value meaning.

It is surprising that there is relatively little research on this area. On the one hand, many closely connected phenomena have been studied at some length: digital games' indebtedness to art-historical traditions (Liboriussen 2008), in-game photography (Giddings 2007; Poremba 2007), art games and game art (Sharp 2016; Stockburger 2007), with German scholars even declaring a 'visual turn of game studies' (Beil 2014; Hensel 2011) nearly ten years ago. On the other hand, there are plenty of games that not only prominently feature in-game images, but make interaction with them both the central game mechanic and a structural metaphor. Especially paintings quite frequently feature prominently in games, e.g. *The Unfinished Swan* and *Layers of Fear*, and in these as in other examples, the ontological status of images is often quite challenging: not only can they be the actual subject matter of both narrative and gameplay, they function as gateways to other parts of the gameworld (like the warp paintings in *Super Mario Odyssey*) or contain complete world, such as the Painted World of Ariamis in *Dark Souls* (that can only be entered if the Peculiar Doll, found only by backtracking to the starting position of the game, is carried by the avatar).

We are still nowhere near having a robust, general understanding of representation in digital games, and it would therefore be preposterous to attempt a functional and/or aesthetic definition of in-game images here. This article focuses on one function of in-game images, their meta-referential capabilities. What I want to demonstrate is that in the example game *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios/Bethesda Softworks 2016), in-game images are used to blur the line between reproduction and production of reality. Whereas in reality, we have traditionally accepted that images can be referential or illusionistic (trompe-l'oeil), digital technologies like CGI, VR and digital games increasingly confront us with images that actively produce (virtual) realities, calling into question many established ways of thinking about the ontologic status of images. The game renders this media-technological moment of instability tangible in the use of its in-game images, defamiliarizing not only those images themselves, but by extension the whole apparatus of the games they are embedded in. As such, in-game images are, within the scope of this paper, particularly interesting as defamiliarizing devices that allow games to reflect upon themselves, or more specifically, their individual as well as generic aesthetic possibilities. To outline this dimension, questions of ontology and referentiality will be discussed only in as much as necessary, paying particular attention to the approach to metareferentiality developed by German media theorist Werner Wolf as well as visual theories of Edmund Husserl's and Nelson Goodman's.

These theories will be applied to an especially intricate examples of digital games which use in-game images. *Dishonored 2* foregrounds the tenuous relationship between digital games and the reality they depict/simulate, and the simultaneously empowered and powerless subject position of the player. While these issues might seem to be disconnected at first, I will show that the game constructs its gameworld, gameplay, and narrative in codependent ways that thematize the role of the player, and that they do so prominently through their use of in-game images.

To make this argument, I will first situate the game within a genre- and design-context that frames the role of their players and connect them to theories of agency and philosophy of action. The next section gives an overview of the use of in-game images, followed by a section connecting simulation, virtuality, and referentiality with visuality to enable a more profound discussion of the games' aesthetics. These theoretical considerations will then be used in a focused analysis of *Dishonored 2* in the final section.

***Dishonored 2* and the ‘immersive simulation’ tradition**

Dishonored 2 is a game by the French/American developer Arkane Studios, released in 2016 through parent company and publisher Bethesda Softworks. Industry veteran Harvey Smith acted as game director on *Dishonored 2*, which was primarily developed at Arkane’s French offices. Following the financial and critical success of their mainstays, the *Elder Scrolls*- and *Fallout*-Franchises, Publisher Bethesda has backed several games that were ambitious in unexpected ways. The most recent Arkane games are situated in the tradition of what Warren Spector, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the genre, calls “immersive simulations” (Spector 2000), also known among fans as “451 games” for their recurrent use of that number – a reference to Ray Bradbury’s novel and its dystopian view of the future – as a code for safes and locks. Although superficially similar to computer roleplaying games (Vorhees/Call/Whitlock 2010) and First-Person Shooters (Vorhees/Call/Whitlock 2012), they are usually not understood as belonging to either genre, but are described as hybrids (Call 2010, 138) that should be considered a genre of their own (Pinchbeck 2013, 154). As such, they are generally considered a subgenre of AAA action games – the games equivalent of a Hollywood blockbuster movie – that caters to a small, yet dedicated fan-base and frequently engages with daring and mature themes.

