Manhunt – The Dilemma of Play

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Manhunt is a videogame developed by Rockstar North and originally released for the Playstation2 platform in 2003. In the game, the player controls James Earl Cash, a death row criminal who is rescued from his execution and coerced into starring in his kidnapper's snuff film productions[1]. "The Director", who witnesses and records Cash's carnage though a network of security cameras, goads, threatens and provides instructions via an earpiece worn by Cash. The player controls Cash in a 3rd-person perspective and the gameplay is best described as requiring both elements of action and stealth. Cash is outnumbered and must carefully, and quietly, make his way through his dilapidated surroundings in order to surprise and execute his victims using a variety of items including plastic bags, shards of glass, bats, bladed items, and firearms.

Manhunt created a controversy when it was released due to the graphic nature of the violence it depicted. This led to the game being banned in a few countries. In the United States, the game received an "M" rating from the ESRB, recommending the game as unsuitable for people under the age of 17. The most notorious element of violence in the game is the execution system. Executions in *Manhunt* are perhaps the most effective way to eliminate opponents and are required in order to progress in the game. However, the player decides how brutal an execution

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[1] A snuff film is a film that depicts the actual death or murder of a person or persons without the aid of special effects that is produced, perpetrated, and distributed solely for the purpose of profit.

will be. Let's say Cash sneaks up behind a gang member with a plastic bag. Pressing the attack button will result in Cash yanking the bag over the victims head and suffocating him. If the player holds down the button for a few seconds, the execution is more violent and Cash might punch the victim in the face in addition to suffocating him. The third, and most brutal, type of execution is carried out by holding down the attack button even longer. Thus, by deciding how long to press the attack button for, the player determines the degree of brutality of the execution.

The premise and violence in *Manhunt* are undeniably gory and brutal. However, from an ethical perspective, this game isn't interesting due to the violence of the executions. 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?

Manhunt's player-based (rather than character-based) moral dilemma is made all the more intense through the use of a USB headset. Playing the game using the headset allows you to use your voice to distract enemies in the game.[2] It also allows you to hear the Director's instructions directly via the earpiece. Both elements effectively shorten the distance between the player and the grotesque world of *Manhunt*. The microphone does this by allowing the player a more direct form of agency while the headset heightens the tension by channeling the Director's wishes and

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[2] Or, conversely, draw unwanted attention to Cash.

desires directly to your ear. In this way, The Director assumes the role of the "evil conscience". You hear him inside your head. His voice goads, taunts, and cheers you on when you cave in to his desires. There is nothing more sickening and disturbing than hearing the Director cackle maniacally as Cash murders a gang member. As might be expected, the Director derives more pleasure from the more gruesome executions.

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? Also, executions are risky to execute since, while the player keeps the attack button pressed, he is exposed and vulnerable to attack. We might expect Cash to reason that an ethical solution to his predicament might be to kill as few enemies as possible and to do so in the least gruesome way (thus not allowing himself to further the Directors ends). The player is thus presented with a situation in which, narratively, there is no reason or motivation to opt for greater brutality in executions. Role-playing Cash does not exculpate the player from Cash's actions.

From a game design perspective, the context for deciding the dilemma is the opposite. In a macabre twist, the player is awarded extra points for completing more gruesome executions.

Within the context of the game, points serve no function or purpose. In the game, nobody knows or cares that you, the player, got more points. Their only purpose seems to be to tempt the player. To force the player to question how much he really values what is essentially a meaningless measure of achievement. How far would you go for a few points more? As a game player, how do **you** value your competitiveness and achievements as a player (get the most points) versus doing the right thing in the context of the narrative? What does it mean to be a good player? Therein lies the true moral dilemma of *Manhunt*.

Personally, I found the experience of playing *Manhunt* disturbing. As a person who loves to play games and who loves to talk about my achievements playing games I was shocked to realize how this game was essentially playing with my mind. It was preying on my competitive instincts. Yes, I want to get a 100% completion. Yes, I want to get a higher and better score than my friends. Yes, I want to unlock all of the extra content. But playing *Manhunt*, all of a sudden, I didn't want to do that. I wanted to know how to make my way through the game doing the least amount of damage possible. The Director's voice is what made the difference: he creeped me out. Could I live with myself knowing that I had made that sick, evil, and twisted person happy? I also realized how this game serves as a commentary on the role and use of violence in videogames. While videogame critics often bemoan the senselessness and recklessness of violence in games, most games aren't able to effectively connect that which happens in the game with your feelings and experience outside of the game. Sure, I've killed my share of pixellated enemies, but I never cared. It wasn't really violence. The true meaning of violence is driven home when it affects you personally. Of all the games I've played, *Manhunt* is probably the best

example of this. It's also a telling commentary that this is the first great game I feel proud to say

I am unwilling, rather than unable, to finish. I guess sometimes the best decision is not to play.