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# 'San Andreas' Rocks the 'Righteous'

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Hot Coffee. Everybody's getting some this summer.

I'm not talking about the beverage, rather the on-screen sex in the videogame "[Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas](#)" that has [triggered a Federal Trade Commission probe](#) and inflamed the passions of the U.S. Congress.

By now you almost certainly know what I'm talking about, but just in case you don't, here's the recap: The latest entry in the "GTA" videogame series (a franchise that had already embraced graphic violence and sexual content to lure gamers) features a hidden scene in which two characters get busy in the bedroom in a way that's more pornographic than passionate. (I won't link to any video captures. Let's just say you don't need to enter too any creative search terms on Google if you want to find it.)

This graphic content is hidden from most game players, but available to anyone who downloads the right software, a program dubbed "hot coffee."

A Dutch game player who more or less stumbled onto the sex scene shared the software online, and the next thing you know, Sen. [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) (D-N.Y.) declares war on java, along with the House of Representatives, whose members reacted to the GTA revelations almost as wildly as they did to the sexy saga of Bill and Monica.

The [Wall Street Journal explains](#): "The fallout from hidden sex scenes in one of the most popular videogames continued yesterday as [Take-Two Interactive Software Inc.](#) said the **Federal Trade Commission** is conducting an inquiry into its controversial Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas game. ... The commission targets 'unfair or deceptive' advertising practices by companies, and any finding of wrongdoing could result in fines for Take-Two and requirements to change its advertising practices. The FTC's decision to probe Take-Two's advertising claims comes a day after the U.S. House of Representatives voted 355-21 to pass a resolution asking the FTC to investigate Take-Two and its **Rockstar Games** subsidiary, which developed the game. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York previously had asked the FTC to investigate the company."

So -- the justification for this use of our tax dollars is that Take Two misled the public by promising a game featuring enough violence to make [Sam Peckinpah](#) blush, but instead sprinkled it with near-hardcore pornography. (I use "near" as there isn't any display of genitalia, at least as far as I could see. And it's a cartoon graphic, not real people...)

Good heavens, citizens! What's going on here? Oh yes, of course, we're getting all bent out of shape over nothing again. I keep forgetting that this is a proud American tradition, on the same display shelf as the

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controversy over "[Darling Nikki](#)" and the fuss over video games in general from the early '80s. I bet some of the folks who thought our children's brains were turning to mush over too much "[Centipede](#)" aren't looking at it this way today.

I'm going to echo the refrain that you'd expect from thirtysomethings like me who don't have children to protect: I don't like the sex and violence of the GTA series. As a result, I do what anyone capable of making decisions does: I don't play it.

For parents, GTA joins the ranks of adolescent sex, dope-smoking, underage drinking and a long list of other things that they shouldn't do but try to get away with anyway. And despite the misogynistic nastiness that turns my gut worse than a cup of burnt McDonald's coffee, it should be the bottom item on the list of bugbears threatening the moral values that many of us hold dear in this crazy age.

### **But Enough About What I Think...**

Let's take a look at some of the media coverage, as there are some interesting stories out there.

The [Boston Globe reported](#) on Sen. Clinton's suspicion that Take Two tried to smuggle the sex scene past the [Entertainment Software Ratings Board](#) to avoid getting the game slapped with an "Adults Only" rating as opposed to a "Mature" -- "The board had given San Andreas its mature rating, meaning the game was appropriate for players age 17 or older. But after a new investigation, the board changed San Andreas' rating to adults only -- suitable for players 18 or older," reporter Hiawatha Bray wrote.

After all, that one-year distinction is crucial.

Bray also quoted game industry critic **David Kinney**, the inventor of a [ratings system of his own](#). Kinney said that "Take-Two shouldn't be the only company under investigation. 'There will be more to come because there are more video games out there have hidden codes in them that are sexually oriented.'"

Games reporter Dean Takahashi at the San Jose Mercury News [wrote an article](#) that brought up an example: "Fresh from the fallout over some sex scenes hidden in a violent video game, an anti-game crusader is pressuring **Electronic Arts** to take action against those who modify another game, '[The Sims 2](#),' so that it can display naked characters. ... **Jack Thompson**, a Florida attorney who has tangled often with the makers of video games, has written a letter to EA and a number of politicians alleging that teen-rated 'The Sims 2' game should be the next on the list to be re-rated as an 'adults only' game. That's because the game can be 'modded' to show naked characters. Normally, the game blurs, or pixelates, the images of characters when they change their clothes, take showers or go to the bathroom in the simulation of ordinary life."

The [Wall Street Journal's Nick Wingfield](#), meanwhile, reported that plenty of videogames throw in hidden scenes, often referred to as "Easter eggs" -- "For instance, players of [Activision Inc.'s Fantastic Four](#) game can punch an arcane combination of buttons on their PlayStation 2 controller -- square, circle, square, down, down, circle, up -- to reveal an interview with Marvel comic-book legend **Stan Lee**," Wingfield wrote. "Similarly, many game companies leave various 'cheats' in their games that allow players to attain extraordinary powers, such as invincibility or instant access to all levels of the game, by entering special codes into the games."

Wingfield also wrote about the one thing that continues to disturb me about the controversy: "Although the game's manufacturer initially said the sex scenes were the work of independent modders, Take-Two later

admitted that they were created by its developers and locked on the game disc to prevent access by players, rather than deleted." It seems a pointless and stupid move, especially when it could have made a perfectly good defense of the scene's inclusion from the get-go.

The [Buffalo News](#) ran this assessment: "[The] new rating and changes in the game won't stop younger players from having access. 'It's like putting a Band-Aid on a water spigot; these are token gestures, and they're not going to stop most kids from getting this game,' said **Scott Turner**, founder of Cyberjocks in Amherst, Western New York's most successful video gaming center. Cyberjocks does not allow adult-rated games in its facility. Children under 17 need parental permission slips from parents to participate in games there. While the furor over 'GTA' may cause more demand, it could lead to a crackdown on the video game industry, similar to the way government has come down on television, music and radio."

And the [Dallas Morning News reported](#) on how some parents are reacting; it's safe to say they don't agree with me: " **Lauren Charbonneau** didn't worry about purchasing Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas for her son, Luke, in October when he was 11. Luke is 'pretty mature,' his mother says. She figured he could handle an M-rated video game. Then news broke last week that explicit interactive sex scenes were discovered hidden in the code of the game that touts intense violence, blood and gore. ... Luke says he never accessed the hidden scenes, but the news of their existence upset his mother. 'I'm shocked and angry,' says Ms. Charbonneau, 47, of Plano. 'They deceived the public.' The revelations make it easier and harder on parents, says Dr. **Philip Korenman**, a psychiatrist in private practice in Plano. It's easier in one sense, he notes, because 'if you had any doubts about getting this game for your kids, now the new rating makes it less ambiguous.'"

While some columnists and newspaper editorial boards questioned the point of singling out GTA San Andreas as a "unique" example of moral turpitude, the [Rochester Democrat and Chronicle](#) suggested widening the probe: "Clinton should continue to push for an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission. Further, she should extend her concern to the gangsta rap recording industry, whose top executives are also developers and promoters of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," the paper's editorial board wrote. "At the least, gangsta rappers need to be put on notice that their vile lyrics, like the sex scenes in San Andreas, are over the top. Way over the top. While government shouldn't ban these artistic expressions outright, it can prod them to act more responsibly."

But how?

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