Discussing the generic framework of the immersive simulation genre is relevant here because it is unusually well-defined in several respects, and because the specifics of *Dishonored 2* emerge more clearly in the context of these parameters. Only a small number of games are identified as “immersive simulations”, and almost all of them stem from the same developers: Looking Glass Studios pioneered the genre in the 1990s with the first two *System Shock* and *Thief* games, and its key creatives went on to form other studios, perfecting upon the genre formulas there. After developing the computer role-playing game *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* under their original name BlueSky Software, Looking Glass and rivaling development studio id games begun an “arms race” (Mahardy 2015) in perfecting the First-Person Shooter genre. While id software focused on fast-paced action in its successors to *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*, Looking Glass were aiming at more complex and sophisticated game systems. The core of their game design philosophy was to give the player different options to overcome a wide variety of obstacles in complex gameworlds. Ion Storm, the second major studio in the history of the genre, refined the genre formula in the first half of the 2000s with the first two *Deus Ex* games and the third *Thief* title, in which the emphasis of the impact of player choices on the gameworld became crucial. To this end, *Deus Ex* introduced to features nowadays strongly associated with the genre, a branching narrative and the option to play (mostly) non-violently. These principles are clearly spelled out in *Dishonored 2*, where the first loading screen displays the hint: “There is no ‘best’ way to play: Focus on combat or stealth, play brutally or ghostlike – the world will react” (Arkane Studios 2016).

After the eventual demise of Ion Storm, a number of other developers continued the legacy of immersive simulation games, yet in all these companies, key creatives with a background at Looking Glass were responsible for the ongoing development of the genre in landmark games such as *Bioshock* (Tavinor 2009, 188), including Warren Spector, Doug Church, Harvey Smith, Ken Levine, as well as Arkane Studios’ founder Raphaël Colantonio, who early in his career had worked in QA for the original *System Shock*. As such, the immersive simulation genre appears almost as the equivalent of a school of game design, preoccupied with probing the depth of not only immersion, but, maybe to a greater degree, agency.

***Dishonored 2* and its world of images**

In-game images are, of course, a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary games in virtual worlds. Diegetic visual aids (maps, street signs, evidence boards etc.) as well as world-building elements (photographs, advertisements, political posters, medical imagery (x-rays), newspapers and magazines etc.) tend to be scattered around in contemporary gameworlds and are used to great effect both in other immersive simulations (e.g. *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*) and First-Person Shooters (e.g. *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*).

Dishonored 2 goes beyond this conventionalized use of in-game images both in terms of scope and use. Not only does it display excessive amounts of the types of in-game images found in other games, but also foregrounds one specific type. Narrative and gameplay of *Dishonored 2* revolve around a painting entitled “The world as it should be”, which is not only a work of art, but a magical artefact with the power to manifest the painter’s vision of the world as reality.

The narrative of *Dishonored 2* takes its outset in a political coup in the steampunk city Dunwall. In the beginning of the game, the villain of the narrative, Delilah Kaldwin, step-sister of the former empress, stages a coup against the heiress to the throne. The player can choose to play as Emily, the dethroned heiress, or her father and bodyguard, Corvo, to try and win the realm back. Delilah is a powerful witch, and to solidify her reign, she prepares a spell which will form reality according to her ideals and wishes. It is the execution of this spell that the whole game builds toward, and it is intimately connected to in-game images.

In *Dishonored 2*, the visual arts permeate both the physical space and the societal discourse of the gameworld. Every house and apartment is filled with framed paintings, be they hung, stacked, piled, or displayed in glass cases. Statues and figurines are just as common, especially if one includes the countless animal trophies, taxidermied birds, reptiles, apes, etc., as well as the industry and status objects (e.g. harpoons or whaling ship models) in display cases. Even early photographic technologies are used in the steampunk world of the game, with press photographs and carefully staged, often signed black-and-white portraits hung in people’s houses. All key figures of the plot practice visual arts, be it scientist-inventor Anton Sokolov or politician Luca Abele, with Delilah being singled out as the most gifted of them all.

