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 - Search Metroland.Net
- › Classifieds
 - View Classified Ads
 - Place a Classified Ad
- › Personals
 - Online Personals
 - Place A Print Ad
- › Columns & Opinions
 - Comment
 - Looking Up
 - Reckonings
 - Opinion
 - Letters
 - Rapp On This
- › News & Features
 - Newsfront
 - Features
 - What a Week
 - Loose Ends
- › Lifestyles
 - This Week's Review
 - The Dining Guide
 - Leftovers
 - Scenery
 - Tech Life
- › Cinema & Video
 - Weekly Reviews
 - The Movie Schedule
- › Music
 - Listen Here
 - Live
 - Recordings
 - Noteworthy
- › Arts
 - Theater
 - Dance
 - Art
 - Classical
 - Books
 - Art Murmur
- › Calendar
 - Night & Day
 - Event Listings
- › AccuWeather
 - Enter ZIP Code or City, State:
 -
 -
- › About Metroland
 - Where We Are
 - Who We Are
 - What We Do
 - Work For Us
 - Place An Ad

FEATURE

The Great AmericanVideo Game

Grand Theft Auto IV offers violence, redemption, romance—and wide-ranging satire of American pop culture By David King



"You aren't going to hell when you die!" is the first sound that greets Niko Bellic, a recent arrival to the great Liberty City, as he strolls out of his Broker apartment into the early morning light. A ranting homeless man stumbles back and forth across the street from Bellic's humble tenement, preaching to no one in particular. "You are already in hell," the homeless man continues as Niko makes preparations to start his day's work. Bellic approaches a blue sedan. Could be a Nissan Maxima, a Toyota Camry or some sort of Subaru, but the car is labeled "Pinnacle," and in this case the model does not really matter. Bellic has places to be, things to do. His cell phone is already ringing out of his pocket. His cousin, Roman, the proprietor of a run-down taxi company, wants to go to the strip club. Bellic's girlfriend, Kiki, texts him, saying that she wants to see him—"xo xo." And a client, Packy McReary, would like him to swing by his house to talk some business. But before Bellic can accomplish anything, he needs transportation.

"I just want your car," Bellic declares in a thick Eastern European accent as he drags a yelping young professional from behind the wheel of his sedan. In a flash Bellic kicks the sedan into reverse, leaving the presumed owner rolling out of the way of the car's wheels. Bellic recklessly backs the car up onto the sidewalk, sending the homeless man diving for cover, and then Bellic is off, headed out to face the day. And to think it was only a few weeks ago that Niko arrived in the Liberty City harbor on a cargo ship, greeted by that towering green lady—the statue of Liber . . . er, the Statue of Happiness.

Welcome to the world of Grand Theft Auto IV, the story of an Eastern European immigrant's struggle to find wealth, relevance, and revenge in the greatest city in the world. GTA IV also happens to be the greatest and most culturally relevant video game of all time.

In its first week of release, GTA IV sold more than 6 million copies at anywhere from \$59.99 to \$89.99 a pop, garnering more than \$500 million in sales. And while it is easy to assume that what people were buying when they picked up their copy was just the latest cutting-edge piece of video-game violence, what they actually took home, whether they cared or not, is something much more complicated, and much more nuanced.

No, seriously, for the sake of this article, suspend your disbelief, not so you can believe in the story of GTA IV's protagonist, an Eastern European lured to New Yo . . . er, Liberty City with the promise of women and money by his schlub of a cousin Roman, only to fall into a life of violent crime. No—suspend your skepticism in order to believe that GTA IV is more than just a video game, more than just its loose narrative. Because actually, the game is a meticulously nuanced satire of modern American culture.

Pop-culture guru and author Dominic Patten says that GTA IV is comparable to one of the classic satires of all time, Gaius Petronius' *Satyricon*. "What we see in the *Satyricon* are encapsulations of the swath of the Roman Empire—its decadence, pomposity—in jokes, wretchedness, horror and glory, and that is what we really see in Grand Theft Auto. It is a fantastically complex game that plays out on many levels, and not just with your score. It is not just a technological triumph but an artistic triumph."

Like the *Satyricon* or more modern satires like *Fight Club* or *Dr. Strangelove*, GTA takes a dark, mocking look at the time and place it is deconstructing. But unlike the films, the game allows the audience to make moral choices, to fully explore the city and culture being satirized, and to discover all the connections and alliances that make the great city's underbelly live.

