The moral code of
Grand Theft Auto IV

There is more to violent videogames than most people think, writes **Benjamin Hourigan**.

Want to steal cars and shoot cops?

Then *Grand Theft Auto IV* (*GTA IV*) is the videogame for you. You won't be the only one playing it: released for the Microsoft Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3 in April this year, it's **the** game of 2008. In its first week, it sold over 6,000,000 copies worldwide, worth more than US$500 million. (By contrast, the final film in the *Pirates of Caribbean* trilogy made US$400 million in its first six days at the box office.) *GTA IV* is the latest instalment in a series that has become one of the biggest brands in videogaming, a form of entertainment that looks to eclipse Hollywood's cultural and economic influence. The game is also a major instance of what some see as the depravity of modern popular culture. But more than anything else, *GTA IV* is an exploration of extreme moral dilemmas, and—provided that players can understand the game as an exercise in taking responsibility for their actions—its lashings of sex and ultra-violence are valuable causes for introspection.

Since the release of *Grand Theft Auto III* for PlayStation 2 in 2001, the series has been famous for its interactive depiction of the world of organised crime. *GTA III* caused a storm because the main character could solicit prostitutes and then kill them. The later game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* created major controversy in the US when hackers found a way to unlock a sex minigame known as 'Hot Coffee,' which the series' developers, Rockstar Games, had intended to cut. More recently, Rockstar's *Canis Canem Edit* [*Dog Eat Dog*], known as *Bully* in the US, has come under fire for supposedly promoting school bullying. People who don't play videogames usually believe that *GTA IV*, like its predecessors, is designed to let players revel in committing acts of criminality and violence. The fear, for some, is that the game will encourage people—particularly young men—to become violent criminals in the real world.

But as Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson, cofounders and directors of the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media, write in *Grand Theft Childhood*, this fear is unfounded:

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Video game popularity and real-world youth violence have been moving in opposite directions. Violent juvenile crime in the United States reached a peak in 1993 and has been declining ever since. School violence has also gone down. Between 1994 and 2001, arrests for murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assaults fell 44 per cent.

This fact—violent crime rates have been going down as videogame sales have been going up—is one that videogame players keen to defend their hobby (and themselves) have long been aware of. But there's no stopping journalists trying to stir up community fears. In the *Los Angeles Times* the day after *GTA IV*'s release, Tim Rutten wrote: 'what *Grand Theft Auto IV* affirms is the pleasure of eschewing decency for obnoxious violence.' He went on to call it 'a work of genius … in the service of nothing more than sensation and profit.' To see whether it is really that simple, we need to take a closer look at the game's content.

GTA IV includes a complex story that moves through an imagined world of American organised crime. Though you can put the story on hold and just go for a drive (maybe testing the cops' response to your mowing down of pedestrians on the sidewalk rather than driving on the street), there's always a set of missions ready to move the narrative along when you feel like it.

The hero is Niko Bellic, a former teen soldier and witness to wartime atrocities in Eastern Europe, now a middle-aged merchant seaman and petty criminal. After falling in with the wrong crowd in his home country, he's come to Liberty City (the game's setting, modelled on modern-day New York) to join his gambling-addicted taxi-driver cousin in the pursuit of the American dream, and to hunt down two men that betrayed him in a war many years ago.

Wanting to gauge how accurate the perceptions of *GTA IV*'s depravity were, I made detailed notes on my first two hours of play. The game rationalises most of Niko's actions as favours done for others, and in the beginning you'll just be giving people rides in his cousin Roman's taxi. It was forty-three minutes before I had committed my first violent act, accidentally running over a pedestrian while helping Roman flee from loan sharks. Five minutes later, I saw Niko break a loan shark's arm in a non-interactive story scene. Then at around the ninety-minute mark, Niko (under my control) beat the loan sharks' ringleader to death after a long car chase.

Two deaths in ninety minutes is startlingly low for a videogame. In *Ratchet & Clank: Tools of Destruction*, a PlayStation

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3 game featuring a furry alien hero and clearly aimed at a junior audience, you would easily kill over a hundred cartoony enemies in the same timeframe. The outrage and moral concern that GTA inspires comes not from the quantity of its violence, but from its disturbing and graphic quality. Later, Niko executes a petty underworld thug, Vlad, who has been terrorising Niko's friends and acquaintances. Vlad goes down with a fountain of blood gushing from a bullet hole in his eye. By contrast, the slaughtered hordes of *Ratchet & Clank* explode in clouds of family-friendly glowing cogs and bolts.