Among all those visual arts elements, paintings occupy a privileged position. The paintings in *Dishonored 2* are generally representational, tending towards a proto-expressionist romantic style (reminiscent of Goya and Turner), and serve more than a mere decorative function. Many of them have titles attached to their frames that connect them to the events and history of the game by explicitly referring to specific places or people, characterizing at the same time the art practices of the gameworld and contributing to the worldbuilding. This is even more pronounced whenever the player characters comment upon an image, stressing the individual relevance of the depicted objects in their personal history. When player character Corvo Attano recognizes a locale from the previous game, *Dishonored*, in a painting and asks himself “will it get as bad as those times”, the player is invited to reflect upon her memory of the first game or, if she has not played it, imagine the direness of that situation and the influence it had on Corvo. Through this simple rhetorical gesture, the game not only showcases Corvo’s recollection of the first game’s events, but solicits the player’s memories, and suggests their (at least partial) congruence with his. In-game paintings such as this not only refer to a class of real-world (as well as fictional) images with a specific social function (to preserve the memory of a historic event), but acts as such an image with this exact social function for the player.

The prominence of the visual arts in *Dishonored 2* culminates in the game's central plot-point, Delilah's reality-changing spell. Delilah's magic draws its power (apart from occult ingredients such as skulls) from art. She combines her witchcraft with her artistic practice and is able to reverse the relationship between reality and painting, between signified and signifier: Her painting "The world as it should be" can change reality so as to conform to her wishes and ideals. The player character's tasks revolve around foiling Delilah's plans, which can be achieved not only in the obvious way (killing her before she can complete the painting), but in a peaceful, yet more complicated manner: It is possible to transport Delilah into the 'perfect' world of her painting and making her believe that she has transformed the reality of the gameworld, effectively exiling her in an ideal prison of her own making.

The two options for dealing with this final challenge are the last branching point which, in combination with a number of other decisions, determines the overall outcome of *Dishonored 2*. In the tradition of *Deus Ex*, the game has several endings that leave the gameworld more or less just and democratic. Although there is a small influence of accidental events on the final outcome, it is determined to an overwhelming degree by the decisions of the player. The feedback on these decisions is abundantly clear and almost impossible to ignore. Whenever there is a part of a mission that allows for more than one solution with different outcomes, these are clearly spelled out both as an overlay to the gameplay and in the quest log. At the end of each mission, the performance of the player is displayed in a matrix diagram corresponding to the ethical dimensions of the gameworld (violence and invasiveness). The chosen play style of each mission affects the following ones, because one of the central conceits of *Dishonored 2* is that violent actions of the player character are mirrored in the development of the gameworld. Play aggressively, and buildings or streets in a following mission turn from populated and hospitable to derelict and plague-infested. Additionally, there is no ending in which Delilah's plan succeeds, leaving the end-state of the game as precisely "the gameworld as it should be" according to the plans and actions of the player. While the player character prevents the gameworld to become a mirror of the villain's ambition, the player effectively turns it into a mirror of hers.

Simulacra, Self- and Metareferentiality

One of the effects of Delilah's painting is that *Dishonored 2* raises the question which of the player (character)'s actions actually have impact on the gameworld, or, in a sense, where the gameworld begins and ends, which effects are real (within the logic of the game) and which are only imaginary or illusory (MacCallum-Stewart/Parsler 2007). Put more abstractly, many important actions are recontextualized in connection with ontologically questionable in-game images, drawing attention to the connection between agency and the reality, virtuality, or fictionality of gameworlds.

The question of the reality of objects and actions in games is obviously a highly complex one that would require a protracted discussion for which an article like this offers no room. The central problem is that the virtual worlds of digital games use "graphical objects as an information interface, enabling the player to play with a set of formally defined events", while, at the same time, "events unfold from the player's interaction with concrete models, in a reified, quasi-physical environment. The technology of realtime graphics can perform both functions at once—as both depictive interface and concrete model—but not without conflicts and ambiguities" (Klevjer 2015, 16).