When Bellic flips on Liberty City TV, he finds a variety of familiar programming, such as Weasel News, which offers programming suspiciously reminiscent of Fox News, *Vinewood Cunts* (perhaps a nod to *Desperate Housewives* or some reality TV show I am unfamiliar with), and *Republican Space Rangers*, a cartoon featuring a group of space marines dressed like Master Chief from Bungie's ultra-successful Halo video game and spewing rhetoric about killing aliens before they invade the nation. The Weasel News department gleefully trumpets its coverage of people on fire: During one spot, a reporter in a helicopter tells a man who is fully engulfed in flames that he is on live television and should turn and face the camera.

If Bellic is in the mood for something a bit more educational, he can turn on the public-television station that features a mock version of Ric Burns' (Ken Burns' brother) *New York: a Documentary Film*, which boringly details the birth and evolution of Liberty City. Another show, called *The Men's Room*, features real-life mixed-martial-artist Bas Rutten, who gained notoriety for his unintentionally hysterical self-defense videos when they were posted on YouTube, joined by effeminate Liberty City celebrity and self-help guru Jeremy St. Ives. St. Ives recommends that Rutten try some aroma therapy, to which the amped-up Rutten responds, "The only thing I want to smell is the smell of

burning flesh!"

While driving around the city, Bellic can soothe his ears with Liberty City's great selection of radio programming, including Radio Broker. Broker is Liberty City's thinly veiled version of Brooklyn, and Radio Broker plays all the latest indie/electro hits, and has radio spots that declare their products perfect for any guy who has ever kissed another man or has worn a pair of women's jeans.

There are also Liberty City versions of National Public Radio, conservative talk, hip-hop and numerous other formats. All of GTA's music stations are filled with tracks from real artists who represent an array of genres. Some of the music has been altered by the artists themselves to focus on Liberty City. And most of the stations are hosted by musicians and celebrities like Juliette Lewis and Iggy Pop.

When Bellic decides it is time to visit one of Liberty City's Internet cafés, he can hop on TW@ (pronounced twat), the in-game Internet, which is fully populated with Liberty City's interactive versions of MySpace, Match.com, and any number of shopping sites, as well as interactive e-mail.

Bellic can even check out the latest headlines at the Web site of the *Liberty Tree*, the city's most respected newspaper, whose motto is "Yesterday's News Today," to see if any of his latest hijinks have earned him a write-up.

"The devil is always in the details, but that's especially true of GTA IV," says Patten. "They are playing on a realm people feel is very close to a world they live in. For many years, the *Simpsons* and *South Park* were the greatest cultural satires, because they were disguised as cartoons. But as a video game, Grand Theft Auto is capable of taking an even more devastating, creative, satirical look at America."

While critics of the game have called it sexist, racist, and violent, the game does seem to be an equal-opportunity offender: Everyone gets what is coming to them.

As Patten points out, the game is about moral choice. If a player wants to beat up women, he can. But the player could just as easily beat up men or inanimate objects. At key points during the game, Bellic is given a choice about whether to kill his enemies or let them live. Bellic's actions rest solely in the hands of the player.

Patten insists that GTA IV has established a new, modern standard for interactive satire. By giving players the choice of how to interact with their environment while putting a world of clues, options, moral choices, alliances, friendships and goals in front of them, this approach to satire is in some ways more immediate than experiences delivered through books and film.

"Grand Theft Auto IV is the great American video game," says Patten, "just like there used to be the great American novel in the early 19th century. But just as Nietzsche said 'God is dead,' the great American novel is dead. And when Scorsese passes from this world, the great American movie will be dead. . . . But the guys at Rockstar Games are bringing an entirely different approach. I think because the owners are British, they bring an outsider eye and have a clarity others are missing."

Patten says that GTA IV, like any great work of art, functions on multiple levels. One can play the game for the violence and go around shooting people—though this approach is likely to end in being killed or arrested by law enforcement—or one can explore a grand, open world and revel in the graphic beauty that makes up the game; one can play it as a cultural satire and absorb the dark comedy others might miss, or one can play it linearly, accepting every mission, completing every task. But, however it's played, the game accomplishes something Patten says a lot of current entertainment has stopped doing: referencing other works of art, political issues and real-life events. In other words, it can educate.

