

## MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

### Video Games and Censorship – The Bogeyman of the 21st Century

Eoin Murphy

This edition of the video games review section takes a special look at banned and censored games, with reviews of Rule Of Rose (banned across Europe and memorably described by no less than the Mayor of Rome as the product of “perverse minds.”) and Manhunt, a game cited in the media as the trigger for the murder of an English school boy.

In addition, David Egan, a first time reviewer for the journal, will take a look at Condemned as a counter point between games that are banned for their violent and sexual content and those that are applauded for their innovative look at the world of criminals, yet still retain excessive violence (and lead pipes...).

To open this section we have an article about the effect the media can have on the public response to videogames and how these games are slowly being turned into ‘the new video nasties’.

#### The New Video Nasties?: Censorship and the Video Game

Videogames have been around since the 1960s (albeit initially in a severely limited form), but it is only in the last decade and a half that they’ve fully entered into mainstream society as an acceptable hobby, career and conversation topic. This change is reflected most obviously in the age of the average gamer, which has been rising steadily for years. At the present time you’re more likely to find someone in their mid-twenties or early thirties playing a games’ console than a 14 year old. This has resulted in a boom in adult-oriented games (for example, there’s even a game where you take on the role of a young Hugh Hefner as he builds the Playboy Empire!). The relatively new level of popularity and exposure has also led videogames into the media spotlight, with many games falling under the intense scrutiny of a suspicious media keen to uncover scandal and shock within this rapidly evolving activity.

This article will discuss the effect the media coverage can have on videogames. It will examine the way in which adverse reporting can shape the perceptions of the general public and consider whether there is any concrete proof that videogames can cause violence. As part of this assessment the games Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (which was heavily criticised and pulled off shelves after the discovery of the mini-game ‘Hot Coffee’) and Manhunt, which was cited in the media as the cause of a teenager’s murder, will be discussed in particular detail, with an exploration of the facts behind the media frenzy.

The current treatment of games in the media is remarkably similar to that received by horror films in the 1980s, when the video nasty scare dominated headlines for the best part of the decade; with tabloid editorials and band-wagon hopping M.P’s like David Mellor calling for the ban of controversial films such as The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, Last House on the Left, I Spit on Your Grave and many others

(some of which, ironically, are now being released in DVD box sets which explicitly play up their previously banned status on the cover).

However, unlike the video nasty scare, which was generally restricted to low budget films made by relatively obscure directors and producers, the media targeting of videogames is affecting a multi-billion dollar industry, and a single bad headline is enough to influence a game's release or its age rating.

One of the games best known to both the general public and videogame players is Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. GTA: SA follows the main character CJ as he returns to his 'Los Santos' home to discover that his neighbourhood is under siege, his mother is dead and rival gangs are selling crack all across the city. The plot follows CJ as he travels across the fictional cities of Los Santos, San Fernando and Las Venturas, seeking revenge and trying to avoid the machinations of corrupt cops, who are voiced by stars such as Samuel L. Jackson and the late Chris Penn.

The game follows a 'sand-box' format, with a large game world allowing players to immerse themselves in the gameplay. Unlike other games, the GTA franchise avoids load screens wherever possible, doing away with them entirely in GTA: SA. The sand box format means that gamers can essentially go anywhere and do pretty much anything, unlike most other videogames which follow a linear pathway to ensure the players move from the start to the end. In GTA:SA you can play for hours on end and not move the plot on one iota, but rather just have fun with mini-games, assorted challenges and driving cars very, very fast through city streets. While not a horror game as such, GTA has never been a series to avoid bloodshed, as gamers are able to arm themselves with everything from brass knuckles to a flamethrower (with victims running around screaming as they slowly burn to death).

The sheer premise of the game (criminal tries to gain control of cities whilst wiping out his rivals) means gamers are exposed to the kind of gameplay not normally employed within the medium, as the requirements of the plot encourage you to regularly perform car-jackings, thefts (it has a sub-game where you can break into people's houses and steal their belongings) and pimp female prostitutes.

Unsurprisingly, GTA: SA, like all the GTA games, was released to a chorus of complaints from concerned parents, politicians and church groups alike. They argued that the exposure of children and teenagers to a game like GTA would result in delinquents roaming the streets inflicting GTA style violence on the innocent. Despite these protests, the game flourished as a must-have purchase on multiple platforms and PCs: predictably; the media furor actually did much to add to the game's appeal. Rockstar Games had previously made excellent use of the media to help generate interest in their games and GTA:SA was no exception. However, the media's typical short term interest soon saw the storm of controversy fade as the press moved on to newer moral outrages.

That was, of course, until 'Hot Coffee'...

One of the more intriguing aspects of GTA: SA was C.J.'s ability to get himself a girlfriend within the game (a dream of many pasty-faced, mostly male gamers). Gamers could wine and dine the

forementioned female, and if they were lucky they could get invited into her abode for a bit of extra curricular activity. This was implied by little more than a few suggestive sounds and the sight of a slightly happier CJ leaving the house.

