

What's Up With *Grand Theft Auto*?

Brandon Shopper & News, August 18, 2005

David McConkey

A recent controversy about the rating of one of the *Grand Theft Auto* video games alerted me to the popularity of the game and really got me thinking.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, the sixth of the wildly successful series of video games, had its rating changed. The reason? The discovery of a hidden sex scene which can be unlocked using a free modification available on the Internet. The sex scene grabbed the attention of American Senator Hilary Clinton and other legislators.

The ratings change made the news because video games are really, really, big business.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board changed the game's rating from M (Mature, for those aged 17 and over) to AO (Adult Only, for those aged 18 and over).

But what is the difference between a video game sold to those aged 17 and over, and one sold to those 18? Lots, it turns out. Large chains such as Future Shop and Wal-Mart don't carry the AO games.

As a result of the rating change, the company which makes the *Grand Theft Auto* games lowered its sales projections from \$170 million to \$160 million, for the next *quarter*. (Of course, these games are avidly played by youngsters of all ages, despite the official rating.)

The *Grand Theft Auto* series of games have been enormously popular. They have sold in the tens of millions, with total sales in the billions of dollars.

For older people like me, who don't play video games and are out of touch with the genre, seeing a *Grand Theft Auto* game is quite a shock. They aren't like the *Pac-Man* or *Mario Brothers* of yesteryear.

These new games are complicated animations, with multiple options for storylines. The *Grand Theft Auto* games have "unprecedented

production value,” enthuses Wal-Mart, “uniting gameplay and narrative in a cinematic gaming experience.” They feature a “huge, open environment with hundreds of interior and exterior locations and incredible details full of inhabitants who interact with you and one another.”

You, as the game player, are literally in the driver’s seat as you cruise the streets looking for adventure. And they are violent. You beat people up, kill people (including police officers), steal cars, sell drugs – whatever it takes. “You’ll have to rob, steal and kill just to stay out of serious trouble,” gushes Wal-Mart, “these games provide worlds of drama, danger, and death.”

I’ve watched the regular game being played as well as the controversial sex scene. I must say I’m personally much more offended by the violence and killing than I am by the sex.

I guess I’m from the old school of those who think it’s better to “make love, not war.” I was a member of the generation of parents who tried to get our young kids to play with dolls and trucks, instead of toy guns and soldiers.

By the way, the sex scene is not that graphic, it is consensual, and it is - after all - only a cartoon!

One very important question: do such games encourage similar behavior in real life? After all, as a society we would like to reduce actual theft, violence, and murder.

These new video games surprise and shock us older folks. But we parents over the years have warned of the supposed dangers of each new popular medium as it came along, whether paperback novels, movies, comics, TV, rock ‘n’ roll music, and now the Internet.

Crime – especially auto theft – is of special relevance to those of us here in Manitoba. Among cities, Winnipeg is the worst in the country for overall crime. In auto theft, Manitoba is actually the worst in North America!

Damages to property, injuries, even deaths, are the result of this Manitoba real auto theft rampage. And, it just got a whole lot more dangerous as Manitoba thieves now weigh down the gas pedals of stolen vehicles and launch them as driverless missiles down the street.

Most Manitoban car thieves are kids younger than 18. While some

are as young as 11, the majority start when they are 13. Whatever causes this Manitoba crime wave, I don't think it is *Grand Theft Auto*. The video games are widely played throughout North America, but real auto theft is much worse here.

Could video games actually be improving us? This is the thesis of Steven Johnson's book: *Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*.

In the United States, as Johnson points out, auto theft is down substantially since the first *Grand Theft Auto* game was released in 1997. Violent crime has dropped dramatically in the last ten years, coinciding with the release of more violent video games. Could it be, asks Johnson, that would-be auto thieves and other criminals are now "getting their thrills on the screen instead of the street?"

Johnson also cites several large-scale studies which have been tracking American kids since the 1970s. They find that today's youth are not only less violent, but also do better academically.

We need to know more. Hilary Clinton and ultraconservative politician Rick Santorum could work together to back legislation funding research on the effect of media on kids.

What about in Manitoba? In Brandon, you can be robbed at gunpoint by a 14 year old. You are more than three times as likely to be murdered in Winnipeg as in Montreal or Toronto. Your chances of being a victim of auto theft are much higher in Manitoba than in the United States or other provinces in Canada.

The Manitoba government has just passed a law to punish retailers who sell mature video games to kids. The idea is to provide the best environment for our youth, but are we going in the right direction?

I'm left with a discomfoting thought. Wouldn't we be better off if Manitoba kids were getting their kicks by stealing cars and killing people in a video game, instead of in real life?

* * * * *