In general terms, five main understandings of the duality of interface and environment can be identified within game studies. a) The simplest assumption is that the entirety of games (Tavinor 2009) or at least, with Jesper Juul, all non-rule elements of games (Juul 2005) are fictional. Declaring them as such removes gameworlds to the well-explored realm of fiction and renders ontological questions a priori irrelevant. b) From a diametrically opposed ontological perspective, the reality-relation of game objects and events is anything but clear. For proponents of this approach, the real, the fictional, and the virtual can be distinguished in accordance to whether an object or action is undeniable, is only true with regard to a fictional heterocosm, or can be empirically repeated, regardless of whether they exist within reality or a virtual world (Aarseth 2007, 2001). c) From a media-technological perspective, it makes sense to distinguish between integral parts of simulations, such as system, representation, and interface (Järvinen 2003), focusing rather on the (semiotically speaking) signifiers instead of the signifieds. d) From a poststructuralist perspective, the politics of inclusion and exclusion of real-life elements in a (necessarily reductive) simulation comes to the foreground, stressing their inevitable subjectivity (Bogost 2006, 106-109). e) Yet ultimately, from the strict perspective of philosophy of science, all these questions appear secondary, as the usage of the involved terms (such as 'simulation' or 'virtual') in game studies are so far removed from their original meanings as to make all these lines of reasoning questionable. If simulations in all other fields require a real-world referent, yet can be considered non-referential in games, it is questionable if subject matter and/or concepts have any significant overlap (Karhulahti 2014).

For the discussion of in-game images, especially with regard to agency, the ontological and philosophical perspectives are most relevant. *Dishonored 2*'s magical painting "The world as it should be" problematizes the referential relationship between image (or, more generally, sign) and object, and thus points toward general aporias of digital games. The central question of whether play and games necessarily relate referentially to reality has been answered quite differently by existing research. Only in Kendall Walton's very specific usage of the terms (Walther 2007) are acts of play understood as being unambiguously representational: "A teddy bear is a representation insofar as that it has the function of being implemented in a game of make-believe, a game that might involve, for example, going to bed and falling asleep for the night" (Klevjer 2015, 3). For Walton, representation is something that results from games of make-believe, which leads even his followers to admit that his "broad concept of 'depiction' can also be somewhat misleading" (Klevjer 2015, 5). A more widely accepted understanding of representation in play might be one that uses poststructuralist terminology to characterize it as "always already simulacral" (Giddings 2007, 401), with digital games forming "a paradigmatic form of contemporary hyperreality" (Giddings 2007, 402). This understanding of games as hyperreal and play as simulacral manages to align the game studies understanding of simulation with the use in other fields, as it points out that games do not simulate a source system to arrive at conclusions about said system, but for their own ends, be they entertainment, persuasion, or social commentary. It also addresses that "games are games because they are fundamentally self-referential" (Walther 2007, 219) and that they are part of a "bricolage culture in which texts, images, motion pictures, games, commercials, and brands cite each other at a rapid pace" (Walther 2007, 220), which gives them a very particular relationship to real phenomena they might otherwise be said to represent.

Studying in-game images allows one to look toward theories of representation in the visual arts for inspiration, where surprisingly similar reflections can be found. The apparent tension between realistic depictions and simulations in digital games and their (sometimes non-existent) real-life counterparts is something that, according to Edmund Husserl, is negotiated when perceiving any kind of picture. Even when

confronted with a documentary, unaltered, photographic representation of reality, the perceiver still has to distinguish between the reality of the picture and that depicted by it:

“It is this “reality” that we are, according to Husserl, seeing in the picture [...], as opposed to the actual, present reality that we see when looking at the picture as a physical object. Unlike direct vision through an actual window, this image is an aesthetic object characteristically produced in the framed surface of the Bild as a physical thing.” (Klevjer 2015, 6)

Husserl terms this phenomenon image consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*): when perceiving an image, we are generally aware that it is an image, and interpret both its materiality and the objects it represents accordingly. Nelson Goodman has extended these reflections by asking what this means for pictures of mythical or fictional beings. He concludes that the perceiver identifies them as a specific class of representations: “What, for example, do pictures of Pickwick or of a unicorn represent? They do not represent anything; they are representations with null denotation” (Goodman 2008, 21). We make sense of such pictures regardless, according to Goodman, because we have an awareness for this categorical difference, which is actually an awareness of two factors: “In representing, a picture at once picks out a class of objects and belongs to a certain class or classes of pictures” (Goodman 2008, 31). The ontological status of the depicted object(s) thus determines how we interpret the sign-function of a picture, in addition to our awareness of the picture being a picture. While it would be a stretch to claim that this sufficiently explains the simulacral nature of simulations in digital games, the obvious parallels are what allows in-game images to foreground the conventionalized aporias of games.

