

Stories from the Seats of Power: Chopper versus Chopper as Deuling Travelogues

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A Tale of Two (Liberty) Cities

Player 1:

As I spawn on my rascal of a street bike, leather jacket and helmet strictly for show, the familiar text – “Get to the checkpoints, and avoid the pursuer” – seems ridiculous for what it obscures. The corner HUD map has yet to highlight my shortest route, but I immediately hit the gas and scream up a small incline straight ahead, quickly working my neon green Bati 800 through its gears. You need to be a little lucky to reach any checkpoints at all.

Player 2:

There he is. I can already see him across the city. His avatar’s neon-orange halo makes him impossible to miss from miles away. I gently tip the helicopter forward as its spinning blades make short work of the distance between us. I remain perched at a high altitude. From here, I can see where his motorcycle is headed, and try to anticipate any obstacles that he’ll put between himself and the twin miniguns mounted beneath my aptly named Annihilator helicopter. I make a beeline to his orange halo as his marker zigzags from one block to the next.

Player 1:

Now the yellow line appears and tells me I guessed wrong; I hit the emergency brake, swerve hard left and slam into a protesting, foul-mouthed pedestrian, and then a brick facade with scaffolding, ingloriously tumbling

off my ride. This bike's torque turns pavement into ice.

Player 2:

And now his marker has stopped. I can't tell whether he's had an accident, if he's stuck in traffic, or if he's luring me into a trap. My Annihilator is fast and powerful, but its size and momentum makes it susceptible to the city's innumerable architectural elements. Nothing can destroy my gunship. However, billboards, traffic lights, and elevated roads can stop me from stopping him. He scores a point with each checkpoint he crosses. But if I time my approach right, he will not cross the first one.

Player 1:

Remounting, I again push the tiny vehicle to top speed, taking a multitude of wide turns, past warehouses weathered by salt in the air, under power lines and stoplights black against the twilight, and toward an immense silhouette of the suspension bridge that will bring me into the city. By now, he's probably very close indeed, maybe setting up for his first shot. One last hard corner, and I'm roaring up the freeway entrance ramp.

Player 2:

I'm closing in on him. It's still early in the round, so there's no need to announce my arrival with premature gunfire. He is traveling from one of Liberty City's boroughs to another by way of a four-lane bridge. This will be my point of attack. Once he commits to this route, I drop the Annihilator down and sweep wide to out flank him. If I execute my move correctly, I'll connect with him as he turns on the bridge's elbow. My arrogance dissuades me from using my guns. I do not want to shoot him; I want to crush him with my helicopter. I drop from the sky like a celestial hammer, punctuating my sudden appearance with a dignified "AHHHHHHH!"

Player 1:

About a hundred feet over the water, my wheels dance among the dense bridge traffic, flirting with the concrete divider. The world blurs as I tear

through the vulnerable rush hour commuters, all apparently oblivious to the immanent threat dangling above us all. I sense rather than see an enormous plunging black mass. I slam on the brakes, and my pursuer plops down ahead of me like a skydiving orca without a parachute, crushing three unsuspecting motorists.

Player 2:

My dramatic belly-flop maneuver misses his bike, but not the adjacent traffic. Nearby cars explode into flames while others are flung off the bridge like ragdolls. As my Annihilator flails about on the blacktop like a mechanical beached whale, I catch a glimpse of the biker careening around the bridge's metal wreckage. He sails through the tollbooth. And though it remains invisible to me, I know that he must be closing in on the first checkpoint.

Player 1:

Weaving sneakily past the deadly (if momentarily grounded) churning rotors, ignoring the chorus of terrified screams, I urge my bike through the sparking carnage. Knowing that my odds have dramatically improved, I tense up a bit – you don't want to make any mistakes if you manage to survive the initial assault. Engine at full-bore, I zip along the highway with a high-pitched whine, for the first time paying attention to where the checkpoint might be. Skyscrapers tower in my field of view, and I allow myself a moment to appreciate the enormity of downtown Liberty City.

