



Manhunt gruesome but dull

Manhunt 2

Available Now
Published by Rockstar Games
Available on Wii, PS2, and PSP

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It seems that whenever Rockstar Games releases a new title, it's destined to be rife with controversy. *Manhunt 2* is no different. After being delayed for six months to tone down its excessive violence, we finally have what concerned parents and politicians would call an "ultra-violent murder simulator" in stores. However, despite all the attention that this title has gotten in the mainstream press, most gamers don't give a shit about it—for good reason.

Manhunt 2 takes place in the Dixmor Asylum for the Criminally Insane. You play Daniel Lamb, a scientist who was part of a top secret experiment known as the "Pickman Project" and thrown into the asylum by the government after the experiment went horribly wrong. One night, the power goes out during a thunderstorm, and all the psychopaths are left to run loose. Your goal is to escape with your life—all the while finding the most violent way to take out your fellow inmates.

The game plays like an otherwise watered-down version of *Splinter Cell*, with the violence cranked up to eleven. It's fairly simple: you sneak through the asylum, evade your fellow inmates by hiding in the shadows, and attack when they least expect it. While the majority of

the game is this basic, killing is where it starts to get complicated.

When first starting the game, you're forced to go through a tutorial of different ways to swing the Wii remote and nunchuck to kill people. These kills are as diverse as they are perverse. Want to cave a man's head in with a fire extinguisher? Go ahead. Want to cut off a man's testicles? Give it a try. Want to play a game that's fun? Sorry, maybe try *Manhunt 3* in two years.

While the Wii may have a more powerful graphics engine than the PS2 or PSP, the versions look disappointingly identical to one another. The environments aren't too ugly, but the character models are awful, looking like a now-dated PS2 launch title. In order to actually get this game published, Rockstar had to introduce filtering effects during some of the more exquisite kills. But after your 20th kill or so, said effects will start to give you headaches, and you'll begin to wonder why you needed to remove that homicidal maniac's genitalia.

If there's one high point to the game, it's that the sound production is very well done. Every disturbing kill corresponds with an assortment of equally disturbing screams, moans, squishes, splatters, and slices. There really isn't that much background music during play, which adds to the creepiness.

As the first M-rated title for Nintendo's little white box, *Manhunt 2* is something of a flop. It seems that all the controversy was for nothing, as most gamers don't—and rightfully shouldn't—care for *Manhunt 2*.

It may have guts and gore, but at least there's genuine context to it

RAMIN OSTAD



A&E Commentary

Despite the growing mainstream acceptance of video games, the idea that they're just for kids is still infuriatingly prevalent. Nevermind that surveys have found the average gamer to be in his or her late 20s; public perception and media spin constantly push the assumption that all videogames are toys for children, rather than entertainment for a variety of different ages.

While I'd like to say that influential members of the gaming industry—like the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB)—heartily battle that perception, they probably infantilize video games more than anyone else.

The prime example of this is *Manhunt 2*, Rockstar Games' ultra-violent, psychoses-induced survival horror romp released this week. Originally intended for release last summer, the game was given an Adult Only (ages 18 and up) rating by the ESRB—gaming's answer to the MPAA—due to its extremely violent nature. Since most retailers have strict policies against selling any AO-rated games, this rating effectively banned the game in North America, forcing the creators to marginally trim down the game's gore before the ESRB dropped the rating to M, for players 17 and up. That's a marginally better outcome than with the British Board of Film Classification, which outright banned the game.

Now, some of you are probably thinking, "So removing a scene where a guy gets his nuts ripped off is infantilizing?" Frankly, yes because while that action on its own has no context, it does in the game. You're not just killing someone in cold blood; there's a reason for it all, and that's something any regular adult can understand. The murder stops as soon as they put down the controller. But the ESRB rating system's inability to adapt to this growing maturity of gamers—continuously adding "content descriptors"

doesn't cut it—as well as the gaping chasm that exists between the Teen and Mature ratings hinders the industry's development as its audience gets older.

For one thing, the distinction between a Teen and a Mature can sometimes be made by simply looking at the colour of the blood that spews from your enemies: green means Teen. Also, the age group that the word encompasses is far bigger than the ESRB seems to give it credit for: their rating deems it to be ages 13–17. I don't really put much stock in a 13-year-old's ability to fully understand the mature themes in a game like *Grim Fandango* or the sardonic humor and \$100 words in the new *Sam & Max* games as well as a 17-year-old would.

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This becomes important when the T rating encompasses vague situations like "violence, suggestive themes, and/or strong language." For that matter, I doubt that a 17-year-old would get a drastically different message from *Manhunt 2* than someone just a year older.

It's a parent's responsibility to determine what their kids should be playing. The problem comes when they can only rely on the ESRB's content descriptors, which describe potentially offensive content in the game, except without that essential ingredient we call context—you know, that thing that tells you why you'd be committing any of these acts.

I'm of the firm belief that a game can be used to convey a well-written story and an adult, sometimes graphic, message. But the infantilization of the industry needs to change from within before public perception can change. Only then will games at least approach the maturity of the average 20-year-old.

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