

Prey Drive & Video Games

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I'm someone with an overactive prey drive. I attribute it to my nonhumanity and specifically my identity as a canine psychopomp (a glorified magical hunting dog...wolf...thing) and it can be something of a struggle to deal with. Sometimes seeking enrichment can be difficult or downright impossible, situations depending—the covid epidemic has in particular made navigating this part of me especially hard.

The best way I've yet found to alleviate this resides in video games. Two ones in particular: Skyrim and, more recently discovered, Monster Hunter.

Skyrim's werewolf mechanics, especially with DLC and modding add-ons that enhance the natural abilities of the character and the customizability of the model, are an iconic part of the game's appeal to me. Racing around the countryside and mindlessly slaughtering animal and civilian alike is satisfying in the same way eating a good meal might be, especially when your werewolf character themselves gets to devour the hearts of their kills!

But more satisfying than that element is the stealth mechanics themselves, especially in regards to daggers and bows. Everyone rags on stealth archer builds, and for good reason: they're overpowered as all get out with the ability for the character to just melt away into the shadows and ruthlessly one-shot virtually anything, sending even giants careening into the sky.

Crouching unseen in a patch of grass while stalking the guards outside of Whiterun, only to take them out one by one while the NPC's AI works itself up into a panicked frenzy, imitates an emotional economy that is functionally impossible to (legally and/or ethically) engage with in real, physical life for me. Skyrim's broken code around stealth, bows, and daggers works by proxy as a fantastic "pumpkin full of meat" in terms of enrichment, helping to soothe some of the restlessness that my prey drive ramps up the longer I go without engaging in something that satisfies that itch. The option to sneak right up behind a target and get close and personal, the option to keep your distance and get the perfect shot, the option to slink through city alleyways or

through the tall grass of plains or in the murky swamp water like and hunt actual animals... it's the beauty of Skyrim's open world layout and utter lack of any real morality system beyond "don't get caught."

Hunting the guards is probably the most satisfying for me within game play, but the ability to functionally roleplay as an actual big game hunter, going out and after the various wildlife like saber cats, wolves, deer, bears, and potentially more if you have modded gameplay, is also something I enjoy. The juxtaposition of doing all of the above while being a werewolf in-game hits a special sweet spot between what I want, and the reality I'm currently living.

But Skyrim's ragdoll physics and the repetition of playing a game that I've had since 2011 can dull how well it works for me. It's also hellish to start the game up, as I have it loaded with a fun few hundred mods that make it liable to crashing—because what's the point of playing Skyrim if you're not going to break it over your knee in the process?

Skyrim is the old reliable of getting my prey drive worked out, but a new option's come to light to help me deal with my more problematic instincts: Monster Hunter World.

Monster Hunter World, for those unfamiliar, is a game where—you guessed it!—you hunt enormous monsters, either capturing them or killing them. This game in particular is set in the "New World," an unexplored continent filled with flora and fauna that scholars and scientists are attempting to gather as much information on as possible.

The game has multiple different fighting style options based on various kinds of weapons, all combined with a grappling hook that allows for up close and personal encounters. For me, I enjoy the sword and shield, and the hammer. Both allow for immediate use of the grappling hook without sheathing the weapon, and let me functionally wail on anything that crosses paths with me. Anything that tries to run—which monsters in the game will try to do, multiple times, while you hunt them—I chase with the single-minded determination natural to virtually any canine.

Before playing Monster Hunter World, I thought of myself as a scholar first, a bundle of uncontrollable animal instincts second: during the second area of the game, during an escort mission where a large, fire-breathing dragon monster called a Rathian swooped down upon the group of scientists I was supposed to be chasing, I realized that was not the case. The Rathian is meant to be significantly above the player's level, especially if they're new to the game, and the scientists all scream to run as soon as it comes in sight. I proceeded to chase after it and try to rip its individual limbs off with my bare teeth, and only stopped after it lead me through an area that activated an automatic cut scene with my then-forgotten escort, causing me to lose my prey and lose my shit. It's a good thing the NPCs in this game are invulnerable, because I was ready to take their lives in exchange for the Rathian I'd lost.

But getting to bound after monsters and even occasionally lose them because they successfully flee off the map or outmaneuver you on the terrain is half the fun. It's the joy of knowing that the hunt might not always be successful, and the pride and celebrating when one is.

You also have the ability to harvest raw meat from certain monsters and spit-roast it over a fire, with different degrees of done-ness having different perks. Eating what you hunt is never not a plus for me.

But the benefits don't just stop with the hunting or trapping of the big, scary monsters: Monster Hunter is filled with a variety of different small insects, mammals, reptile, amphibians, birds, and fish to catch or kill as you please. These creatures are affected by the game's day/night cycle and different weather effects, so it's been a real treat to get to sniff around and discover them all. Chasing after the squirrel-esque creatures and netting the birds is more of a treat for the "stalk," and "chase" parts of my drive than the "kill" part, but it's deeply satisfying in its own right. The only downside is that spawn areas for creatures are pre-determined, so once you know where everything small is, there's no turning back to the days of being presently surprised by the geckos or fish you stumble across out in the wild.

There's also a certain sense of kinship with the large creatures in Monster Hunter World that I just don't feel in Skyrim: even though Skyrim has its fair share of non-human NPCs, filled with lizard-people, cat-people (both humanoid and feline),

ghosts, vampires, and werewolves, the only people I tend to feel any strong connection to on a nonhuman front are the followers of Hircine and the god himself. Which is a very small number of characters overall, when you put the whole open world factor into perspective.

Meanwhile with Monster Hunter World, I can see parts of my own instincts in the animals I hunt and track. Even the way some of them move when defensive or hurt is a reflection of my own phantom limbs' tendencies. It makes me sympathize and relate to the animals in a certain way, though not enough to make me feel emotionally invested in not engaging them in combat. But it helps my brain unwind and let loose, not being so caught up in the human decorum that I try to keep up consistently and that I, to some degree, mask with unconsciously.

I've tried other games that involve hunting wildlife, but none of them have quite hit all the points for me in the same way Skyrim and Monster Hunter do. Slime Rancher's exploration and mechanics with catching slimes is fun in a similar way, but I can't (and don't want to) injure any of the purposefully lovable critters. theHunter: Call of the Wild was fun, but being a human in it felt limiting in a way that put me off of it. Dead by Daylight I struggle with because of its multiplayer focus and how much of an absolute n00b I am at it. And the Witcher series is slow going, since I'm starting from the first game, so it's more for the story than for any nonhuman benefit at the point I'm currently at. These games are all objectively good and I certainly enjoy them, but when my inner instincts are screeching at me, they just don't make the cut.

I'm lucky in that I've found these ways to blow off steam, especially during a pandemic that makes it difficult to explore my other options. Keeping my instincts under control isn't the easiest thing to do and I'm constantly on the lookout for ways to improve my enrichment methods, but I'm at a good place right now and I'm grateful for what I've found that works for me.