

The Shield: The Game

Once in a while, a show comes along to shake things up in a popular genre. The Shield was that show for the police drama. Centered mostly around corrupt cops in Los Angeles and inspired by the Rampart scandals of the 1990s, The Shield was an innovative show for basic cable television which won awards and reshaped the television landscape. With a cult following and acclaim from critics, a video game was inevitable. While it was maligned by critics when it came out, the game is a bit of a guilty pleasure for me since I'm a big fan of the show but I wouldn't recommend it to anyone unless they're a glutton for jank. Here I want to explore what makes this game a failure in comparison to its source material.

Not much is known about development but it's clear based on the state of the game, that it was quite rough. There's plenty of holes throughout that point to a troubled production — Walton Goggins' voice switching to that of someone who sounds like Yuri Lowenthal a few times, various bugs and glitches, etc. But I'm getting ahead of myself so I should start with the story.

As mentioned before, The Shield: The Game takes place after Season 3 in the fictional district of L.A. known as Farmington. It is supposedly the most dangerous part of town. The anti-gang unit simply known as the Strike Team, led by protagonist Vic Mackey, is on the verge of being disbanded and (in a plot point taken straight from Season 3) the Captain David Aceveda sends them on a tip to find a batch of MP5 machine guns before a gang war starts. If I can genuinely give the game props, it replicates the look and feel of the show. It's hard edged, grimy, nasty and gritty. Having one of the show's writers, Scott Rosenbaum and most of the original cast help keep some of the characters feeling close to how they were on the show. But that's really about it, the story itself is a lifeless, incoherent mess. In fairness, I do know that it is difficult to write a good plot for an action game but little problems start piling up when the story does things either to have a gratuitous action scene or throw in bizarre misguided attempts at fan service. To get this point across, in Season 2 Vic burns a guy's face on a gas stove. This was a pivotal scene that had long term consequences for the rest of the season. In the game, you can do it numerous times even though it'd be completely out of character for Vic to do at that point. CONSEQUENCE FREE! Other problems are the Strike Team planting drugs that turned out to be poisoned (without checking them first. Keep in mind, these guys are ridiculously cautious on the show) so part of the story gets complicated by them being sloppy. It starts as a gang war between black and Latino gangs but then it turns into a conspiracy involving the Armenian Mafia, it becomes hard to keep track of and the lack of solid character writing keeps everything feeling flat. The series excelled at great character writing. It was more of a show about people talking about the moral ambiguities of police work with some action sprinkled throughout thus the writing was able to be the star of the program.

Since I mentioned that the game captures the look of the show, I should talk about graphics. On a technical level the visuals are subpar. It looks closer to a PS2 title from 2003 than 2007. Textures are muddy and ugly. Character models range widely from a very accurate looking Michael Chiklis to a very uncanny valley Walton Goggins. The random NPCs look barely above

pedestrians from GTA3. There is a decent amount of detail in environments though to help the game keep looking especially seedy like the show was. It takes a lot of time and effort to design individual pieces of graffiti and various bits of crap on the ground, so it's nice to see them replicate the atmosphere of the show. As a fan, I appreciate the recreation of the series' main precinct called The Barn. It's fun walking around it and seeing how much they got right. The game likely was made on a budget which would explain the rather dated visuals even for the time.

Gameplay wise it's a third person shooter where you are discouraged from excessive killing. You see Vic has a "heat meter" that keeps track of the various people he kills (righteous or not), the brutality he inflicts in front of other NPCs and sadly that's mainly it. You're encouraged to disarm enemies and arrest them rather than kill them and this is a good idea in theory. The problem is that disarming enemies only seems to work if you shoot them non lethally enough times to knock down their resistance meter until they drop their guns. This is as ridiculous as it sounds. There is some comedy in unloading lead into a poor bastard's knees and them dropping their guns going "It's cool, man! It's cool!". On the later enemies like the Armenians, this doesn't work so you end up sometimes running up to enemies and punching the shit out of them until their resistance meter drops enough so you can grab them. I felt like I was breaking the game every time I did this because even though this is a hyper macho thing that Vic would do, it's also hilariously stupid and impossible to take seriously. More on the heat meter, one of the ways you drain heat is by turning in evidence into the evidence locker or by planting guns on unarmed suspects (it doesn't matter if people were watching you do that). You can also turn drugs and money you find into Vic's retirement fund. That unlocks extra content and the game's best ending. You find drugs and money by doing this hot and cold search minigame where you need to drag a cursor across the titular Shield until you find contraband within the time limit. You think having a time limit would add tension but if you're close to failing one, you can back out at the last minute and try again as much as you want. In concept a decent idea for a minigame however this one big oversight removes all tension and it just becomes a chore. The game's movement and shooting feel like Vic's moral compass: broken beyond repair. Moving Vic is cumbersome and sluggish, kinda like before Vic's actor Micheal Chiklis lost the weight. You'll sometimes get caught on environmental obstructions especially during the game's sparse chase sequences where Vic sprints. There are a lot of bugs and glitches. Bullets going through your targets, Vic getting stuck in the geometry, the cover system making the camera go haywire and much more. Shooting lacks weight to it. Every gun including the shotgun feels floaty and awkward. On top of sketchy collision detection, it's just not enjoyable. Lastly in regards to gameplay, there is a forced stealth section and a handful of optional ones. Do I really need to go further than that? Alright, I guess. Stealth sections in action games are almost always bad and this is no exception. The worst comes in the second level where you need to sneak into a house and plant drugs. If you get spotted even once, you have to reset. Vic Mackey doesn't skulk around. I do think there are some good ideas here but a lack of polish and some oversights prevent it from getting off the ground.

Sound wise the game is all over the map. Good voice work from the original cast members but TERRIBLE performances from the random NPCs. I mentioned earlier that Walton Goggins'

voice switches to a dude who sounds like Yuri Lowenthal at one point and that tells me they just couldn't get him back in the booth to record lines. Music wise, it feels appropriate for the game. Some hip hop, metal and bits of funk here in there. A typical urban cop game score. Though sometimes the music is mixed way too loud to the point it's hard to hear the rest of the game. There is a remix of the show's original theme and it's quite poor. It sounds like a drunk slurring out "Just another daaaaaaay." It's just very sad sounding.

Why would I consider this terrible game a guilty pleasure? Is it because I'm a fan of the show or do I see what could've been a good game underneath all of it? Yes. I do think there is a lot of potential in a game where you play as a crooked cop. The mechanics are there but need a lot more time in the oven. Also, there is some joy I've found in running up to suspects and slapping em silly until they drop their guns. The game at times makes you feel like Vic Mackey. So at least the game accomplished that to a small degree. Even if some were absolutely unintentional.