

When Mark Harris took a stroll down Grand Theft Auto IV's mean streets, he quickly identified with its amoral hero. It's all just a bit of fun, though – isn't it?

Making a killing is the name of the game

Grand Theft Auto IV sold a record 609,000 copies in one day when it was launched in the UK this week, raking in nearly £25m for its maker, Rockstar Games. That's about twice what Hollywood can expect its first blockbuster of the year, Iron Man, to earn when it opens here this weekend. Some experts are even tipping Grand Theft Auto (or GTA) IV to topple the Pirates of the Caribbean 3 movie from its perch as the entertainment title with the most first-week sales. That's not all. The game has been linked to two real-life attacks (a stabbing and a mugging) on its very first day of sale, and adverts for it have been withdrawn from public transport systems across America because of its graphic violence. So what makes GTA IV, available now on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 consoles for about £40-£50, more exciting than Speed Racer, more profitable than James Bond and more dangerous than a crazed hoodie? I take a stroll along the mean streets of Liberty City (its fictional setting – a thinly veiled New York) to find out.

Forget big-name stars and glitzy glamour girls; the "hero" of GTA IV is a rough-hewn, unshaven Serbian immigrant by the name of Niko Bellic. He's voiced by Bruce Kronenberg, an actor whose previous career highlights have been as a minor character in a single episode of The Sopranos and a few appearances in Law & Order.

Arriving in Liberty City, Niko hooks up with his wiseguy cousin Roman and is soon enjoying the American dream. Not the one with a steady job, a gas-guzzling SUV and a waistline the size of Delaware but the one that involves pump-action shotguns, drug deals in strip clubs and swearing all the time.

Stepping out onto the streets of Coney Beach ("Hove Beach" in the game), I am instantly impressed by the authentic-looking surroundings. The roads are grimy, the run-down fairground rides clunk away in the background and the sound of my footsteps even changes when I move onto the resort's famous boardwalk.

Admittedly, the passers-by are rather a sullen lot – I wouldn't normally expect to be asked, "Are you some kind of stinking-ass gypsy?" while sightseeing in Brooklyn – but the attention to detail is amazing. I take a stroll along the beach, pop into a Cluckin' Bell restaurant to recharge my health with some (convincingly unappetising) fried chicken and use my new mobile phone.

This lets me chat with Roman and other non-player characters in the game, send text messages and even arrange a date with the virtual women I meet.

Before I can afford to spring for a classy date at the neighbourhood pool room, I need some money. And here's where the 18-certificate GTA IV gets controversial. I could take cab-driving jobs for cousin Roman to scrape together a few bucks, but Liberty City is an expensive place to live, so why not help him out by beating up some aggressive loan sharks? Then it's only polite to accompany Roman's pal Little Jacob on a pot deal, and before you know it I'm collecting debts, organising coke buys and building up my own criminal network. And all without a green card.

Liberty City is awash with pistols, machineguns, baseball bats, sniper rifles and grenades and, thanks to the thugs and lowlives I hang out with, extreme violence is never more than a button-push away. Unlike in many shoot-'em-up games, though, whipping out a gun in GTA IV does have consequences. If I start shooting up "Burlesque" (Broadway) or knock over an innocent pedestrian in "Middle Park", Liberty City's finest will be on my case in seconds – and they aren't too fussy about reading you your rights before the lead starts to fly.

Shoot a cop and the city goes crazy, with police helicopters, Humvees and Swat squadrons



A history of violence

■ More than 70m copies of GTA games have been sold to date, making it the fifth bestselling games series after Mario and Pokemon, The Sims and Final Fantasy

■ Launched in 1997, the original GTA was created by Dave Jones, a Scottish games programmer. Subsequent versions have been developed in Britain by Rockstar Games, although the firm's headquarters is now in New York

■ Dennis Hopper, Burt Reynolds, Samuel L Jackson, Ray Liotta and Axl Rose have all voiced characters in GTA games

■ Jack Thompson, an American lawyer, has tried, unsuccessfully, to connect the game to real-life murders. In September 2006 he filed a "wrongful death" lawsuit against Take-Two Interactive, parent company of Rockstar Games, after a 2004 shooting spree by a 14-year-old

you don't have to. This is the key appeal of the GTA series: there is no linear story or quest to follow; you are simply spending time in an incredibly detailed environment. So, like any real American, I chill out for a while in my apartment and watch TV, where a hilarious selection of cheesy infomercials, inane talk shows and trashy celebrity exposés epitomises the game's cynical, cruel humour.

When I feel like heading out, that's simple too. As befits a game set in a virtual Big Apple, taking a cab has its own key-press – and comes complete with blaring foreign radio stations and nonsensical taxi-driver banter. If you prefer to be in the driver's seat, it's possible to carjack almost any vehicle (be it car, motorbike or 18-wheeler), and I confess that helping myself to some sweet rides (including 1950s retro whales, supercharged pick-ups and speedboats) quickly becomes my preferred mode of transport.