However, an enterprising Dutch 'modder' (someone who hacks into the code of games for the purpose of modifying the code, generally to add weapons, characters, etc) discovered a hidden code within the game that unlocked another mini-game. To access this mini-game it was necessary to hack into the code of the game, a notoriously difficult task on a console, but much easier on a PC. The code was then made freely available on the Internet: a simple download onto the appropriate PC and the gamer was able to unlock the mini-game. Within a few weeks of the game being released on the PC, videos of 'Hot Coffee' began to appear all across the Internet.

The 'Hot Coffee' mod allowed gamers to actually take part in the bedroom hi-jinks of CJ and his latest girlfriend, with the player able to control CJ's actions and the camera angles. Once they successfully completed the mini-game, the player gained extra 'respect' points. Unsurprisingly, as soon as videos of the mod began to appear on the Internet, Take-Two interactive and Rockstar Games - the game's publisher and developer respectively - came under intense scrutiny by the ESRB (the games industry regulator) and the world's media.

Suffice to say, the same groups who had campaigned against the game's release in the first place again demanded that it be banned. The game and its developers were widely vilified, with a number of countries (including Australia) banning its sale or altering its age certification to reflect the 'Hot Coffee' mod.

As a result of the mod, GTA:SA was given an increased age limit in the US, going from a mature 17+ game to an 1+ adults only game from the ESRB. Take Two interactive itself reduced its expected profit margin from the game from \$170 million to \$160 million. This change to just a small section within the game cost the company \$10 million dollars (Source: [www.gamespot.com](http://www.gamespot.com)).

It must be said that the mini-game it is fairly graphic and could easily offend the "uninitiated". But while it might have left little to the imagination, was the distinctly hysterical reaction from the world's media justified? This mod can only be downloaded via the Internet and loaded on to a PC. In Ireland and the UK, GTA: SA is rated as 18s only.

With the augmented power of next generation consoles, games are attaining greater levels of realism. Such superior levels of realism are, in turn, creating greater difficulties for games in achieving release in markets throughout the world. This is especially the case in light of various groups, including right-wing conservatives in the US and the Australian government, calling for the banning or censorship of specific games.

The argument presented by many of these bodies is that violent videogames played by children will have a subsequent effect on the child's behaviour, creating a greater tendency towards violence.

Research, supporting this contention, was conducted in 2000 by psychologists Craig Anderson and Karen Dill and published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2000, Vol. 78. The research was conducted via two separate studies on college students, one conducted into videogame violence in the real world and the other on videogame violence in the lab. Upon completion of the studies, the researchers stated that:

The present research demonstrated that in both a correlational investigation using self-reports of real-world aggressive behaviours and an experimental investigation using a standard, objective laboratory measure of aggression, violent video game play was positively related to increases in aggressive behaviour. In the laboratory, college students who played a violent video game behaved more aggressively toward an opponent than did students who had played a non-violent video game. Outside the laboratory, students who reported playing more violent video games over a period of years also engaged in more aggressive behaviour in their own lives. Both types of studies—correlational—real delinquent behaviours and experimental—laboratory aggressive behaviours have their strengths and weaknesses. The convergence of findings across such disparate methods lends considerable strength to the main hypothesis that exposure to violent video games can increase aggressive behaviour.

(Anderson & Dill, 2000)

The researchers then went on to point out that the high school students who carried out the Columbine Massacre (Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold) in April 1999 were regular players of videogames, with Harris having redesigned a copy of the videogame *Doom* so that it featured two players and unarmed enemies; a scenario that is disturbingly reminiscent of the Columbine Massacre.

Further research conducted in 2005 (which involved a review of research and studies conducted on the topic over the previous 20 years) showed that youths who regularly played violent videogames were classed as more hostile and aggressive towards fellow pupils (Six-hundred 8th and 9th Graders, rated by their teachers). Teachers also noted their pupils' tendency to replicate moves played out by game characters (one teacher cited the example of a pupil who was prone to Karate chopping others.). As stated on the website [www.mentalhealth.about.com](http://www.mentalhealth.about.com): "The researchers warn about more serious violent behaviour if children played this type of video game over and over again".

However, it must be noted that there is a counterpoint to such arguments. As a child I spent many a happy day wandering the playground acting out scenes from *Robocop*, one of the more violent films of the 1980s, and I have yet to carry out any mass murders.

The research cited above, although thought-provoking, nevertheless does not prove that violent videogames lead to violence in the real world. Children may copy what they see, whether it is in the real world or a virtual one, but whether they carry these actions to a violent and deadly conclusion is an entirely different matter, reliant on many other factors both psychological and environmental in origin.

The charge of inciting violence and/or anti-social behaviour has been laid at the feet of many forms of media (for instance, consider the banning of films like *The Evil Dead* in the early 80s, now a cult favourite, or the controversy often attached to Rock 'n' Roll - the Devil's music - in the 1950s). It seems videogames have taken on the role of media scapegoat for the present.