Player 2:

The Annihilator is agonizingly slow to right itself. Its blades clip the tollbooth and grind against lampposts. While I struggle to recover from my failed strike, the biker puts more distance between us. Despite his narrow escape, he has not returned to the relative safety of the city blocks – not yet. Having righted the bulky black bird, I push the helicopter forward, firing short bursts at my target. From this distance, I might get lucky and knock him off his bike, or cause a nearby car to

sideswipe him. But he and I know that these shots are mostly for show. I'm taunting him, daring him to tempt fate again.

Player 1:

Distant mechanical rattling echoes give way to intense, momentary tremors. Metallic shells rend the earth around me, splashing me with fiery pavement. Somehow maintaining my balance, I rocket toward the exit ramp, and see that the checkpoint is a few short blocks away. I make no decisions about which turns to take; if I don't know exactly where I'm going, neither does he.

Player 2:

With my helicopter now paralleling the roadway, I line up my crosshairs on the nimble biker. I take a few casual potshots, kicking up asphalt and ripping apart the roadway's concrete divider. He hasn't taken any direct damage, but the indiscriminate destruction is cluttering his escape route. He is forced to slow down to negotiate a tight space between two wrecked cars. And that's when it happens.

Player 1:

Wincing in anticipation, I prepare to jump the exit ramp's retaining wall, but the charred hull of a mid-'70's sedan inconveniently slides across the lane and forces an evasion. It's an earthquake of heat and noise all around me. There's a sinking feeling in my stomach as the motorcycle skids to a near-stop, and I briefly consider abandoning it. Now I'm picturing myself sprinting to the wall, leaping over it, and hustling through the tree-lined park on foot, all the way to the yellow-and-black-checkered goal. Of course, I won't ever get the chance.

Player 2:

I lay off the guns and drive the Annihilator down. It strikes the road with a sickening thud. The cars around me ignite instantly. I see the biker frozen in time and space, paralyzed amongst the wreckage. This is when

one of my blades catches his torso and flings his summersaulting body into the evening void. My screen fades to gray.

Player 1:

The sports car-turned-fireball throws me up and back from the seat, doubled over, hands and feet out front of me, my body concave to the street. I might have flown fifty feet backwards if the blades hadn't caught me; I might even have survived. Instead, they strike the rear panel of my leather jacket squarely and bend me convex. Like a batted ball I instantly reverse direction, which is how I go flying across the park – five, ten stories up – lazily twirling over the autumn trees at sunset.

Player 2:

My opponent's sudden death is accompanied by a discordant sound – his howling laughter. This is not our first match, and it will not be our last. The game reorients my point of view, and the roles are reversed. I am now sitting on a motorcycle lost somewhere in the city. It's now my turn to get through the checkpoints. I should get going. After all, somewhere nearby there is an indestructible helicopter bent on my destruction. And I am sitting here with a bright orange target on my back.



Figure 1: Player 2 chases Player 1 in “Chopper vs. Chopper.”

“It was the best of choppers, it was the worst of choppers”

“Chopper versus Chopper” (CvC) is one of several multiplayer games packaged with “The Lost and Damned” downloadable expansion pack for the 2008 multiplatform action-adventure game, Grand Theft Auto IV (GTA IV). A critical and commercial success, GTA IV built on the design formula that has characterized the series: open-world gameplay, urban spaces teeming with colorful citizens and vehicles, and a rags-to-riches story that allows players to make narrative choices that determine the game’s outcome. But unlike its predecessors, GTA IV was the first to feature multiplayer gameplay. The core game came equipped with a suite of modes, including “team deathmatch,” car races (both armed and unarmed varieties), and cooperative missions, among others.

GTA IV’s two expansion packs – “The Lost and the Damned” and “The Ballad of Gay Tony” – allowed players to revisit the game’s NYC-inspired locale, Liberty City, through the eyes of different protagonists. These add-ons also introduced new multiplayer modes, including “Chopper versus Chopper” (CvC).

At first blush, CvC can be an underwhelming experience. This is especially the case when the game is viewed alongside the random, free-flowing violence of “Free Mode” or the frenetic, Mad Max-like armed road battles of “GTA Race.” For one, the number of competitors is dramatically reduced. In lieu of competing hit squads, only two players inhabit this world. And these two players are not offered a wealth of in-game options. One player begins on a bike, and the other one in a helicopter. The former chooses the best route to the map’s checkpoints, while the latter works to eliminate their competition. But CvC is not any less of a game mode because of its restrictions; it is a more compelling experience because of them.

