

Manhunt: Aesthetics of the Amoral

“BAN THESE EVIL GAMES,” read the *Daily Mail* headline after the murder of Stefan Pakeerah, allegedly a crime that copied the killings depicted by the infamous videogame *Manhunt*. The game had previously created similar outrage as earlier Rockstar titles such as *Grand Theft Auto 3* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, which were reviled by many as gratuitously violent, sexist and racist. The moral panic surrounding these games had led to a ban on the sale of *Manhunt* in New Zealand, Germany and other countries, while in the UK and elsewhere it was sold with an 18 rating, which should have prevented it from coming into the hands of the teenage murderer.

Although the investigation into the Stefan Pakeerah murder case found no evidence for a causal link between the killing and the game, *Manhunt* remained married to the murder in the public imagination – a pattern established by the mention of *Doom* in connection with the murders of highschool students at Columbine, and *Counter-Strike* in a similar case in Germany in 2002. While it seems easy enough to brush these allegations aside as simplistic explanations of a society unwilling or unable to engage with the institutionalised violence operating in late capitalist societies, it is hard to shrug off the discomfort caused by the fact that the videogame medium is perceived as primarily violent, if not downright evil, by a large majority of people.

Are videogames evil? So far, most serious investigations into the medium of the videogame – ranging from Stephen Poole’s popular history *Trigger Happy* to dense scholarly volumes such as David Myers’ *The Nature of the Videogame* – have shunned this question in favour of extolling the virtues of the medium. They argue that videogames represent a new form of storytelling, a new form of engagement with culture, even a new form of ideological critique. Following a similar line of reasoning, videogame journalism has praised games like *Grand Theft Auto 3* for their ‘satirical’ take on contemporary society, their self-referentiality and intertextuality.

In its review of *Manhunt*, *Edge* magazine (issue 132, January 2004) said: “The gore is disgusting, but it’s disgusting in the same way old-skool horror movies were, because of the use of over-the-top Troma-like evisceration.” It goes on to say that, “the title is much more interesting than the majority of videogames because the range of pop-cultural influences are so refreshingly different and diverse, from ‘The Warriors’ to ‘Running Man’ and ‘Escape from New York’ and beyond.”

In effect, the violence of *Manhunt* is justified by its rhetoric: satirical embellishment and intertextual references to other popcultural artefacts. On the face of it, this seems to be the same kind of logic that catapulted novels like Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* on the reading lists of academic literature departments all over the world. But is it really so

easy? Playing *Manhunt* myself, I could not shake the feeling that I was, somehow, the butt of a very sinister joke. To put it more precisely: the game’s appeal to my jaded and media-saturated mind, that was as obvious to me as to the *Edge* reviewer, seemed to me a deliberate manoeuvre to numb my critical faculties, a kind of counter-subterfuge that left me in an ethical and ideological dilemma.

In order to unravel the aporetic situation I found myself in vis-à-vis *Manhunt*, let me briefly summarise the game’s core mechanic, tinted, as it were, by my growing repulsion. In keeping with other Rockstar titles, the opening sequence of *Manhunt* has a distinct retro aesthetic simulating the grittiness of CCTV footage which evokes similar uses of this visual style in films by David Lynch and David Cronenberg. The other obvious influence on *Manhunt* are ‘snuff’ films with their typical conflation of sexuality and violence. This is clear from the game’s accompanying booklet which poses as a catalogue for Valiant Video Enterprise’s “domination and humiliation titles,” as well as the possibility to choose between a ‘hardcore’ and a ‘fetish’ difficulty setting at the beginning of the game.

Stereotypically enough, the game begins with the execution of the main character, which is later revealed as staged when he awakes to the sound of the ‘director’s’ voice offering him the following deal: if the protagonist – and thus, by extension, the player – is willing to supply him with footage for his films, he will be given a second chance to live. This ludicrous ‘Running Man’ scenario serves as the backdrop for the unfolding action of the game, with the ‘director’ doing just what his name implies: giving directions to the player.

