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Manhunt: How Rockstar justifies violence in videogames

Lights, Camera, Action!

Manhunt is a game developed by Rockstar North and released by Rockstar games, you play as James Earl Cash, a death row convict who is brought back to life after lethal injection to be forced as the leading role of a snuff film directed by, “The Director.” Players would be spending their time in the game, using stealth and patience to one by one execute their fellow man. With the player’s only choice of the matter is how violent they want the execution to be. By creating this scenario, the game designers focus on forcing the players to get out of their comfort zone as they need to execute enemies as this is the only effective way of completing the levels. This mechanic quickly becomes the most essential piece of the entire experience as players need to constantly face a moral dilemma in moment-to-moment gameplay, and becomes the go to game on why Rockstar succeeds to make violence in a video game work in this essential horror experience.

Murder is my Middle Name

Manhunt is primarily a stealth game, one that rewards careful strategy, planning, and patience to either *clear* or bypass a level. The game is entirely in third person as the player controls James through the streets of Carcer City, moving from shadow to shadow as they are guided by the director to their next task. It is a linear game, but the levels are designed as dark

gritty places with a lot of shadows and cover for the player to hide in, all while roaming gangs search for them. While the player has the option to fight enemies' hand to hand, it is purposefully made clunky and an unreliable method of killing; And in a game where players need to kill in quick succession and hide in the shadows repeatedly, they resort to Rockstar's main attraction, the "execution system." The execution system is a mechanic that can only be activated when a player is behind an enemy and pressing or holding a button for a certain amount of time. There are 3 levels of executions all represented by their colors, grey or referred to as "Hasty", yellow or "Violent ", and red or "Gruesome". They are all violent to watch and hard to stomach and as the player moves up a level, will only get worse. So, if it is hard to watch, how come it is the focus of the game?

The Voice in Your Head

Rockstar North intended to create a controversial game. So controversial that Rockstar almost had a mutiny and discussion on whether Rockstar North should continue. As stated by Jeff Williams

"It was Rockstar North's pet project - most of us at Rockstar Games wanted no part of it.

We'd already weathered plenty of controversy over *GTA3* and *Vice City* - we were no strangers to it - but *Manhunt* felt different... *Manhunt*, though, just made us all feel icky.

It was all about the violence, and it was realistic violence. We all knew there was no way we could explain away that game. There was no way to rationalize it. We were crossing a line." (Jeff Williams)

The game's premise is not just the violence, it is violent for sure, but the intent was how the player, who is the violence, would react in the game world. The intention was the player to always be analyzing and questioning their morality and humanity, and the psychological aspect

of having the choice to murder either quickly or painfully. In Zagal's paper, "Manhunt: The dilemma of play," he discusses how the brutality is all up to the player, how would the player choose to execute, and how would their subconscious affect them on moment-to-moment basis.

"Rather, it is interesting because of the position the game places the player in. As mentioned, the brutality of an execution is a choice made by the player. By forcing the player to question and evaluate his actions and motivations for how to play the game, the player is forced to confront the act of being a successful player as a moral dilemma itself. Should I, the player, choose to execute Cash's opponents in the most brutal way possible? How far are you willing to go, as a player, in carrying out the executions?" (Zagal, Manhunt: The dilemma of play)

Rockstar intended the irony in writing to having the players dilemma mimic Cash's dilemma as both were stuck in a situation where they are forced to murder for the content of an audience never seen in game. It is up till this point, where we bring up the main antagonist of the entire game. The "Director." As mentioned before, he is a hidden figure that gives you guidance throughout half of the game. The game designers made the Director like your "evil conscious" in game, a person who not only enjoys the violence put out, but also encourages the most brutal of actions from the player. With constant dialogues of encouragement when you are behind the enemy ready to execute, and like a proud father to his son whenever you finish an opponent. It is clear this man is not mentally and morally right. Yet, The Director is the push that the player needed to continue, and in a way provides comic relief to an otherwise morally dark game. While being the only comfort to the game mentally; narratively the Director also is in control of the chaos, he is the reason Cash is in this situation. With this idea of being inline to a "movie" or a train track, going from scene to scene with enemies that don't know they are being set up for

you, the player, seems to be played out as though they are simply actors, and you are the performance. This comfort allows the player to feel a bit better at least morally as they know deep down, they will forever be better people than the Director, the gangs, and even Cash himself. The player is so detached from the entire cast of characters in the beginning that it creates this feeling of being a part of the ride, but not being there. It is the case, until further down the story, when Cash breaks for it, and successfully escapes this train track of insanity, the player and Cash are left alone in Carcer City to survive and take down The Director himself.