"When I was a kid, I listened to a lot of rock & roll. My parents were university educated and smart people," says Patten. "But you know how I learned about literature? I listened to David Bowie and the Rolling Stones. I read somewhere that 'Sympathy for the Devil' was based on a Russian novel, so I started reading Russian literature and learned about Russian politics and Stalin and Lenin and communism. Once I listened to David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* and I read he used the cut-up method, and I discovered that was a technique used by William Burroughs. From there, I learned about the Beats and I was able to ask my father about Jack Kerouac. So, there are these clues and avenues, little tricks in culture that we see so rarely now unless they are clues about where to buy cars or other things."

Patten points to a recent incident that occurred in the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. During a speech in North Carolina, Sen. Barack Obama talked about fending off attacks from the camp of his opponent, Sen. Hillary Clinton.

"So, I understand it," Obama said, "and when you're running for the presidency, you gotta expect it, and you just kinda . . ." He paused and raised his hand to his shoulder, brushing off some invisible dirt. "You gotta let it . . . you know," he continued, as he made the gesture popularized by the Jay-Z song "Dirt off Your Shoulder."

"Obama makes that gesture and everyone under the age of 35 understands it," says Patten. "He is referencing a Jay-Z video, and by sweeping dirt off his shoulder he was able to connect to the hip-hop generation and still say 'I'm your guy,' even though he walks out to Stevie Wonder."

GTA IV is full of those moments, moments where the game winks at you knowingly, brushes the dirt

off its shoulder, and makes you wonder exactly how much effort went into creating the world of GTA. There are so many of those moments that it is nearly impossible to miss them, even if you are playing the game for its most base activities—like making Bellic have sex with whores and then kill them for money, or riding around town in a police car catching criminals, or rampage around town stealing cars and running over pedestrians. For every moment of possible horror and violence in Liberty City, there is a moment to appreciate culture or to appreciate the beauty of urban decay. And there are choices to be made, lives to save rather than extinguish. The world is exactly what you make of it. And for every action, there is a reaction.

Bellic cruises through the center of Star Junction, Liberty City's Times Square. The lights are nearly blinding, the way you might imagine the entrance of heaven, except these lights advertise things like Bank of Liberty, whose colors and logo look nearly exactly like those of Bank of America; Sprunk, a soda with a logo not unlike Coke; and Whiz, which sells an iPhone-like product. Whiz touts its ability to let users "download ring tones that annoy strangers," and send pictures of their genitals via text.

Bellic has recently "acquired" a Dilletante, the Liberty City version of the Prius, marketed with the slogan, "Fighting Global Warming just became fun." The hybrid purrs softly, except for a loose hood that flaps up and down occasionally, a scar left on the vehicle from Bellic's forceful acquisition. Bellic's destination is his girlfriend Kiki's apartment, so he checks his GPS and marks it on his map. On the radio, a representative of the HMO industry talks to a conservative talk-show host about the tragedy caused by so many Americans' actually using their health-care plans.

"Next time you get sick, why not try not going to a doctor?" the woman asks matter-of-factly. The host agrees. Bellic fiddles with the radio stations, stopping briefly on Liberty City Hardcore. A station spot touts the superiority of music that helps you bash other people rather than whining about loving them.

Bellic fiddles some more, landing on the classic-rock station. Ace Frehley's "New York Groove" fills the cabin of the Dilletante, and Bellic accelerates, losing himself in the music. He notices the traffic light is about to turn from yellow to red, but by now it is already too late: He is going to have to run it.

The opposing vehicles begin to make left turns, and Bellic swerves at an angle, trying to fit through a gap in the wall of cars, but with no luck, as his vehicle is a hybrid, not some European sports car. The Dilletante spins sideways, and the front of the vehicle catches the back of a Bobcat pick-up truck. The Dilletante starts to spin up into the air, eventually landing with a thud as pedestrians scream and run for their lives. The vehicle skids on its side. Smoke billows out of its tires and then, crunch! The car crashes smack dab into the windshield of an LCPD patrol car. Sirens start to blare as Bellic pulls himself from the wreck.

Liberty City's finest already have their guns pulled and are shouting threats. "Get back here!" "I've got him in my sights!" Bellic pulls out an Uzi and returns fire as LCPD cars swarm to the center of Star Junction.

A helicopter hovers overhead as Bellic dashes towards a lone, parked minivan. He jerks at the door handle, looks back and then smashes his elbow through the window and unlocks the door. Bullets fly by. One punctures the front left tire of the minivan as Bellic hotwires its engine to life.

