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Posted on Thu, May. 8, 2008

### Grand Theft Auto car-jacks pop culture

By David Hillbrand Inquirer Staff Writer

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Yahoo! Buzz

Grand Theft Auto IV car-jacked pop culture this week.

The controversial and coveted video game sold about six million units in the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 formats, reaping more than \$500 million in worldwide sales.

The \$59.99-a-copy game, which follows fresh-off-the-boat Serbian immigrant Niko Bellic on a crime spree around a spectacularly detailed virtual manifestation of New York, took in \$310 million in its first day of release, April 29, more than the gaming industry's previous record-holder, Halo 3, earned in a week.

The eye-popping totals for Grand Theft Auto IV eclipse all other forms of popular entertainment. The prior one-week sales record was held by the Hollywood blockbuster Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End, a 2007 sequel that took in \$404 million worldwide.

"Grand Theft Auto IV's first week performance represents the biggest launch in the history of interactive entertainment," said Strauss Zelnick, the chairman of Take-Two Interactive Software, which publishes the game, in a statement yesterday. "We believe these retail sales levels surpass any movie or music launch to date."

The digerati are hailing GTA IV as a masterpiece, the War and Peace of the gaming world. But only if Leo Tolstoy had been kidnapped by the makers of those explicitly ghoulish Saw films.

The casual and graphic quality of the violence in GTA IV has drawn heated complaints from watchdog groups such as the Parents Television Council, which blasted the game as "brutally violent" as well as New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. (GTA IV is ostensibly set in "Liberty City," but with landmarks such as Radio City Music Hall and the Statue of Liberty, it is clearly a stand-in for the Big Apple.)

The parents' group has been lobbying the gaming industry's ratings board without success to change GTA IV's current rating of M (17 and older) to AO (adults only: 18 and older). The group's director, Gavin McKiernan, argues that the nature of the game makes it more hazardous for young adults than any R-rated film.

"An R-rated movie is a two-hour passive experience," he said. "With this we're talking about 70 to 80 hours of game play where you're practicing and completing these [violent] acts."

Mothers Against Drunk Driving has been pillorying GTA IV because Niko is capable of downing several cocktails before sliding behind the wheel - usually of a vehicle seized at gunpoint.

"Drunk driving is not a game and it is not a joke," reads a MADD statement.

Ironically, the drumbeat of criticism may have worked better than any marketing campaign.

"There is a lot of attention given to controversial themes and it often helps the buzz for these types of products," said Josh Eliashberg, a professor of marketing at the Wharton School. "All the controversy helped in psyching the target market for this game."

Certainly the release of GTA IV set off a frenzy among players last Tuesday.

"We go to lots of launches of big-ticket games and consoles, and I've never seen a reaction like this," said Shane Satterfield, the editor-in-chief of GameTrailers, a broadband video Web site for the gaming industry. "Even at the small mom-and-pop stores where usually you might have five kids standing outside, they had hundreds of kids waiting."

In the software business, the definition of success is roughly one million copies. So you can't sell six million units if you're counting only on devoted gamers.

"There are two different types of gamers," Satterfield said. "There's the hard-core kids like me . . . and then there are the more casual players. Grand Theft Auto has been great at capturing the casual player. Only a few titles - Madden [NFL], Halo, Call of Duty - have been able to do that."

What is attracting players is the game's astonishing attention to detail, which makes for a uniquely sumptuous and rewarding gaming experience. (Rockstar Games, the Scottish company that developed the Grand Theft franchise, spent 3 1/2 years and \$100 million on this sequel.)

"There have been other open-world games where you can wander around and explore, but nothing approaches this," said Hilary Goldstein, editor in chief of the Xbox team at IGN, the gaming Web site.

"Here there are hundreds of pedestrians walking the streets, gabbing away on cell phones," he said. "If you drive through a poor part of town, it's all potholes and crime. But if you're in a more affluent area, it's clean, no graffiti and there are more cops around. You actually get the feel of neighborhoods. It's very immersive, in a way we've never seen in a game before."

The central storyline is simple: Niko lands in this country and immediately finds himself trying to square the debts of his ne'er-do-well cousin Roman. He hires himself out as an enforcer for a variety of criminal enterprises, taking on jobs such as snuffing out rival drug dealers - even robbing a bank and escaping on the subway.

If you devote yourself single-mindedly to carrying out these missions, you can get through the game in 25 to 40 hours. But that workmanlike approach would involve skipping the recreational activities that make GTA IV so entertaining.

Why go on a dangerous criminal caper when there are so many things in Liberty City to enjoy? Go sightseeing, shopping, check out a comedy club (Ricky Gervais is doing standup), or surf the Web in a cybercafe. The game is stocked with 740 distinct voices and more than 80,000 lines of dialogue.

If the audio is good, the visuals are spectacular. Wait until you see the city that never sleeps sparkling at night. The view is breathtaking; all that's missing is the Gershwin.

Not that you're lacking for tunes. Like the previous Grand Theft adventures, IV comes with a hip soundtrack of 200 songs, many of them original recordings. Hear a song you like on Niko's radio? You can punch a button and download

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Social networking is rewarded. Niko cultivates a circle of friends, calling them on his cell phone to invite them to go bowling or play pool or have a few drinks. If the bonding goes well, these pals provide him with various services and goods that come in handy for a man in his line of work.

Some of Niko's social activities are decidedly mature. He dates, patronizes hookers, visits strip clubs and even gets lap dances. "There is no outright nudity but it does take the sexual content pretty far," said IGN's Goldstein. "For an M-rated game, this is as far as I've seen it go."

"Inside the gaming world, the genre that Grand Theft Auto created is called the free-roaming game or the sandbox game," Satterfield said. "GTA IV is the distillation and perfection of that genre."

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