As you play, Niko descends into a world ruled by drug-addled crime bosses, where killing is a routine transaction. But as the player, you must still continually decide for Niko what is right and wrong. When Vlad sends you to kill a man because he is going to rob Roman, you may decide that Vlad is just trying to manipulate you into rubbing out someone he doesn't like, and let Ivan go. But later, when you feel that cocaine-addicted Mikhail Faustin's call for a hit on a man named Lenny is just the drugs talking, you may change your mind when Lenny's accomplice opens fire on you at the slightest provocation, and decide that if he wanted you dead, then he deserves to die himself.

Niko has a strong sense of what it is to be moral in his own world. He is self-deprecating and polite, quite unlike his cowardly braggart of a cousin, who is forever babbling misogynistic curses. On dates, Niko treats his women with respect and gentle curiosity. He's the guy you can count on to hurt someone if they hurt you, but he doesn't seek trouble or cause others pain for his own amusement. It's a matter, perhaps, of honour amongst thugs. Like Robin Hood, Niko is the sort of man who in better times might have been a military hero, but who circumstance has put on the wrong side of the law. Since he does not glory in

violence, it is not implied that the player should do so, either. *GTA IV* makes a life of crime look horrific, not desirable.

But the story is only half the picture. Among videogame aficionados, the *Grand Theft Auto* series is known as one of the prime examples of 'sandbox' gaming. Like a sandbox for children, *GTA IV* facilitates unstructured play. The difference is that instead of sand, buckets, spades, and water, players have as their material cars, fists, weapons, buildings, and people. Players of *GTA IV* can use the material at hand to revel in wanton violence and criminality, but they don't have to. People who haven't played the game often don't realise that in *GTA IV*, as in the real world, the purpose of a car, a driver, and a pedestrian can be a carjacking or a hit-and-run killing, but it can also be a taxi ride. This adds a moral dimension to the game. For Aristotle (and for most Westerners thereafter), to be morally responsible for something, you must have caused it and you must have been able to do otherwise. So, where *GTA IV* gives players an option to indulge in violence but does not compel them to do so, players are morally responsible for their wrongdoing.

But what kind of moral responsibility could you have for actions carried out in a game, which have no lasting consequences? A violent death in the game causes no suffering, so where could be the wrong in it?

Let's imagine that you get home and sit down to play *GTA IV* for some entertainment and relaxation. Thinking about the possibilities, you decide that what you'd really like to do is carjack a sports car at an intersection, and then cruise down to the industrial precinct to pick up a prostitute. You'll drive off to have sex with her in a park, set her on fire with a Molotov cocktail as she walks away from the car, then look on while she dies a gruesome, fiery death.

This is all possible. But there is

something at least distasteful about being the sort of person who would do this for entertainment—even in a videogame. Would you let your grandmother sit on the couch next to you and watch you set prostitutes on fire? Psychologically healthy individuals will feel uncomfortable about having others know they had done these things for fun, even in a virtual world.

When we understand this, we can see *GTA IV* as—among other things—a tool for exploring the limits of our morality when the consequences are limited, and learning what our consciences dictate in situations where we will not be punished for doing wrong.

Criticising Rockstar for allowing players to create the above prostitute-on-fire scenario ignores that one of the tenets of good game design is to make objects behave consistently.

It is the major element of what makes *GTA IV* fun and successful. As fire burns the flesh of villains, so it burns the flesh of innocents.

Tragically, this is the way the real world works, and we should not imagine artists (and videogame developers *are* artists) have a moral duty to sanitise the world their work reflects. They may go beyond reflection, to encapsulate some aspiration or paint some model of perfect human character, but we cannot blame them for showing us the truth.

If there is blame to be laid here, it should rest on the shoulders of those who use *GTA IV*'s sandbox to take pleasure in the simulated suffering of others. It remains concerning that *GTA IV* is part of a wider popular culture that sees violence as a spectacle. Unlike Hollywood action cinema, though, videogames of this kind give players a measure of responsibility for events. As such, they are valuable tools for exploring our moral responses to the unpalatable sides of our society and our popular culture.

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