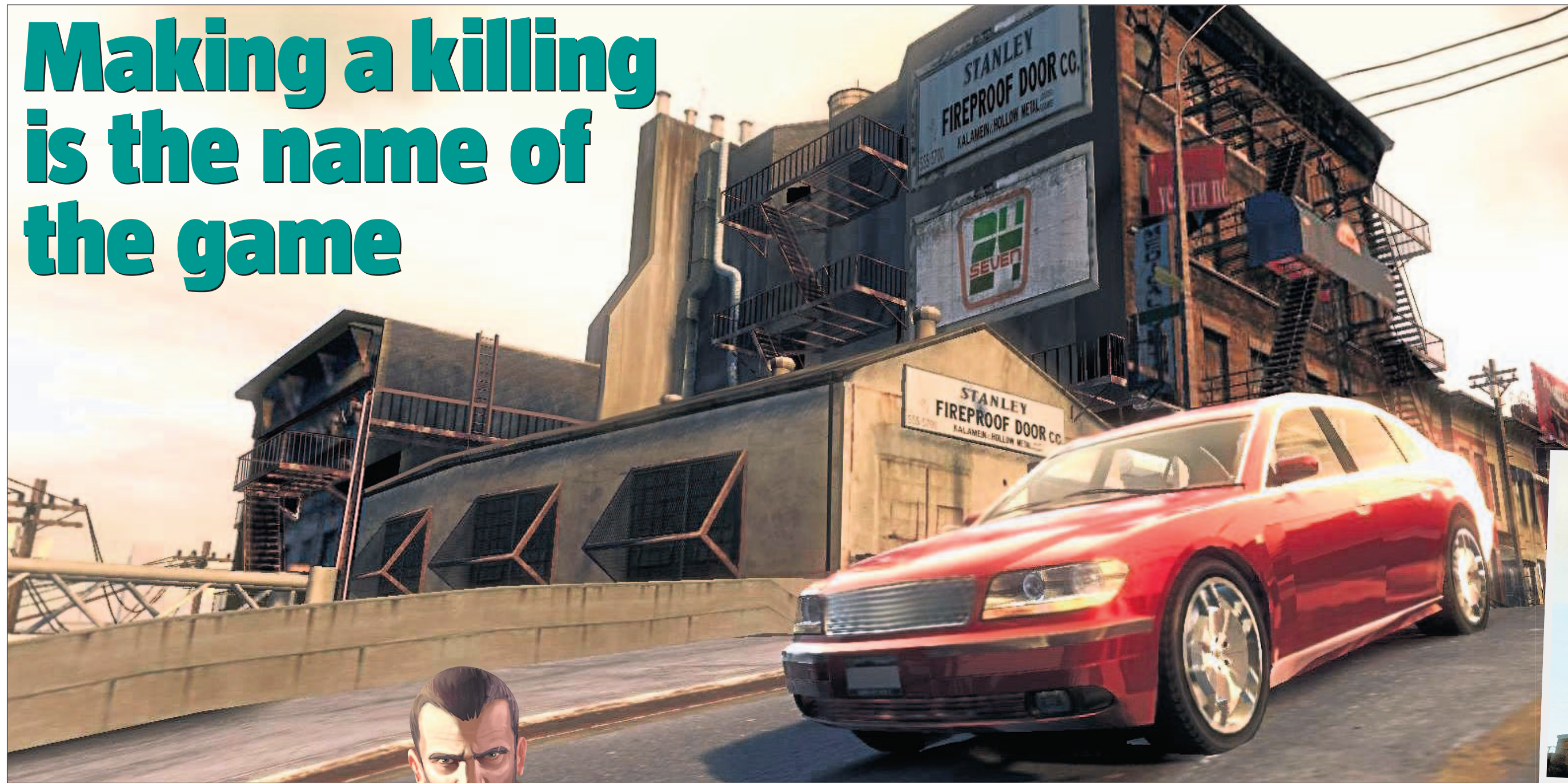
Although GTA IV is a gangster game, there is a lot more to it than just shooting. When Niko gets access to the internet halfway through the game, I decide to try a spot of online dating. The mechanism (and much of the language) is crude but I do have to work hard for some pixelated fun. I learn that Carmen loves a drink but doesn't like seeing Niko in glasses, whereas nothing impresses Alexandra more than an evening in the Split Side comedy bar. Finding Ricky Gervais

doing a bizarrely irrelevant cameo here (with terrible laugh track) shows that Liberty City's unwelcome immigrants aren't limited to east Europeans. It's worth persevering with dating, though, as the more Niko sleeps around, the less he has to pay for his clothing. I'm not sure whether this is a quirk of the game or an aspect of American society no one ever told me about.

Look hard and there is a moral code to be found in Grand Theft Auto IV, even if it works along the lines of "Thou shalt not get caught" rather than anything more profound. Loyalty and honour are prized traits in this parallel world, and determined do-gooders can choose to turn vigilante, tracking down Liberty City's biggest criminals in a hijacked police cruiser.

GTA IV is a violent, twisted game, packed with casual racism and misogyny. You have to behave in a nasty manner to succeed, and it certainly deserves its 18 certificate. It can also be extremely enjoyable, with thrilling action and a sophisticated storyline that bears comparison to some of the best American gangster movies. Like Hollywood, the games industry is becoming

addicted to sequels (this is actually the ninth title in the series) and its lead characters now generate the interest usually garnered by A-list movie stars. The growing success of Grand Theft Auto shows that many of us do enjoy the thrill of behaving badly, at least in the safety of a virtual world. Just don't expect to see Niko Bellic starring in a romcom any time soon.



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