The in-game images in *Dishonored 2* do this in what many might call a ‘breaking of the fourth wall’, yet that description would be misleading. Metareferential strategies in fiction are diverse: Already in theatre, we can observe a clear distinction between the actual breaking of the fourth wall – an actor addressing the audience directly, potentially even out of character, as is one of the central tenets of Brechtian Epic Theater – and the less radically immersion-breaking foregrounding of theatrical conventions by staging a play within a play. In literature, there is a categorical difference between *mise-en-abyme* – the nesting or repetition of a narrative within another – and *metalepsis* – the breaking of ontological barriers between different fictional worlds or the fictional world and reality. Even for games, different forms of *metalepses* have been distinguished between player characters directly addressing the player and non-player characters referring to the game itself or exhibiting awareness of being a game character (Ryan 2006, 224-226). These typologies are far from exhaustive, and still other distinctions can be made for the visual arts, film, music, etc. (Hanebeck 2017).

German media theorist Werner Wolf has compellingly argued that the common denominator of all these phenomena is that they are particular forms of referentiality (Wolf 2009). He broadly distinguishes three classes of referentiality: hetero-referentiality is the most common form, where a sign points toward something that is not part of the same semiotic system (e.g. most words in natural language that refer to people, animals, or objects); self-referentiality is targeted at a sign within the same semiotic system (e.g. a rhyme-word in a poem or an intertextual reference between two literary texts); and metareferentiality is a special form of self-referentiality which is “located on a logically higher level, a ‘metalevel’, within an artefact or performance [and] forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to” (Wolf 2009, 30-31). Wolf offers up a number of analysis tools for metareferentiality which serve to distinguish the different forms (such as *metalepsis* and *mise-en-abyme*) in a systematic fashion, yet for the purposes of

this paper, his general distinctions will suffice. Hetero- and self-referentiality correspond well to Aarseth's, Karhulahti's, and Walther's aforementioned observations about the tenuous relationship of games to reality. "The world as it should be" belongs, however, clearly into Wolf's category of metareferentiality: it is an element of a digital game that highlights properties of digital games.

The inversive metalepsis of "The world as it should be"

The ways in which *Dishonored 2* uses paintings and sculptures in traditions of real-world art-historian and museal practices only to radically break with them in "The world as it should be" resonates with both Husserl's and Goodman's reflections. The omnipresence of fine art and its discursive practices (e.g. exhibiting, naming) in the gameworld draws attention to the parallels between the art-world of the game and that of reality. For all its differences from reality, the steampunk society of Karnaca uses visual arts in very similar ways and for similar functions as real-world Western societies do: to evoke cultural values, taste, class, status, and wealth. The paintings in the gameworld can be decoded easily, if not unambiguously: the painting of a political leader in the game appears as belonging to a certain class of painting, priming us to understand the depictive conventions and the symbolism of its representation as not-quite realistic. While we certainly possess the image consciousness to look in instead of at those paintings for the greater part, this facile relationship is problematized by a number of paintings that can be stolen by the player character. By making them interactable objects and visualizing the act of removing the canvas from the frame, awareness is shifted from the depicted object of the painting to its materiality. The player is forced to negotiate between image consciousness and object perception, between looking in the picture to perceive its subject matter and looking at it as an interactive object in the environment.

