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'Grand Theft Auto V' blows away the competition

Oct 4, 2013

By John Powell - G4 Canada

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Grand Theft Auto V is here and you know what that means. It is time to casually run over civilians as we race to our destination. It is time to evade airport security and take a jumbo jet out for a joyride. It is time to ignite high speed police chases, capture muggers, shoot aliens, steal a submarine and punch a shark in the face.

The greatest gaming guilty pleasure is back and this time around when you aren't being a troublemaker on the streets of Los Santos, you will be playing as and managing three distinct characters whose destinies are intertwined.

Following the events of a failed bank robbery seemingly inspired by ' Fargo ', criminal masterminds Michael Townley and Trevor Philips run for their lives. While the slightly unbalanced Trevor escapes the long arm of the law, the cold and calculating Michael is thought to have died in a hail of bullets. In reality, Michael not only survived the foiled heist but is in the witness protection with his family and living in Los Santos, AKA: Los Angeles. Having left his criminal days behind some time ago, Michael has blended into the Los Santos lifestyle. His kids are spoiled brats. His wife is doing the horizontal mambo with her tennis coach. They all pop pills like candy, rub elbows with vapid celebrities, treat the hired help like crap and spend most of their waking hours drunk or stoned.



Michael is snapped out of his blissful Hollywood haze when his son's car is repossessed by the second protagonist: Franklin Clinton. Besides working as a repo man for the car dealership, Franklin also supplements his income through nefarious means. Living in the poorer part of Los Santos, Franklin desperately tries to leave his shadowy past behind but keeps getting bamboozled back into a life of crime. Of the trio, he is the one who truly feels remorse for his actions, actually has a moral compass and is the one who has the best chance at redeeming himself. Michael slowly drifts back into his old ways and takes Franklin under his wing.



The perpetually pissed off Trevor Philips is the third and final piece of the puzzle. The antithesis of Michael, Trevor has been hiding out in the rural outskirts of Los Santos. There, Trevor is the man with one eye in the land of the blind. Higher up on the evolutionary scale than the majority of the hayseeds surrounding him, the loose cannon and his illegal drug business are thriving until local bikers begin moving in on his turf. Everything changes for Trevor when he discovers his pal Michael is not only alive and well but living a stone's throw away. Trevor decides it is time he paid his old pal a visit.

Written by Dan Houser, Rupert Humphries and Micheal Unsworth, the Grand Theft Auto V campaign is as gritty and as it is downright hilarious. The trio of main characters are flawed human beings, who despite their exceedingly questionable behaviour at times, are surprisingly sympathetic. That is a tribute to the level of storytelling at work here.

After spending hours and hours in their shoes, you cannot help but to be emotionally invested in the fates of Michael, Trevor and particularly Franklin. Although it means juggling three personas instead of one and everything that comes along with outfitting a Grand Theft Auto character; the inclusion of three separate lives and storylines is carried off quite well. Each character has their own skills and abilities which can be upgraded. It sure does complicate matters but in a good way.

The only real bump in the road is a controversial torture mission involving Trevor. To gain information during "By The Book", Trevor methodically tortures a man before letting him flee instead of killing him as instructed. The mission itself forces players to pick torture instruments from a table and use them on the restrained man. While this may seem over the top, it is really no different than the 'No Russian' mission in 'Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2' in which players took on the role of terrorists massacring innocent people at an airport. Players could choose whether to skip the COD mission and could actively participate in the massacre or not.



Just as I did to Infinity Ward, I give credit to Rockstar North for including the unsettling mission. Sure, it is grotesque and unnerving but that is what real world violence is. It is not as simple or as clean as dispassionately pulling a trigger and walking away. By invading their headspace, RockStar North effectively tapped players on the shoulder and reminded them how ugly and ruthless these acts can be and the consequences that can result. Although it is an admittedly a harsh way to drive home a message, whether it is about real world violence in general or government sanctioned torture, it is one that will assuredly not be forgotten by anyone experiencing it.



For us who remember playing the original top-down version of Grand Theft Auto, Los Santos is a virtual adult playground like no other. The open world design is a milestone of modern game development. You can do just about anything your heart desires. Get a haircut and a shave, buy new clothes, catch a movie, fire off a few rounds at the shooting range, play tennis, join an illegal street race, visit a strip club, go boating, attend a flight school, ride a Ferris wheel or a roller coaster or punch a shark in the face. The choice is yours. Exploring everything Los Santos has to offer is just as exhilarating as the campaigns themselves and you can spend hours alone just traveling through all of the alleyways, roadways, shops and settings. Los Santos' design is a living, breathing work of art.



While there may be many duplicators, there is only one Grand Theft Auto series and this, the latest instalment, proves that handily. It seems almost fitting that Grand Theft Auto V is being released when it is as there is no better way to celebrate the outgoing console generation than with the best GTA game ever developed.



Grand Theft Auto V
Format: Xbox 360
Publisher: Rockstar Games
Developer: Rockstar North
ESRB Rating: M for Mature
Official Site: <http://www.rockstargames.com>

Rating: 9.5 / 10

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