This tendency came to particular pre-eminence in the case of Stefan Pakeerah, a 15 year old boy who was lured into a park by his 18 year old 'friend' Warren LeBlanc and brutally stabbed to death.

The murder provoked an extreme media response when it was reported that a copy of *Manhunt*, a so-called 'stealth-'em-up' involving the hunting and killing of gang members, was found at the home of the teenage murderer. Reports suggested that he was obsessed with the game.

This sparked a media and public outcry, calling for the game to be banned, with headlines emblazoned across the tabloids:

"Rockstar accused of "providing a template for murder"

- The Inquirer, July 2004

"Video game 'sparked hammer murder'"

- CNN, July 2004

"Teenager gets life for 'Manhunt murder'"

- Daily Mail, September 2004

It was only in the following weeks that it was revealed that not only were the police not considering the game as a motive for the boy's death but that it was actually in the possession of the victim rather than the murderer.

As stated by the Leicestershire Constabulary: "Leicestershire Constabulary stands by its response that police investigations did not uncover any connections to the video game, the motive for the incident was robbery." ([www.gamesindustry.biz](http://www.gamesindustry.biz), August 2004)

The media uproar, which included predictably vehement commentary from the notoriously pro-censorship Daily Mail, (which waged an intense battle to have the likes of David Cronenberg's *Crash* banned during the late 1990s) provoked widespread reaction, with infamous 'anti-violence in games' lawyer Jack Thompson offering to represent the Pakeerah family in bringing a law suit against Rockstar Games. A scenario remarkably similar to the furor which followed the murder of toddler James Bulger, when the film *Child's Play 3* was cited as a possible inspiration for the toddler's murder by two other children. This was despite the fact that there was no direct evidence that the boys involved had even seen the film. Nevertheless, the implication resulted in certain horror films being removed from video stores and pulled from TV schedules. The UK channel, ITV, for example had been running a series of horror films on Saturday nights (screened post-watershed): following the Bulger controversy, they were pulled.

Similarly, even following revelations that the Pakeerah murder was fuelled by the need to pay a drug debt, the Daily Mail continued to refer to the case as the “Manhunt Murder” (Daily Mail, 3rd September 2004). The game was pulled from the shelves by both Game (one of the largest videogame retailers in Ireland and the UK) and Dixons. However, a statement from Virgin Megastores announced that:

“While we take a level of responsibility, ultimately, censorship decisions are up to the consumer.”

And surely this is the crux of the matter. Violent acts have been blamed on all forms of popular culture, from Rock ‘n’ Roll and Heavy Metal music to the satanic influence of 1970s Role-Playing board-game Dungeons and Dragons, but at the end of the day, many of the video games cited as the cause of violent actions already have 18+ ratings, especially in Ireland and the UK, which stick to strict guidelines. Interestingly, while the BBFC imposes these restrictions in the UK, the Irish Film Board, unlike most other countries, does not have any role in censoring games. The Republic of Ireland is signed up to PEGI (Pan European Games Information) but does not impose its age ratings. Instead there is a reliance on retailers to enforce these age restrictions.

Censorship as a concept is important to any society. While it may, arguably, be imprudent to call for no censorship or banning of any kind, placing a ban on something such as a videogame on the basis of limited research, generally inconclusive evidence and a well-orchestrated media uproar is hardly the right response.

Rather, it is in the home that these parameters must be initiated, with parents being aware of just what it is their children are playing. Not, may it be stated, to stop them from becoming mass murders in the years ahead – as stated previously the average gamer is aged somewhere between their late twenties and earlier thirties, and thus outside of parental control if not the parental home – but to ensure they only view images that are appropriate to their age. This is applicable not just to video games but to television, movies and books. If it has a large red 18+ on it there is a good chance that an 11 year old shouldn’t be watching it, and a responsible parent shouldn’t give them the money to buy it. Except if it’s Robocop, as it has educational value...

Eoin Murphy

## Rule of Rose

Rule of Rose

Publisher: 505 GameStreet

Number of Players: 1

Format: Playstation 2

As controversial games go, Rule of Rose is right up there with the greats. On its release the Mayor of Rome called for its banning as it ‘promoted lesbianism’ and allegedly contained sadomasochistic images. It was pulled from distribution in the UK and Europe by its publisher before it even got its release rating (16+ by the way). In Australia, again the publisher didn’t release the game, preferring not to put it up against the country’s certification board (OFLC) which has banned a number of games from distribution in the past including Manhunt and a game version of the Quentin Tarantino movie Reservoir Dogs. In the USA, Sony Computer Entertainment America refused to pick it up, with a smaller distribution company more willing to take on the risk of raising the public ire.

The question is, is Rule of Rose all that horrifying? Surely a game that sparks this much of an uproar must be the most grotesque ever produced? Before I get into that, here’s a brief run down of the plot:

Rule of Rose opens in the 1930’s England, with Jennifer, a teenage girl whose parents have recently died in a tragic accident, on her way to an orphanage. While on the bus taking her to her “new home”, a little boy runs up to her and requests a story, the story of a Princess whose parents have just died. Jennifer takes the book from the boy’s hands and then, rather foolishly, follows him off the bus, quickly becoming lost along a dirt track road.

