

MOVING VIOLATIONS

Grand Theft Auto is the videogame series notorious for allowing you to hire a prostitute and then kill her and get your money back. The recently released *Grand Theft Auto IV* garnered almost unanimous critical praise and broke entertainment industry records by taking in over \$500 million in its first week (outgrossing any Hollywood movie release), helped perhaps by familiar media accusations of immorality. The opportunity to shoot cops, run over pedestrians, and bludgeon passersby with a baseball bat no doubt attracts players, but the game's pleasures go beyond bloodlust. What makes this series so gripping is not that it requires you to perform extremes of ultra-violence, but that it offers an immense, open-ended environment where such actions are possible. *GTA IV* allows for more innocent and even banal pleasures too: cruising through the city listening to the radio, people-watching on a busy street corner, bowling with friends, surfing the Web. Harshly criticized for its social irresponsibility, *GTA IV* in fact encourages players to spend substantial amounts of time nurturing social relationships. And *GTA IV* has a remarkable capacity for making players queasy with emotions rarely touched by videogames—remorse, melancholy, and self-doubt. Violence is only one element in the equation: the experience of the game is fascinating because you can spontaneously jump between different modes of play.

You take the role of Niko Bellic, an immigrant from Eastern Europe haunted by the unspeakable things he has seen and done in his war-torn homeland. Niko arrives in Liberty City (a fictional stand-in for New York) to start a new life. But he soon finds himself working his way through the criminal underworld doing jobs for various gangland bosses. Playing the game, you can follow the goal-oriented progression of these jobs or missions, or you can ignore them and strike out on your own. The staggeringly detailed city—changing weather and traffic patterns, pedestrians dashing out of the rain with newspapers over their heads, cabbies flicking cigarette butts out their windows—provides a vast “sandbox” for unstructured, nonlinear gameplay. You can wander around the streets stealing any car you see and mugging any person you encounter. But you can also hire a cab to tour the city, take your girlfriend out for a game of pool, check your email (including spam) at an Internet café, or

even just stay home and watch TV. Playing *GTA IV* is designed to encourage wild improvisation, with spur-of-the-moment shifts between the rise-of-an-immigrant-gangster narrative and its disruption by infinite digressions: “What happens if I do *this*?”

In a game world where every person, object, and location presents an opportunity for some sort of illicit interaction, players relish the dark absurdity of their criminal potential as much as the crimes in themselves. Resourceful players discover that if you are stranded in a deserted part of the city with no means of transportation, you can dial 911 on your cell phone and then carjack the ambulance that arrives to rescue you. Scenarios like this are not built into the missions, nor could the game developers have predicted all the ways that people might play the game. Rather, *GTA IV* spurs players to test the system's technical and ethical boundaries and to create their own goals. Thus players can devote themselves to discovering spectacular suicidal stunt jumps, or to shooting anyone who litters.

With such freedom, what you actually choose to do in *GTA IV* takes on more significance. The potential for impromptu brutality is latent even in mundane situations—you can just as soon beat a street vendor to death as buy a hotdog from him. But these violent acts are not imbued with any sense of dramatic tension. They unfold casually like a series of non sequiturs: pick up your date, mow down a homeless person, walk into a bar. The juxtapositions are disconcerting. Unlike in other bloody videogames, there is no valor in *GTA IV*'s combat. You are not a war hero saving the human race from aliens, but a thug as corrupt as the ones you are hired to kill. Most players will find that their transgressive kicks are always edged with unease. Because the game allows but does not prescribe behavior, the issue of accountability is always present. Consequences are not predictable and what you find yourself doing may disturb you. Killing the driver of a car will cause her to slump over the wheel so that the horn blares in a continuous wail. If a random bystander is shot in the leg during your no-holds-barred killing spree, he doubles over and crawls away in agony. There are more human details and fewer eruptions of blood in *GTA IV* than in previous versions, so the violence can feel painful and wretched rather than uninhibited and exhilarating.

The moral landscape of the game is further complicated by the friendships and romances that you are required to cultivate, a gameplay dynamic familiar from such games as *The*



Violence alternates with networking

Grand Theft Auto IV. © 2006—2008 Rockstar Games Inc.

Sims but new to *GTA IV*. Not only do you spend a lot of time hanging out with various characters—drinking, eating, playing darts and pool, visiting cabaret bars and strip clubs—you also have to return their text messages and emails. While free-roaming the city, you must constantly attend to social obligations and respond to cues. Within the game’s strange logic, you can run down people on the street with impunity, but you will be punished for ignoring a phone call from your cousin.

Like certain other screen mafiosi (a homophonous recent example is Viggo Mortensen’s character Nikolai in *Eastern Promises*), Niko derives no joy from the dirty work. In a substantial departure from previous versions of the game, the *GTA IV* protagonist is troubled by his crimes. He is as interested in redemption as in money and power and it is notable that he moves more slowly than the former protagonists. Although it might frustrate many gamers’ desire for breakneck maneuverability, this subtle adjustment in pacing uses gameplay to enrich characterization. It is as if Niko were weighed down by a moral exhaustion that may transfer also to players. Should Niko betray a close but not very useful friend to gain cash and status? Execute a black drug dealer who has been hypocritically branded a dangerous criminal by a crooked white cop? Every decision to take or spare a life has consequences in how the story unfolds—how characters respond to you, what sections of

the game are accessible—but the game never affirms whether a choice is right or wrong. Thus *GTA IV* sometimes takes on the quality of an ambiguous morality tale, but although moral reflection is encouraged by the game, it does not dominate. Niko’s lamentation over the atrocities he has witnessed and committed—“The creature that could do this . . . doesn’t have a soul”—are tinged with irony and they need not stop players from enjoying the game’s most bloody amusements.

The gameplay additionally undercuts its reputation for mindless violence by creating an extensive media environment which you can access at almost any point. Information and entertainment stream throughout the game such that, overall, it is more accurate to describe *GTA IV* as a form of creative multitasking than an extended rampage fantasy. In Liberty City, you switch between traditional action and media consumption that includes in-game TV news, talk radio, reality shows, dating websites, and email. *GTA IV* understands that fictional violence offers only a limited kind of pleasure and so it offers something more gratifying: to be able to steal, kill, and cause general havoc while also scanning billboard ads, flipping radio stations, and talking on your cellphone.

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