We Are One in The Same

Rockstars genius writing intended to have the player separate themselves from Cash, showing how calm and collected he is when executing a hunter, as if he done it many times before the events of the game. Ryan Hollinger even explains that even with the hunter's irredeemable nature of ultra-violence, they still make the player squirm when the player take their life in a matter of agonizing seconds. "In Manhunt, our character is completely cold and unprovoked by his actions, which make him a much more terrifying presence. Whereas the enemies we kill; Despite their violence, psychotic nature, and appearance, show a real humanity as they slowly die. (Ryan Hollinger, 8:43 –8:57)". The game designers focus on the brutality of the executions that it was meant to unnerve the player. Unlike in GTA, Manhunt was more realistic, more grounded and grotesque. Even the sound design is so specific, that while the graphics show its age, hearing the agonizing sounds from the hunter and hearing nothing from Cash creates this sense of dread to the player until it's all over, and the player resumes their position in the game world. Despite the separation, Rockstar managed to have the player and Cash come to an understanding that in this situation they are one in the same. In a segment early in the game, the player and Cash are given a challenge set within in a level to use stealth to free

Cash's family who are tangled in the snuff film by the Director. If the player is spotted by any of the hunters, or takes too long, a family member immediately gets executed and the player has to continue from that point on. This adds a layer to Cash unbeknownst to the player that humanizes him. However, even if the player manages to free all or some of the family members, The Director will have them executed off camera and present it to Cash in another level, making the entire thing pointless. This nuance writing shows the player that Cash is alike the player, both forced to murder, and while Cash is all too familiar with the idea, he doesn't want to, and so does the player. As stated by Hollinger,

“- is this idea of the internal, external components to a videogame. Internally what is the game asking you to do? And externally what does the game let you do? For example, in Manhunt, internally within the game's world it encourages you to be violent, but externally within the gameplay itself it doesn't. In other words, while the game asks the player to commit the most vicious murders possible. The game is designed in such a way that you don't have to kill anyone. It's not necessarily always essential to the experience. (Ryan Hollinger, 3:05 – 3:30)”

The game is designed as a stealth game, that just so happens to have executions in it. In some situations, the player doesn't have to execute a hunter, but the designers intentionally added the Directors dialogue to enforce that mindset. If the player chooses to hide in the shadows or not execute long enough, the Director grows more and more impatient and frustrated until the player resumes their killing spree again. The game is also designed to look like a snuff film, from executions filmed like they're from CCTV footage, to the main menu being a DVD menu, and the manual in the game box looking like a shopping catalogue for snuff films. All of this shoves itself to the face of the player, making sure that the player knows what they're getting into. With

everything coming together, once the player starts the game, they come to a mutual agreement with Rockstar North to take them on an experience ironically close to Cash, both unwilling to murder, but must to further themselves along the twisted journey.

It wasn't me, it was the DEVIL

With a mechanic like this, how does Rockstar keep the player engaged through the game's length? Surely if the game is upsetting, why would the player continue? The answer is by making the player feel rewarded by the challenge and mastery of the game utilizing the execution system. By forcing the player to murder, it keeps the player using the mechanic as a way to further themselves in a level. Learning enemy patterns, and finding tricks and tactics to alert the enemies like a fly landing on a Venus fly trap. This all rewards the player mentally for getting better at the game, while the game in turn adds more layers to make the game harder to survive. For example, in the later stages, you would have to stealthily hide from a group of mercenaries that have night vision goggles, and in a game where you're heavily reliant on the darkness, that is a problem. With the added difficulty, it would be safe to assume that the hunters would cause more trouble to the player. If the player is caught, a chase sequence would begin and if the numbers overwhelm the player, it would be a safer to just runaway, hide and recover until you're ready to hunt again, and this is where the feeling of reward comes in for the player. In the words of Liam Triforce, he explains the feeling the player would get after overcoming these obstacles.

“These are sickening murders, surely I don't want to watch these right? Well, no of course not. Realistic gore is very unpleasant to most people, but Manhunt forces your hand into killing enemies in disturbing ways through the sheer curiosity that also makes us human. - Not to mention they are satisfying to pull off. Yeah, as fucked up as the

actions you commit are, they still manage to be gratifying. When you get chased by an enemy, or when you feel overwhelmed, there's no better feeling than executing the hunters that caused you so much trouble. It's unsettling, but you can't look away. That's the appeal of Manhunt's horrific murder scenes. They're not just used to be blatantly gory with no purpose they're a reward for the mastering enemy's behavior, and as ugly as they may be, they feel good to carry out. (Liam Triforce, 10:37-11:18)"

Rockstar manages to get players excited of the notion of executing that hard boss instead of the actual execution, and with the games increasing difficulty, can only reward the player more until they defeat its hardest enemy, Piggsy. At the near end of the game Piggsy would take all that the player had learned in the game and put it all to the test as they scour the Directors abandoned roof hallways to find and execute Piggsy. Piggsy seems to always be hiding, which forces the player to look for him, and then run to a safe hiding spot before Piggsy catches up. Once the player performs the execution on Piggsy a number of times, the player lures him to an area where he is disposed of. All while the music and the environment shaken the player to the core. At this point in the story, Cash and the player are fed up with this seemingly hellish ride to The Directors estate. The only thing that stands between them and The Director is Piggsy, and the player and Cash are all willing to finish the game. Piggsy being the most disturbed, grotesque hunter of the entire roster combined was a worthy, memorable, and rewarding opponent for the player at the end of Manhunt while being disgusted by the notion that the Director would turn a human being into Piggsy. Rewarding the player by the notion of executing the hardest boss, and not the execution itself.