Jennifer soon finds herself at a strangely empty orphanage where she is greeted by the sight of figures with paper bags on their heads beating something in a sack (a sack that moves and yelps...).

After a brief wander around the orphanage, Jennifer is thrown into a homemade casket and wakes up on an airship.

It’s here that the game really starts to get strange... Jennifer is inducted into the ‘Red Crayon Aristocrats Club’, a group of girls who bring a monthly tribute to their mysterious overlord. Jennifer is forced to join in or be killed, all the while trying to solve the mysteries that surround her in this new and strange environment. Mysteries such as just who are the Red Crayon Aristocrats? How did they end up on a Zeppelin? And just who (or what) is the Stray Dog people keep mentioning?

Gameplay in Rule of Rose follows the by now standard format for RPG’s, with Jennifer searching through the Airship for tribute, unlocking areas by completing puzzles and finding keys, a formula that has been employed since the days of Resident Evil. The only relatively original aspect to the gameplay is Brown, a Labrador that Jennifer discovers relatively early (he was in the sack that was getting beaten at the start of the game). Brown can be used to find items scattered across the Zeppelin. Simply get him to smell a

connected item and he will track it down for you, taking much of the mindless search elements out of the game (for the first hour and a half you don't have Brown and spend your time randomly checking doors and vainly searching for items to move the plot along).

The sound in the game is particularly good, with an atmospheric orchestral feel: violins scream to a high pitch when you come under attack from enemies and help develop the feel of the game's 1930's setting. The voice acting is ok, with relatively well done English accents, although at times you can envision a 40 year old woman attempting to do a 12 year-old-boy's voice.

Combat is the weakest element of the game, feeling like an added on attempt to make it more exciting. Jennifer can weakly stab at enemies using a variety of household cutlery (the first weapon you pick up is a fork and the second is a paring knife). Unlike games, such as *Silent Hill*, which also employ physical melee weapons, Jennifer's attacks have little impact and it is much simpler just to run around and avoid opponents in the game. The adversaries themselves are child-sized monstrosities with the heads of animals. The first creature you come across has the face of Munch's *Scream* and subsequent bad guys have the heads of rats, fish, and pigs. Throughout the game, Jennifer comes across a number of Boss enemies, including a woman who vomits acid on you, the animalistic *Stray Dog* and a large man who attacks whilst running on all fours. While you never come into open conflict with the other members of the Aristocracy, throughout the game Jennifer suffers repeated humiliations at their hands and has a tendency do things like meet them, faint and then wake up tied to a post.

The graphics for the game are quite good but are nothing spectacular, similar in vein to the graphics for *Silent Hill*, with a slight grainy quality to the screen to emphasise the fact that it takes place in the past. The character models are good, with Jennifer's Labrador companion particularly well animated, barking at your commands and wagging his tail when he gets attention or finds a clue to the next puzzle. The FMV (Full Motion Video) sequences are also quite effective; adding to the slightly disturbing feel of the game, with award winning cut scenes (Official Selection of the *Anney 2006 International Animated Film Festival*).

Whilst viewing such sequences the controversy surrounding the game can almost be understood, with many non-player controlled characters taking overt pleasure in the physical and psychological subjugation of others. Another scene has one of the few adults in the game seemingly beaten to death by Imps. While there is no outright gore, the final shot is of a corpse being shoved under a bed, her neck twisted round to face the wrong way.

*Rule of Rose* does not add much to the RPG horror genre. Rather it regurgitates the standard methods of gameplay, adds a dog and relies upon its more controversial elements to sell it. If it had been released three years ago, *Rule of Rose* may have been a bestseller, its graphics and unusual premise acting as a draw to gamers, but in the day and age of next generation platforms it doesn't do enough, simply rehashing old gameplay elements.

The controversy surrounding the game is warranted however; with FMV scenes making the player squirm (Just think of Takeshi Miike's notorious 1999 film *Audition* and you'll understand what I mean). A prime example of this is when Jennifer first meets the Red Crayon Aristocrats and is subjected to vicious and repeated humiliations at their hands, with her nearest rival on the Aristocracy Hierarchy poking her in the face with a live rat on a stick. While this is decidedly creepy as is, it is made more disturbing by the obvious pleasure Amanda (her rival) gets from the experience, making for decidedly uncomfortable viewing.

The hierarchy presented by the Red Crayon Aristocrats leads almost automatically to thoughts of *Lord of the Flies*, with the isolation of young people similarly resulting in the development of a subculture displaying its own disturbing goals and values (in this case climbing the ladder of the Red Crayon Aristocrats through the presentation of gifts).

*Rule of Rose* and *Lord of the Flies* differ however in the important respect that that world of *Rule of Rose* also contains adults who are as much at the mercy of the bizarre rules that govern the *Zeppelin* as the rest of its young inhabitants. Also the world of *Rule of Rose* is populated primarily by girls not boys.