It is this use of a (meta)narrative voice that is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of *Manhunt*. Where other games depend on subtle or not-so-subtle cues to create the impression that it is the player, rather than the game, who controls narrative progression, this game quite unashamedly *orders* the player to do certain things – in most cases, kill her opponents in the most ghastly manner imaginable. What is interesting about this narrative voice is its inherent unreliability: it is all too easy to speculate that the director’s voice might indeed be just that, a voice in the player’s head. The suggested use of a headset while playing the game – whose inbuilt microphone will also alert nearby opponent’s to the protagonist’s presence – reinforces the effect of this stylistic device, instilling a relentless feeling of paranoid anxiety in the player.

Stealth is the protagonist’s most powerful weapon in the game – even more so than in seminal ‘stealth games’ like *Metal Gear Solid* and *Splinter Cell*. Opponents are almost impossible to overcome in direct combat, requiring the player to slowly creep up behind them, and kill them with a quick blow to the head with a baseball bat or some similar form



of silent extermination. The extermination scenes themselves – using means such as plastic bags, wires, and glass shards – contain some of the most repulsive imagery ever seen in a videogame, including severed heads, extended agony and blood spurting onto the virtual camera’s ‘lens’. Most sordid of all, however, is the option of choosing the level of violence in these executions – quick kills are easy to perform, while drawn-out massacres require a high level of skill, which will be rewarded by an increased violence rating from the director.

Not that the victims are particularly deserving of sympathy: they are depicted as derelict dwellers of a decayed, sprawling suburbia – a setting which is almost the antithesis of the bustling urban settings of *Grand Theft Auto 3* and *Vice City*. It is this ‘grimy realism’ that sets *Manhunt* apart from other games in the genre, its predilection for the margins of society faintly reminiscent of Zola and Celine. This depiction of how violence is ‘de-centred’, pushed to the margins of society while at the same time remaining at its core, also explains why some benevolent reviewers might see the game as a ‘biting satire’ of contemporary society, as a slap in the face of neo-liberalism. The protagonist almost seems to evoke Agamben’s *homo sacer*, forced to prostitute himself at the behest of a disembodied, omnipotent voice.

Manhunt’s allusions to the sexual component of violence seem to support this reading to a certain extent: the victim’s plea to “just make it quick,” the

Rockstar Games’ *Manhunt*. Image courtesy of Romanian gaming magazine www.jucaushii.ro.

use of vulgarisms such as “pussy” and the director’s ambiguous running commentary (“You’re really getting me off”) seem to be employed solely to drive home the point that there is a quite strong (homo)sexual subtext to the game. This raises the question whether *Manhunt* should be praised for bringing to the fore these latent traits of many videogames, or condemned for its graphic sexual violence. Indeed, the questions about dominance and submission raised by these allusions to rape and humiliation serve as shorthand for *Manhunt*’s problematic ideological status.

After all, one must not forget that *Manhunt* is primarily a commodity, and the aesthetic it employs serves first and foremost to sell a product. While Edge magazine could still claim that “Rockstar’s stealth marketing strategy for *Manhunt* doesn’t appear to have worked” one week after the game’s launch in the UK (entering the charts in “the lowly position of 15th”), this changed radically after the murder of Stefan Pakeerah a couple of months later. Prior to the murder, second-hand copies of the game could be bought at bargain prices at videogame shops such as Game and Gamestop. But the sales were apparently given a boost by the retailers’ public announcements that they had taken the game off the shelves after the murder.

Shock and awe tactics like these are hardly a new

phenomenon in the media. As a caveat against simplistic cause-and-effect explanations, we may remind ourselves of the allegations of pornography raised against 20th century classics such as *Ulysses*, *Lolita* and *Tropic of Cancer*. It is a truism of media reception studies that obscenity is in the eyes (or the mind) of the beholder. And it would be disingenuous to suggest that Rockstar deliberately fuelled the connection between *Manhunt* and the murder of a teenage boy.