This already constitutes a first layer of metareferentiality in Wolf's terms, as it highlights the double nature of game elements (Klevjer 2015), the depictive interface and the reified object. On its own, the metareferential potential of stealable paintings might go unnoticed, as this game mechanic has been conventionalized as a part of the design language of immersive simulation games already in *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. However, *Dishonored 2* alienates the status of interactive paintings by the central role it gives to Delilah's magical painting "The world as it should be." For the longest time, the painting is the subject of conversations. Only very late in the game, the player actually gets to see it. Unlike the stealable paintings, it cannot be interacted with immediately, but needs to be prepared by sabotaging Leila's ritual. When interaction becomes possible, it is of a literally metaleptic nature: interacting with the painting means transporting the avatar from the first-order gameworld to an ontologically separate second-order world constituted by painting. As mentioned before, it is possible to take an unconscious Delilah into the second-order world of the painting, where she, upon coming to, will assume that her spell has taken effect and what she sees is the outer, first-order gameworld, magically transformed into the vision of the world she had painted. Expressed in terms of referentiality, the painting is depicting Delilah's imagination. It refers to something imaginary that, through an act of magic, is supposed to replace reality. Put differently, it is a signifier which refers to an imaginary signified with the goal of manifesting this signified in reality. In the most recent monograph on metalepsis, Julian Hanebeck identifies such a constellation as the rare phenomenon of inversive metalepsis,

"those rare transgressions in which the hierarchical relation of two diegetic universes that are connected by an act of narrative representation is unambiguously reversed [in] an exchange of the metadiegesis of the 'world'

of the diegesis/exegesis (and thus in an inversion of their original hierarchical relation) – but not in a mutual contamination of levels” (Hanebeck 2017, 105).

When the player interrupts Delilah’s ritual, this inversive metalepsis does not materialize. The “World as it should be” of the painting does not replace the reality of the gameworld; it does, however, exist as an explorable world – a *mise-en-abyme* –, and it is in this world-within-a-world that the player character can perform the crucial task that foils Delilah’s plans for the reality that the painting and its secondary world are situated in.

From here, it does not require much interpretive effort to identify the in-game painting as a metareferential element of *Dishonored 2* that turns the game into a simile for digital games in general. The player character lives in a world full of political intrigue, social injustice, and abuse of power. The way in which the player chooses to perform, in accordance with this regime of violence or in (comparatively) peaceful subversion of it, determines how the world develops, if it will become a better or an even worse place. The most crucial action in this world is, however, how to deal with attempts at projecting an enforced cultural imaginary upon the world. Resistance against the regime is ultimately only possible within the realm of the hyperreal, which, once properly understood, becomes the locus of empowerment, because actions there shape the outside world and prevent the powers-that-be to shape the world in their image. Given the parallels between the in-game image outlined above and the apparatus of digital games, it is only a small substitution to read the political subtext of *Dishonored 2* as a metaphor of the role of popular culture, and especially games, within society, recursively likening the player’s agency in the gameworld to their real-life capacity to effect changes, even (and maybe especially) through actions in the virtual environments of digital culture.

Conclusion

The argument presented here is that in-game images are a quite specific tool in the aesthetic repertoire of digital games, and that they have been used to great effect in the discussed recent immersive simulation game *Dishonored 2*. The game deals with visualization that creates something that does not replace reality, yet shapes it. The game uses the idea of inversive metalepsis as a negative foil against which it positions its gameworlds. Their limited malleability and consequentiality form both a metaphor and a model for resistance to cultural imperialism, demonstrating through its metareferentiality that games which allow for ruminations of cause and effect in politics and violence are culturally valuable.

It bears pointing out that *Dishonored 2* is far from the only recent game to employ such strategies of metareferentiality. Even within the portfolio of Arkane Studios, we find *Prey*, which not only uses in-game images in similar fashion, but forms a veritable companion piece to *Dishonored 2*. Whereas *Dishonored 2* reflects upon the power of agency and consequences, especially as a tool for conceptual empowerment in a political setting, *Prey* instead probes the emotional impact of immersive simulations, even if the player is aware that everything is just a game, or a game within a game, or a game within a game within a game (Backe 2018). As impressive as *Dishonored 2* is as an exercise in ludic self-awareness, it becomes even more so when considered side-by-side with Arkane’s other recent game, rendering them prime examples for the maturity and aesthetic rigour AAA games have reached in recent years.

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