It is most likely this gender element, coupled with the young age of many of the protagonists, which lends the game its sense of taboo. The fact that the people precipitating in random and sadistic acts of violence are young women and girls, rather than the more typical male avatar certainly seems to be a highly significant factor in the game's negative reception. This would explain why, for example, the game *Canis Canem Edit* (or *Bully* as it was known before yet another media outcry), which regularly has its main male character beating up other school children, did not receive the same treatment as *Rule of Rose*. For although, *Canis Canem Edit* did provoke a predictably negative media reaction, the end result was simply a name change and increased sales for the game's publishers. However, *Rule of Rose*, with its largely female cast, was banned across the world and its publisher in Europe pulled it from the shelves just weeks prior to its launch, despite the fact that it received a PEGI rating of 16+.

Notwithstanding the fact that *Rule of Rose* sparked the beginning of yet another round of public debate regarding the effect of videogames on children, it doesn't introduce any truly new elements to the genre, other than having female leads and a tendency to dawdle on the edge of sadomasochism. The lack of innovation in gameplay and the tacked on combat system lets it down, not doing enough to encourage you to play to the next FMV sequence. Rather, in between the disturbing FMV you find yourself half-heartedly opening doors and getting Brown to sniff objects. Given the difficulty in actually getting a copy of this game in Ireland and the UK and its unrewarding nature it is best forgotten about. If you're looking for a game that leaves you slightly disturbed and won't cost you an arm and a leg, you're better off spending your money on *Manhunt* or *Fahrenheit*.

*Rule of Rose*

Graphics - 7

Sound - 8

Game play - 6

Replay value - 5

Average – 6.5

Eoin Murphy

## **Manhunt**

Publisher: Rockstar Games  
 Number of Players: 1  
 Format: Xbox/Playstation/PC

The first of the banned games to be discussed in this review is Manhunt, a game that faced criticism when it was first released and then came under intense scrutiny following the murder of Stefan Pakeerah (see *The New Video Nasties?: Censorship and the Video Game* article above).

Manhunt follows the story of James Earl Cash and his descent into the hellish nightmare of forced participation in snuff movies. But don't feel sorry for him. The game opens just a few hours after his apparent execution in prison.

Manhunt takes the novel approach of having the game's plot introduced by the screaming voice of film director, Mr. Starkweather (namesake of the notorious 1950s spree killer Charles Starkweather), who yells at you through an earpiece demanding that you to kill an unsuspecting gang member with a plastic bag. And you do...

The game incorporates some of the same tricks employed in *Grand Theft Auto*, which isn't altogether surprising as it was made by the same publisher, Rockstar. The game guide is presented as a catalogue for "Valiant Video Enterprises" (the snuff movie distributor), with details presented on enemies and weapons in a particularly engaging fashion, much in the same way as the game guides for *Grand Theft Auto* and *Canis Cadet Edit* (formerly *Bully*).

The game itself is well made, with decent graphics which, although they're starting to show their age (especially compared to those seen on the next gen consoles), can still hold their own. There is some blocking and moments of poor collision control (I spent 5 minutes trying to extract Cash from the corpse of a victim and came dangerously close to hitting the off button...)

Character models are well detailed, with gangs such as the 'smilies' and the 'innocents' adding a decidedly creepy edge to the game. Being hunted through the empty streets of a city is bad enough, but when they wear smiley faces it just gets a bit odd.

The screen is presented in a slightly grainy fashion, giving the effect of watching proceedings through CCTV. Stealth kills are conducted through short FMV sequences that show the gore in spectacular detail. The sight of a man struggling to tear a plastic bag off his face is one of the most disturbing of the game.

Controls for the game are quite intuitive. For example, a gentle push on the left analogue stick makes Cash creep forward and a bit more force nudges him into a walking pace. Running is controlled via the right trigger but drains the stamina bar. My one gripe regarding the control system is the occasionally annoying first person camera. It can become quite disorienting at times, with a certain disjointedness to it.

It does take a while to get used to and even after a few hours of gameplay you will find yourself cursing its awkwardness.

Where the game really comes into its own is through the use of sound. As *Manhunt* primarily relies upon stealth, anything that exposes your position is a bad thing. This can amount to walking over gravel too quickly or bumping into a garbage can. Even your choice of weapon can affect proceedings. The louder the method of attack you choose (be it a glass shard, baseball bat or sawn off shotgun) the more likely you are to attract gang members to your location and that's the last thing you want. Your position is displayed on a small mini map on the screen, with any sounds you make displayed as a red circular wave. Any gang members that are within this circle will immediately lock onto your position and you quickly find yourself fighting for your life.

Voice acting is good, with the character of Mr. Starkweather voiced brilliantly by Brian Cox of (appropriately enough) *Manhunter* and *X-Men 2* fame. Throughout the game it is his voice which directs you to your objectives and screams at you to kill. The grumbling tone of his voice help sets the mood of the game. Other parts of the game have you listen to various gang members discussing their plans for the rest of the night, from culinary titbits ("When I get home I'm gonna eat a bowl of pasta this high!") to spousal alcohol abuse ("If she's been drinking again when I get home...").

