

# Missoulian

## one bloch over: Free will hunting

By BEN BLOCH for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, January 27, 2005 12:00 am

Video games - even most violent - have the power to transport us to undiscovered lands

Over the holiday break, I had several opportunities to play "Grand Theft Auto," the controversial and - not surprisingly - hugely popular video game series for the Sony PlayStation 2.

In the game, the protagonist game-player (who has a different name in each of the three games in the series) walks, runs and drives through a realistic urban environment, completing narrative-like criminal missions that gain him experience and player power that will advance him in the game.

It's obvious why this game is distressing to so many people. To win, you have to do things like successfully complete a drive-by shooting, then get the car to the paint sprayers before the cops can catch up to you. In order to get money to buy clothes, or weapons to defend yourself, you have to assault and rob people who just happen to be walking down the street.

I'm still not sure whether I should be ashamed of the fact that each time I played, I became more entrenched and fascinated with the game. Perhaps most exciting was the odd feeling that arises out of exercising a vicarious free will. "Grand Theft Auto" belongs to a genre commonly referred to as "open environment" video games. As a player, one has the visual control to view and virtually move about within a vast, highly realistic 3-D world from any angle and/or direction. One can choose what car to steal on what street and when, and once inside the car, choose from a variety of radio stations that play really good songs from all genres (the game's producers have secured rights to songs like "Africa" by Toto, "99 Luftballons" by Nena, "Billie Jean" by Michael Jackson, "Owner Of A Lonely Heart" by Yes, "The Breaks" by Kurtis Blow, and literally hundreds of other well-known songs that you still hear repeatedly on the radio today.)

Even if one chooses not to advance through completing the game's missions, you can entertain yourself for hours merely exploring the city-joyriding in a variety of cars that have different handling, pumping iron at the gym, shopping for clothes, seeing the sights, and assaulting random citizens.

Playing the game feels something like entering an interactive movie, a kind of hybrid format between pure spectatorship and participation. And this sensation is heightened by the fact that many big-time Hollywood actors/actresses are actually employed to do the voices behind the characters you meet within the game.

A short list of recognizable names would include people like Kyle MacLachlan, Tom Sizemore, Ray Liotta, Fairuza Balk, Michael Madsen, Deborah Harry, Dennis Hopper, Jenna Jameson, Lawrence Taylor and Burt Reynolds. A list like this testifies to the hip factor of these games - actors/actresses must feel that this exposure is ultimately to their benefit, both monetarily and image-wise.

Of course, there is the real issue of the violence around which many of these open environment games like "Grand Theft Auto" are centered, as well as the effect their violent tone may or may not have in the real world.

Given the proliferation - and mass appeal - of this new wave of games, it seems appropriate to ask ourselves whether the violent content is actually causing a bad effect, or is just another reflection of something buried in the cavernous depths of our nature.

As the world indubitably becomes more virtual (that is, image-based as opposed to material oriented) is it not possible that the violence already in existence, and which has been haunting us since the dawn of human civilization in the real material world, will not in part (and perhaps eventually in whole) take vicarious root in the realm of the virtual?

Thus perhaps the more useful thing is to consider how the world has changed - and continues to change - enough to have a media invention such as this come into existence and to be so widely appreciated.

For those who still believe that such games are absorbed only by relatively wealthy first world youths, think again. I know several 30-

something professionals who own PlayStation or Xbox consoles, and just the other day, a friend in the Peace Corps wrote to tell me that her host family in Guatemala - a family of six that lives in three rooms - plays video games all day long.

Finally, the trajectory towards heightened interactivity makes it more difficult to critique the playing of video games as a purely passive activity. There are many who will argue the importance of the potential for people to gain motor skills through the playing of these games. Also, some of them incorporate complex, riddle-like aspects to their narratives, which force a kind of logical and critical exercise of the interactive mind.

Even further, there are some games like "Dance Dance Revolution," where players step on footpads and use their entire body as a kind of joystick to precisely affect what happens onscreen. In this way, players may achieve actual physical exercise through their engagement with the game.

Taking this thought even further, isn't it possible to imagine a time in the not so distant future when people might spend whole days and weeks immersed in even more realistic interactive game realities? Will there not come a time when the pleasures and evermore rich realities of the virtual become preferable to our current physical circumstances?

That question is definitely worth more pondering.

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