A car crash you can't look away from

Knowing that the mechanic allows 3 levels of executions, and that the first one can be achieved with a single press, why should the player strive for anything higher? In the context of the game, the longer you press the button the more gruesome the kill, but in turn risk getting spotted and having to run from the hunters to try again. It seems logical to always go the easier route, even narratively Cash doesn't have the incentive to go all the way, but the Director always wants you to. As explained by Zagal,

“However, what context is the player afforded when deciding if he should execute gruesome executions instead of “regular” ones? The choice is obvious from the perspective of the narrative. Cash is a convicted death row criminal. Thus, it is not unreasonable for the player to believe that, when placed in a kill or be killed situation, Cash would opt for survival. The Director wants Cash to be as brutal as possible. His illegal snuff-film operation demands it. Cash, however, has no real motivation to perform the most brutal types of execution. The Director is the antagonist, what reason would Cash have to want help him?” (Zagal, 242)

So how come players still want to achieve that higher level of execution? Rockstar intended the execution mechanic to always be an option, from either not executing to execution at its most barbaric. However, the player is always the one in control of that aspect. It is assumed that, through morbid curiosity and the help of roster of weapons at the players disposal, that players would be curious to see what Cash is capable of doing. In all of humanity, from movies to reality television. Gwaltney made this correlation from media to Manhunt, stating how the populace during the rise of reality tv were trying to have their programs be more real, despite how artificial the entire concept is in reality.

“In 2003, reality television was quickly becoming hip, with both *Survivor* and *American Idol* taking off and demonstrating that people wanted content that felt "more real." They didn't actually want reality, though; that would be too boring. Instead they wanted something that appeared to be real while still being grounded in the high-stakes drama of fiction. Reality television, whatever you may think of it, was good at producing this sort of experience: handheld cameras surging toward contestants crying, everyday people being pushed too far to the edge and then responding violently or with profanity-laced rants. It was exhilarating and raw.

Manhunt, developed and released right around the same time as this boom, was also doing the same thing with video game violence, making it more real and disturbing than what gamers were used to.” (Gwaltney)

With the increasing fascination of creating real content, and the execution system, Rockstar were able to abuse that for the players who are not used to that. In the words of Gwaltney himself, “To say it plainly: We're being scored on just how cruel and malicious we can be to other characters. It's revolting. It's monstrous. It's absolutely enthralling.” With the overwhelming number of options available, and the availability of having the execution just being a couple seconds more encourages the players morbid curiosity. Finally referring to Gwaltney opinion on *Manhunt*'s core gameplay loop,

“*Manhunt* constantly puts me in a contradictory state, one of both being horrified and entertained, and that works because the game itself is so caught up in its own contradictions. For example: the player is both Cash and the director, Lionel Starkweather, at the same time.”

Rockstar North engineered a way for players to both feel in and out of control of their morale dilemma, should they be the better person, or the better player? Constantly trying to manage between being humane, and playing the game that they agreed to Rockstar North once again at the very beginning of the game. Players knew what they were getting when they picked up *Manhunt*, and while the executions are punishing, they are gratifying to pull off after much time is put invested in the game. As well as the state of morbid curiosity that plagues people from movies that are filmed solely to disturb viewers, to reality tv about the most horrible people known to man, there is a market for these types of experiences, and thus there is a market for *Manhunt*.

Taped over a Children's Show (Conclusion)

Manhunt, and its execution mechanic is the staple to the experience. Utilizing the taboo subject of snuff films and creating an unmatched game that disturbs the player to an unsettling degree, all while making a statement about violence in videogames and the people playing those types of games. In the words of Hollinger,

“*Manhunt* is built as a aggressively nihilistic experience, and it explores the deepest darkest aspects of violence both physically and ethically by creating a world that is so devoid of emotions and humanity that it is extremely proactive to our sensibility as morale human beings. The acts of violence that the player commits are represented as gratifying to witness given that the kills are being used for entertainment and fetish purposes. (Ryan Hollinger, 4:40 - 5:05)”

With its setting, characters, and narrative, Rockstar North created a game that pushes the player to become morale aware, while also forcing unspeakable actions through great satirical/ ironic writing, and game design. A game that takes human morbid curiosity, uniquely rewarding

attributes and the freedom to have the player choose what they want to do and make a game that stands alone in a sea of “violent” video games. It creates a unique experience, with an abused mechanic in modern gaming taken for granted, and bringing the violence up to eleven. And to put the final topping on the cake, at the end of the game after the credits roll, we see that the entire game seemingly taped over a children's TV show. Manhunt is a statement for violence in videogames in a medium where gamers take the violence as gratifying experiences, while also respecting our intelligence as a whole and our maturity. Especially to those who understand video games as a whole.

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