CvC's rules distill GTA's synthetic boroughs filled with scheming, player-controlled would-be mobsters and hapless non-player characters into a singularly focused affair between two combatants. Notably gone are multitudes of players vying for first, second, or third place in some road race. Gone are the solipsistic snipers that take opportunistic shots as you scramble to find cover. And gone are the rocket-propelled grenades that make short work of your team's get-away car. More subtly, though no less importantly, absent is any context for the conflict. The pilot is not urgently preventing a briefcase handoff; the biker has no drug kingpin to identify. There is no justifying backstory, no narrative excuse required, and what remains is the sheer exuberance of the toys and map.

To be clear, it's not as if the "kill or be killed" logic that undergirds the vast majority of AAA games or even GTA's other multiplayer modes is absent here. Indeed, in alternating rounds, one player is tasked with eliminating the other in spectacularly violent fashion. CvC is likewise not alone in gifting a single player with different game assets (e.g., weapons, armor, vehicles, information) from others to create unique gameplay dynamics. But CvC regulates considerably the terms of its contest, and in doing so presents its two players with dramatically alternating perspectives of this sandbox style city – one from a cockpit above, and one from a leather seat below – that showcase this mode's elementary but essential brilliance.

The alternating perspectives of CvC accomplish elegantly what few other video games are capable of doing. The game establishes competitive gameplay balance by presenting two players with wildly differing perspectival, spatial, and gameplay resources. That is, whereas most competitive games create parity via a series of equivalences – literally staging an "even playing field" – where each side is granted balanced abilities and resources, CvC is an exercise in ludic dissimilarity. For example, the Annihilator pilot can rain down hundreds upon hun-

dreds of bullets in endless waves on the vulnerable motorcyclist. The agile biker's primary strength (such as it is) is her maneuverability. By jetting between the shadows of the city's buildings and overpasses, the biker hopes to force her opponent to guide their bulky and unwieldy gunship through a thicket of urban architecture, occupying them long enough so the biker can score an elusive point. Both choppers must time their approaches with the other player and the city in mind. Can the biker risk prolonged exposure on the open bridge? Should the pilot hang back and assume a better firing position, allowing the biker the time to score another point? Even the title's wordplay gestures at the false equivalences of this urban battlefield. That is, while "chopper" is a recognized nickname for both vehicles, at no point does the game feature two competing helicopters or motorcycles (1).

Clearly, the helicopter's spatial freedom – its ability to play in three dimensions – grants it substantial advantage over the earthbound motorbike. But it is the Annihilator's indestructibility, the mode's most overt suspension of physical reality, which mercifully guarantees that the predator vs. prey calculus neither approaches true gameplay parity nor earthly realism. (To be sure, the biker who crosses multiple checkpoints during any single round has beaten long odds). Striking this unique imbalance between combatants ensures that the mode is understood as a fantastic game and not some horrific simulation (i.e., this "cat and mouse" game mode is the obvious by-product of GTA's sandbox world; it bears no connection to GTA's gritty narrative or its attendant physics). This is a gamble and sacrifice that pays off; the invincible pilot and the nearly powerless biker experience heightened emotional states as a result of this radical inequality (2). While the "choppers" literally move the players around Liberty City, the disparate manner in which they do so makes them affective transports, too. The roles and attendant machines impart dispositions to gamers traveling through the city either the proud and haughty Annihilator pilot, or the terrified and wily biker, thus "moving" the players emotionally.

In this manner, the revolving rounds of “hunt or be hunted” gameplay allow players to see and traverse Liberty City’s space and physics in diametrically opposed ways. And with a change in the player’s position and abilities comes a change in gameplay strategies (e.g., the biker’s utilization of evasive maneuvers, the pilot’s strategic use of firepower, etc.). Functionally speaking, this amounts to little more than moving from offense to defense. One player is the under-equipped scorer, the other player is the overpowered goalie. But oscillating from one vehicle to another generates a wellspring of gaming pleasure because CvC also presents its gamers with competing modes of experiencing and knowing Liberty City’s complex environments and spaces. In other words, built into these alternating perspectives of biker-pilot-biker-pilot are competing experiential and epistemological frameworks. The Liberty City you zip through as the biker is not the same city you surveil and assault as the helicopter pilot. The same skyscrapers that shielded you from gunfire last round are now making it impossible for you to eliminate your competition. With each round, the city transforms from offering contextual affordances to liabilities.