The absence of music in the game adds to the realism of the set pieces. This is good on a technical basis (it would be hard to listen out for approaching gang members if you couldn't hear them over the soundtrack) and it also adds an edge to the proceedings, with the gamer straining to hear the laughter of gang members or the cries of victims.

Unlike many games, the odds are stacked firmly in the bad guy's favour, with each enemy having a similar level of health as Cash, access to the same weapons and a tendency to move in groups. *Manhunt* rewards you for stealth activities and punishes you for gung-ho activities that have you blasting away like a spree killer on a bad day.

A game like this would, however, get quite boring after a while without a decent plot. There are only so many vicious psychopaths you can strangle with wire before it begins to get old. Rockstar, as always, delivers admirably, with the introduction of a female police detective.

Look away for a \*\*\*\*\*SPOILER\*\*\*\*\*

...half way through the game, Cash joins forces with the detective to bring down the director, turning from the hunted to the hunter...

\*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

It is of course typical of Rockstar; to produce a game that actively courts controversy and then turn the plot on its head. Many games have started with the premise that you must overthrow a madman

controlling gangs across a city (such as Urban Chaos). With the main character actively involved in the crimes themselves, Rockstar has the gamer testing their own morals and motivations when there is something “personal” at stake especially in sections where Cash’s family members are tortured to death if you take to long getting to plot objectives.

It is easy to see where the controversy attached to Manhunt comes from. The first half of the game has you hunting down people and killing them for the amusement of others and many of these deaths are particularly vicious. Unlike other games such as The Punisher (which faced criticism for its torturing of victims for information, including the memorable use of a wood chipper...), Manhunt has the gamer decide on how victims are killed (plastic bag, glass shard, crowbar through the neck...), while the longer you hold the triangle button the more vicious the kill becomes. Added to this, if you botch your stealth attack you find yourself facing a hunter in hand to hand combat. If you knock them to the ground they’ll then start to beg for mercy, which given the nature of the game, is in short supply.

Manhunt is a good game, with solid graphics and an excellent use of sound. Whilst it does have some controversial elements this is much more to do with the philosophical connotations of the game than the gameplay itself. It is no more violent than Hitman or The Suffering, but the fact that it is based around the concept of snuff movies seems to have, unsurprisingly, aroused the ire of various members of the tabloids, many of which have called for its banning or censorship. Perhaps the most discomforting aspect of Manhunt’s use of the snuff movie as its context is the way in which snuff’s use of violence and sex for entertainment might be comparable to the more violent and sexually explicit videogames. It could of course be argued that the reason for the general controversy surrounding the game was simply a reaction against the excessive brutality it depicts, and its distinct lack of squeamishness in showing death scenes. However, other games are equally brutal, especially Hitman which allows players to make use of Cheesewire amongst other things. Indeed, the main difference between Manhunt and other games of this nature is that the killings that occur in the game are directly linked with entertainment, conducted, as they are, for the amusement of other characters within the game itself - the Director squealing in delight at each successful stealth murder – this direct association with violence and entertainment seemingly crossing an invisible line that only an irate news media can see ( I wonder why).

It must be stated however, that Rockstar is not averse to creating a bit of controversy itself prior to launching a game, as with the launch of the Grand Theft Auto series when TakeTwo Interactive, the game’s publisher, hired Max Clifford to deliberately generate debate about the game. As they say – there’s no such thing as bad publicity...

Manhunt:

Graphics - 7

Sound – 9

Gameplay -8

Replay value – 7

Average - 8

Eoin Murphy

## Condemned

Publisher: Sega  
 Number of Players: 1  
 Format: Xbox 360/PC

The third and final games review of this edition is *Condemned* (released in the US as *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, a counter point to the previous two games. One of the first games released on a so-called 'next gen' (next generation) console (in this case the XBOX 360), *Condemned* is set in a harsh world of insane homeless people and sociopathic serial killers who haunt a dark cityscape filled with abandoned factories and desolate slums. However, unlike *Manhunt* or *Rule of Rose*, *Condemned* was, despite its extremely controversial content, lauded on its release as one of the best next gen games available and as David Egan points out below, it can still hold its own against newer releases.

*Condemned* places you in the role of FBI Agent Ethan Thomas, a crime scene investigator on the trail of several serial killers. During his latest investigation things go badly awry. Following a chase through a derelict building, a crazed serial killer wrestles Ethan's gun away from him and proceeds to kill two police officers. With no witnesses to clear him of the shooting, Ethan becomes a fugitive from justice. While on the run, and with the help of his partner Rose, he trails 'Serial Killer X' in the hope of clearing his name. However, all is not as it seems. Ethan soon begins to experience frightening flashbacks that place him in the role of the serial killer's victims, forced to relive the last moments of their lives.

Gameplay is controlled from a first person perspective. Unlike other games in this genre, most fighting is done with melee weapons such as 2x4s, lead pipes and axes - whilst guns do crop up from time to time, they always have very limited ammo. Attacking is assigned to the right trigger while the left trigger controls blocking. These must always be used in tandem as the only effective way to fight enemies is to block their first strike and quickly retaliate with your own while being prepared to block their almost immediate second attack.

