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GAME ON

The Boston Globe

Sex scene stirs up a fuss over Grand Theft Auto

By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | July 9, 2005

Enough with the endless controversy over violence in video games. Instead, let's talk about sex.

Raucy, full-contact sex -- the sort of thing you'd see in a porn movie, only with cartoonlike, computer-generated images.

According to some software-savvy game geeks, you can find this kind of seamy excitement hidden inside one of the world's most popular computer games, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas.

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As if Grand Theft Auto lacked for controversy. It's already the computer game that critics of the industry love to hate because of its relentless brutality. GTA has inspired a spate of legislation in such places as Illinois, Georgia, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C., all aimed at keeping violent games out of the hands of minors.

But if Dutch gamer Patrick Wildenberg is to be believed, enemies of GTA have a new reason for outrage.

Wildenberg is a "modder," a gamer who uses software tools to modify the look and feel of his favorite games. Modders have been around at least since the original version of the popular shoot-'em-up Doom, which encouraged users to tweak the program. These days, many games come with tools to make the process easier. Game makers love it because it helps prop up the sales of older titles. Gamers love it because it lets them use their imaginations to create new game scenarios that the original programmers may never have imagined. And they can share their mods with other gamers by publishing them on the Internet.

Inevitably, some modders have reprogrammed popular games to add explicit sexual content. The popular game The Sims has inspired some steamy mods that enable characters to couple and even get pregnant. But "Hot Coffee," an eye-popping GTA mod created by Wildenberg and some of his friends, goes a good deal further, with highly explicit images.

It's no big deal if a Dutchman creates a pornographic version of GTA.

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But Wildenborg said he and his buddies did no such thing. He said the porn movie was built into the game at the factory and his mod simply revealed it. He claims a million people have downloaded "Hot Coffee" since it was posted on the Internet a month ago.

"All the material that is used during the sex scenes of the 'Hot Coffee' mod are on the official San Andreas release," Wildenborg said. In other words, he claims it's an "Easter egg," an old tradition in computer programming. Easter eggs are what result when an engineer adds a secret mini-program that does something unexpected and amusing. Microsoft's Excel 97 spreadsheet program, for instance, has a little flight simulation game built in. You just have to press certain keys in the right order, and up it comes.

Wildenborg said it's harder to get at the porno video in GTA. It can be done only on the version for desktop PCs, and it requires running the "Hot Coffee" program, which changes one bit of data in the computer's memory -- "the censor flag," as Wildenborg calls it.

"If the censor flag is set, all the sexually explicit scenes are blocked from the normal flow of events," he said. That makes a difference in a game scene when the hero visits his girlfriend's house for a cup of coffee. In the censored version, the game shows the exterior of the house while suggestive sound effects are heard. "If, however, the censor flag is cleared," said Wildenborg, "all the explicit scenes are tied into the normal gameplay."

Wildenborg insists that every bit of sex revealed by his mod is built into the game, rather than added by his crew of modders. Take 2 Interactive, which makes the GTA game series, could clarify the matter in a minute, but it won't. A company spokesman said Take 2 never comments on the activities of the modder community. Of course, the question isn't about the modder community at all. The question is whether Take 2 built a mini porn movie into its game in the first place. And the company refuses to answer.

As well it might, because this kind of gag could get Take 2 into trouble with the Entertainment Software Rating Board, the industry-sponsored group that produces age-appropriate ratings for computer games. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas is rated M (Mature). "The ESRB has very strict rules," said its president, Patricia Vance. Game companies must fully disclose every game feature that might affect the kind of rating it should get. Sexually explicit scenes fit that description.

But the presence of such a scene could well get the game rated AO (Adults Only). That kind of rating could cause major retailers to shove the game out of sight under the counter -- or maybe to not carry it at all. That might have been a reason for Take 2 to hide the naughty bits. But if they did that, and got caught, ESRB could respond by changing the game's rating to AO.

That probably won't happen. Vance said that while the ESRB is investigating the issue, she's inclined to agree with Take 2's take -- that "Hot Coffee" is a mod, not an inherent feature of the game. "He actually had to change underlying code," Vance said of Wildenborg. "It's not a cheat. It's not an Easter egg."

Even if the dirty pictures were on the game disk when it left the factory?

Sure, said Vance, who added that game developers have been known to deactivate parts of their code without removing them from

the finished products. "Oftentimes changes are made toward the end of development, and they program workarounds," she said. If Take 2 never intended the porn scene to be "playable content," the company may not be at fault when ambitious modders discover it.

Still, Vance admits the controversy poses new questions about how her group rates games. "I think it certainly raises issues about what's considered playable content," she said. "And should there be complete disclosure of nonplayable content?"

Good question. No doubt Vance will sit down with some "Hot Coffee" and think it over. ■

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