In its review of *Manhunt*, *Edge* magazine declared that the game was “amoral rather than immoral.” This offhand judgment brings us to the heart of the matter – the problematic relationship between satire, ideology and morality. Traditionally, satire has been viewed as a counter-ideological force, a corrective to the often cynical discourse of power. Jonathan Swift’s “modest proposal” to solve the problem of the Irish famine by letting the Irish eat their own children is a classic case in point. Swift’s proposal is superficially immoral, but of course it is moral in intent as well as critical of the dominant ideology of the time.

But satire has come a long way since the 18th century. Just as irony has lost its critical edge over the course of the 20th century (brilliantly analysed in David Foster Wallace’s “E unibus pluram” essay), satire is now employed ubiquitously and gratuitously – not least of all as a means to shift units by marketers. The ‘tongue in cheek’ stealth marketing website for *Manhunt*, <http://www.valiant-ent.tv>, clearly exemplifies this use of satire for the purpose of marketing. And while the appropriation of satire by the discourse of capital is hardly new or surprising, its use to shield videogames from ideological critique is worth a closer look. After all, the same logic operates across the games industry, a cultural industry that seems on the verge of taking over Hollywood’s status as arbiter of cultural discourse.

One of the industry’s flagships is *The Sims*, a simulation of suburban life in which the player succeeds by accumulating wealth and engaging in conspicuous consumption: A bigger house allows your ‘sim’ to invite more friends over, a plasma TV means they will come more often, feeding them well will increase the sim’s popularity, and being popular will make her happy. *The Sims’* claim to fame is that it has penetrated new market segments, including the ever-elusive female clientele, thus becoming one of the biggest bestsellers in videogame history. All of this was achieved by cleverly mirroring the post-industrial lifestyle of the target audience – with often disorienting effects: the ontological vertigo experienced when watching one’s sim play *The Sims* on her computer is reminiscent of the Chinese-box worlds of Borges.

A recent study of *The Sims* by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter found that the satirical element of making blatant consumerism the core mechanic of the game is a “no-lose gambit” as affirmation and negation co-exist peacefully in such a thoroughly post-modern setting. In other words: by leaving it up to the player whether she reads *The Sims* as critique or celebration of late capitalist society, the manufacturers elegantly steer clear of taking responsibility for their creation.

The same logic seems to be at work in *Manhunt*: packaging the game as a satire of the obsession with

violence and ‘authenticity’ within mainstream media seems to suggest that it somehow takes a position external to this discourse. *Manhunt* seems to attempt the impossible: to put itself and the violence it depicts under erasure, to become an index rather than an icon. This strategy conveniently shields the game from criticism from all directions – the game is not violent, it seems to say, it just reflects the violence of its own environment.

The critic is thus put in an awkward position: if she laments the *Manhunt’s* violence, she does not only appear reactionary, she also implicitly admits that she does not understand the game’s ‘subversiveness’. On the other hand, if she praises the game despite its violence, she may be criticised for succumbing to the game’s marketing-imbued rhetoric. Indeed, the very act of unravelling this dilemma attempted here seems to possess a slightly moralistic bent which contributes to the discomfort caused by playing the game.

It appears blunt to brand games like *Manhunt* and the genre it represents as ‘evil’. At the same time, it seems naïve to disregard Rockstar’s cynicism in marketing the game as a satire of itself, putting the player in the uncomfortable position of a witness to a grotesque spectacle. The game’s voyeurism can be read as a scathing critique of the way other media appeal to our voyeuristic instincts. Nevertheless, the game itself invites ‘pornographic’ readings that render its clever alienating effects futile. There will always be moments in which the player identifies entirely with the game’s protagonist, willing to overcome his opponents whatever it takes.

Ultimately, *Manhunt* is a game without any room for play. It is a rigid, totalitarian control structure, alienating the player, as it were, from the protagonist’s vile labour. The game self-consciously demands the player’s submission, exposing the latent authoritarianism of new media’s ideology of play. But *Manhunt’s* self-referential gesture is an empty signifier – it points at nothing but itself. Pretending to let the media-savvy player participate in an elaborate satire of the media’s manipulative power, it recreates and reinforces this discourse at the player’s expense. This double negation is what makes the game, in my view, immoral rather than amoral – it does not negate power, it reinforces it.

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