LCPD cars swerve around the minivan. An officer shouts instructions through a megaphone from the copter above: "We see you!" A patrol car smashes into the back of the minivan, giving Bellic the boost he needs to accelerate with the swarm of LCPD vehicles in pursuit. Bellic has a date with Kiki and has only a half-hour to get there. He knows if he misses the date there will be hell to pay, nothing like the wrath the LCPD could hope to deliver.

Imagine for a second that the uproar over violence in GTA IV were not an issue. Pretend Fox News and the bevy of other media outlets criticizing the game for its violence realized that they themselves sell and market properties just as violent, or even more violent than the game—in entertainment formats that don't allow the audience a moral choice.

Fox, of course, is the company behind the *Die Hard* series and the television series *24*, which is properly mocked in GTA IV as *72*, a show where a secret agent saves the world by "killing as many brown people" as he can.

So, what if those media outlets were to stop ranting about how GTA IV will inspire copycats and instead caught on to the truly subversive and sharp part of the game—its satirical notes on American culture?

Patten says he is not sure whether the mainstream media will ever get past the potential for violence in GTA IV. Patten insists the violence in GTA is a reflection of the subject it is covering: Just as *The Godfather* was a film about violent criminals, GTA is about the underbelly of a modern city. And like films such as *The Godfather*, GTA has a rating designed to keep children away from it.

He argues that anyone who is angered by the game's satire of American culture needs to remember what America is about. "America has always been about pushing the envelope. That is why civil rights happened, women got to vote, why America chose to be a republic instead of an empire. If they can't take people dissecting their culture, perhaps they are insecure in their own sense of culture."

And Patten takes it one step further: Not only does GTA hold comedic and satirical power, along with the ability to turn its audience on to a possibly unfamiliar culture, but in some ways the game is a more worthy reporter about the way New York City functions than some of the more established

sources.

"We live in a post-fact society," says Patten. "You can go online and find something to tell you anything you want to know. Some dingbat has a Web site that contradicts the fact that gravity works. People find it and use it. This post-fact society has encompassed citizen journalism as well as the mainstream news media. Hard news, international news, or labor news has been thrown out the window. But video games play different roles in the socialization method in a post-fact society. You are able to learn more about New York City than any guidebook, Bloomberg speech or Norman Mailer book" from Grand Theft Auto.

Bellic has successfully evaded the police and the FIB (Liberty City's version of the FBI) with time to spare. Kiki dashes from her apartment and compliments Bellic on his choice of attire. "Is that new?" she asks. The shades he is wearing, however, annoy her. "Those glasses make you look shady," she tells him.

But now she is ready to get on with the date. "Take me somewhere fun!"

Bellic pulls away from Kiki's apartment, the shot-out front wheel of his mini-van sending sparks flying in the air.

They arrive at the local comedy club. Ricky Gervais is doing a stand-up routine tonight, and Kiki approves.

"I love Ricky Gervais!" she squeals.

And this is how Grand Theft Auto goes on, with Bellic taking on more dangerous and violent missions for the underground crime syndicates, while leading an increasingly richer social life. Dating multiple women, spending time bowling, playing darts, watching burlesque shows with friends, watching the performances of comedians who have been digitized into the game, and even occasionally taking a date to a bar and having to decide whether to drive home drunk and risk being pulled over or to do the right thing and call for a cab.

"America is still a shiny city on the hill," says Patten, "but that does not mean it is perfect. It has this great underbelly, and I think Grand Theft Auto plays an important part in looking at that. The character of Niko evolves. The more time he spends in America, the less he is a murderous thug and becomes more of an entrepreneur. He arrives in one veil and soon wears another."

You might think, with his great appreciation of the game, that Patten would have spent the 60 hours or so it takes to guide Bellic to the end of his quest to attain wealth and power in Liberty City. But he hasn't, and according to him, he never plans to.

"I don't ever want to play to the end of it. That is what I love about sandbox games—you don't have to beat it. Halo's Master Chief kills aliens and then makes weird remarks that are unintentionally funny, but sandbox games . . . these just go on and on and on. It reminds me of an expression of Dr. Johnson: 'If you are bored of London, you are bored of life,' and the same applies to Liberty City. To want to finish the game is to want to stop having a good time, and why would you want that?"

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