The pleasure of any one round’s situated knowledge is reinforced and amplified by the mode’s other prevailing pleasure: imagining your opponent’s point of view. CvC’s ludic alterity is born out of the identity swapping between the “choppers.” The game designers are not blind to this fact. Indeed, when the helicopter closes on her prey, the biker is momentarily gifted (with the press of a button) with the ability to see the world from her opponent’s vantage point (note: there is no similar ability for the pilot since the biker’s location is perpetually announced with the several stories-high neon orange marker that is affixed to that avatar). This new point of view typically assists the biker in escaping the nearby Annihilator. However, if the players are chatting with one another, the pilot can tell the biker to switch to that optional view to witness their demise from the pilot’s cockpit, perversely turning the biker’s asset into a de facto “kill cam.” Let us return to the scene of the crime on the decimated causeway. That

particular altercation was the finale of but one of many, many rounds. It also marked the end of two emergent stories that had, only moments before, started as separate Liberty City narratives. The collision of the biker and the pilot's strategies and choices on the bridge is likewise a narrative confrontation. But unlike a cinematic chase scene that reveals space and distance through careful editing choices, CvC players must imagine the other player's storyline and choices before they find one another. And therein lies a great deal of the game's holding power.

This interplay of distinct but interconnected narratives, incited by a simple gameplay mechanism and set against a stunningly complex backdrop, constitutes a more direct, visceral, and – indeed – intimate communication than many other competitive gaming modes. The focused interplay between radically different chopper experiences of the same virtual space and series of events has interesting educational possibilities. Imagine how players might think about personal, historical, and fictional narratives and discourses if they could experience a space and/or event from oppositional viewpoints with oppositional agendas. This simple game construct enables a rapid-fire exploration of competing worldviews with quick entries and stunning exits.

Moreover, instead of growing increasingly tiresome, the simple CvC setup grows richer with each round. But why? The mode's holding power is partly due to the enormity of the city map which takes time to master. It is also owed to the city's randomly spawning denizens and traffic patterns, which create new surprises with each replay. But the strongest attraction of CvC is predicated on the players' ability to contribute to their emergent two-player narrative (with all the attendant pleasures and obligations) and the situated knowledge of traversing an expansive space with radically different transports and conflicting *modi operandi*. The magic of CvC hinges on its transformation of a simple but satisfying gameplay dialectic into the promise of as-yet unwritten but memorable stories of narrow escapes and destructive collisions. That

is, the mode's ludic alchemy converts violent spectacle into an ongoing narrative of violence. And while the game's basic scoring mechanic of one point per checkpoint baits the biker out of the shadows and into the vulnerable night despite the comically overwhelming odds set against him, it is the mode's emergent and intertwined narratives and points of view – it is the pitting of one Liberty City tale against another, told by Player One to Player Two and back – that promises that the potential reward is well worth the risk and keeps gamers engaged round, after round, after round.

Endnotes

(1) CvC differs greatly from standard “capture the flag” constructs where players temporarily enjoy different abilities or powers. Take, for example, the popular Oddball gameplay mode in the Halo series. A multiplayer variety of “cat and mouse” with shifting roles, Oddball grants points to a player in possession of a skull, simultaneously altering their offensive capabilities. Yet CvC departs from this more popular formula by locating its players in radically different relationships to the game space, and by amplifying its combatants tremendously uneven odds. These design choices result in a substantive narrative reset after every kill.

(2) At some point over the course of dozens if not hundreds of such engagements, the biker will find himself on foot and at an even greater disadvantage. Having been knocked off his motorcycle, the biker faces the hovering Annihilator. Mostly in jest, he will pull out his pistol, and wildly fire at the helicopter's tiny window. Both players delight and rejoice in the discovery that the bike-less biker can actually wound the pilot sitting in the indestructible helicopter.

References

Figure 1. Image captured from GTA Multiplayer.pl: <http://gtamultiplayer.pl/en/tlad/multiplayer/>