While this makes for frantic battles it can also make things a bit on the unfair side when the player is confronted with more than one foe, with each enemy taking it in turn to strike you with its preferred weapon, giving them an above average advantage. In addition to the standard melee weapons, Ethan has access to items such as a stun gun which can momentarily incapacitate any of the enemies you come up against, thus evening the score somewhat.

An innovative gameplay element here is the use of forensic detection tools. Blood samples can be collected, fingerprints can be analysed, and photographs can be taken; all are then sent to Rose via your cell phone for further lab analysis.

However, while all of this is new and interesting in the initial sections of the game, it soon becomes somewhat repetitious as nothing new presents itself. You simply go from evidence location to evidence location, fighting off enemies as you go. While this is not enough to completely spoil the game, it is disappointing considering the rich premise of the plot and the opportunities that are presented later in the body of the game.

The four shoulder buttons control all aspects of melee fighting while the face buttons control any other abilities the player has, such as turning a flashlight on and checking a gun's ammo. Movement is controlled by the left analogue stick while the ability to look around the environments is mapped to the right analogue stick. If the player finds these controls awkward or unfamiliar there are 2 other preset configurations to choose from. Altogether the controls work really well: the button placement will never frustrate or confuse and won't cause you to lose a fight while scrambling to press a button combination quickly.

The environments in which you play are stunning, especially for a first generation 360 game. Suiting the style of the game to a T, the player must travel through a large range of derelict locations, each one surpassing the one before it. Early on in the game the player will find him/herself in a Metro City Subway, travelling hundreds of feet below the city, complete with damp walls and wet floors, dust clinging to the air and the rumbling of the surroundings as trains pass close by. An abandoned department store presents the player with the scariest level in the game; hundreds of mannequins line the walls as your flashlight illuminates creepy Christmas decorations. The effect the flashlight has on location creates a consummate sense of suspense and tension. The light plays across the walls, floor and ceilings, revealing very little of your surroundings, while still creating enough light to continue. Because the scene is illuminated by just one light source shadows are cast along the walls and enemies faces come into view just a few feet from you as they prepare to strike. The scariest moments are saved for later on in the game when your flashlight's batteries suddenly die and you find yourself slowly inching forward in almost complete darkness.

Sound effects are put to fantastic use. As you creep through an old building a far off shout or scream can be heard which quite literally makes you stop in your tracks and wait for a good 30 seconds, frantically looking around the environment for the source of the sound. Often you won't be able to see the enemy and you'll be forced to carry on, wary that someone could be around any corner. Coupled with the dark shadows in the poorly lit building, the sound effects rival anything that a horror game has done previously. Weapons all create their own unique sound, with the hollow thump of a 2x4 or the clanging of metal on metal as you block an enemy's weapon; all of which helps draw you into the numerous battles.

Enemies consist of "crazies", homeless and deformed people prowling the streets at night, attacking anything and everything that crosses their path. While the enemy AI isn't incredibly bright (they'll often repeat the same formula of running ten feet away from you and then running back to hit you), at times their sheer numbers can make for very pressing battles. Unfortunately there is a lot of repetition in the character models so you'll find yourself facing twins or even triplets on far too many occasions. Aside from one or two notable exceptions they all present the same challenge, even later in the game. This leads to a lot of repetition which drags the game down in the later stages.

While the game would have been a must-have title at launch, there are games available now with much more variety and longevity, leaving *Condemned* to be categorised as a must-rent title only. The gameplay is great and the graphics and sound superb, not to mention the scariness factor, but the game stumbles after a few hours by settling for repetition. That said, it's still a lot better than most 360 games and shouldn't be passed up, especially for fans of horror games such as *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*.

Condemned:

Graphics: 8/10

Sound: 9/10

Story: 6/10

Replay Value: 4/10

Average: 7

David Egan

### **Marvel Horror: Volume 1**

Writers: Gary Frierich, Steve Gerber, Chris Claremont, John Warner, Bill Mantlo, Gerry Conway, Roy Thomas, Tony Isabella

Artwork: Tom Sutton, Jim Mooney, Herb Trimpe, Gene Colan, Sal Buscema, Sonny Trinidad, Ed Hannigan, Russ Heath, John Romita, Pablo Marcos, Enrique Romero, Pat Broderick, George Evans, Vincent Alcazar, Mike Vosburg, The Tribe and The Crusty Bunkers.

Marvel Comics,  
Parental Advisory

Marvel Horror: Volume 1 brings together a collection of comics from the Marvel stable of the 1970s. Nine different publications are presented in the book, including Ghost Rider, Marvel Spotlight and Haunt of Horror.

The collection focuses on three Marvel characters, only one of whom is still instantly recognisable, this being the Anti-hero Ghost Rider, whose story has just been “re-imagined” in the film of the same name now on general release (with the irrepressible Johnny Blaze portrayed by Nicholas Cage, much to the fear of many comics fans...).

The Ghost Rider section forms a minor part of the collection as a whole, serving more as an introduction to ‘Daimon Hellstrom, Son Of Satan’ – but more about him later.

Ghost Rider is the demonic form taken by stunt biker Johnny Blaze, who is coerced into selling his soul to Satan in order to save his beloved girlfriend, Roxanne. Johnny takes up the offer, gaining a flaming skull for a head and a motorbike which can drive up walls. Much like Todd McFarland’s Spawn, Johnny is given the role of Satan’s herald on Earth, with the anti-hero almost instantly rejecting this position and forever earning the Lord of Hell’s enmity.

The Ghost Rider stories follow on from the initial introduction of the character in issues not provided in this collection. Very much a bad guy here, Ghost Rider is chased by police and superheroes alike, who try to bring the demonic character to justice (unlike many other comic-book heroes, Ghost Rider is not afraid to kill or maim his enemies).

The issues presented in this collection depict the gradual change of the character from evil to good, with Johnny Blaze trying to save the life of his poisoned girlfriend. On the way, he faces off against a biker gang and a possessed Indian girl. This also introduces some of the greatest lines ever committed to paper (See Horror Quotes below).

Throughout the Ghost Rider stories a mysterious figure, only ever glimpsed in shadow and a trench coat, makes his way to the home of a possessed Indian girl, called there by the girl's family to exorcise her from demonic possession.

Cleverly interspersed within the Ghost Rider segment, this serves as the introduction to the next set of stories and the next character of the collection, when this mysterious figure turns out to be none other than Daimon Hellstrom, Son of Satan!

The Son of Satan stories somehow manage to be both cheesy and excellent at the same time. Daimon is the product of a liaison between Satan and a human woman, an arrangement that lasted until his mother discovered her daughter (who is, rather suggestively, named Satana) trying to sacrifice a cat in the basement at her evil father's behest.

Damion spends the next few years in an orphanage, joins the priesthood and then comes face to face with his dad, Satan, who encourages Damion to claim his rightful place as The Son of Satan.

Rejecting all his father stands for, Daimon decides to use his supernatural gifts to become an exorcist and to work towards the ultimate defeat of his father.

Whilst the Son of Satan stories could have been quite dull (superhero fights dark side and helps the innocent), Steve Gerber has introduced a true dual identity to Daimon Maelstrom's character, with Daimon having to regularly fight his demonic self and its irrational urges (at one point he's in a room full of academics and has to try and resist the urge to kill them all as they won't stop pestering him with annoying questions).

The stories can also be quite nasty. Dogs are decapitated in one issue while another rather unpleasant section has Daimon unable to tell reality from illusion as he cuts a swathe through friends and enemies alike.

Daimon must confront a number of threats throughout the collection, including the Ice Demon Ikthalon, and, my personal favourites, the Legion of Nihilists (who believe in nothing and dress like Roman Legionnaires!).

The third character in the collection is Daimon's sister, 'Satana, the Devil's Daughter', who despite her early cat-killing ways, has turned from the Devil's path and instead spends her time hunting evil much like her brother, except slightly more violently.

The artwork throughout the collection is consistently good, with the Satana stories the best of the lot, featuring excellent ink work and dramatic use of shading and light, especially in the Haunt of Horror stories, with artwork by Pablo Marcos and Enrique Romero.

In addition the collection provides the occasional short story (part of the Marvel Preview stories), some of them penned by the man responsible for the X-Men's classic Phoenix saga, Chris Claremont.

What's also particularly interesting about the stories (apart from the notably dark subject matter and excessive violence) is the now distinctly un-politically correct tendency of their male characters to be misogynistic. In particular, Daimon Hellstrom is prone to being highly dismissive of his female sidekick and (almost) love interest parapsychologist Dr. Katherine Reynolds, who he at one point slaps in the face for putting herself in danger (see Horror Quotes): a vivid reminder of the fact that the stories were originally published at a time when every good hero knew how to put a meddling woman in her place.

The Marvel Horror collection is an excellent read and great fun. It also shows another, now almost forgotten, side to the Marvel Universe, and acts as a good introduction to a number of characters who haven't been heard from in almost 40 years - except for Ghost Rider, whose upcoming movie antics are likely to both sicken and amuse viewers in all the wrong ways.

Horror Quotes:

“Suddenly, the past explodes into oblivion—and the present comes rushing toward him like the Grim Reaper on a jet powered cycle—a roadblock—the Law”

“Like Hell-Spawned demons they come, roaring across the rain-soaked desert sands astride powerful iron steeds—the Hordes of Attila the Hun circa 1973!... Big Daddy Dawson's Ruthless Riders--!!”

Damion Hellstrom upon saving the life of Dr. Katherine Reynolds from the Demon Ikthalon:

“‘But’ nothing fool! You broke your vow to me—and by doing so almost doomed the human race!” (he smacks her on the side of the head) “You are beneath contempt, my good Doctor!”

Eoin Murphy