

Game mocks real tragedy, experts say

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'Grand Theft Auto' series gives credibility to lifestyle, they warn

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The release of "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," a game that draws heavily upon gang culture and violence, has sparked the ire of the country's embattled gang counselors and educators who say the game not only celebrates the gang lifestyle at a time when gang membership is rising nationwide, but makes a mockery of a tragedy that's all too real.

"They've done a great job in portraying the negative," said Jose Perez, a counselor who works with gang members in the San Francisco Bay Area.

While game players cheer the realism of "Grand Theft Auto," that same realism is embraced by street gang members and wannabes who see the game as not only fun but a validation of their lifestyle.

Online message boards devoted to street gangs have been busy studying the game like it's a documentary: discussing the reality behind North-South Latino gang rivalry and comparing the fashion of another gang with the real deal. "Green da color," reads one post, "but th color purple dat remind me of Grape St Crips."

How Rockstar North, a game publisher based in damp Edinburgh, Scotland was able to create an interactive epic that resonates with At youth is quite a story. But for gang counselors and law enforcement, the story is not about record sales and five-starred reviews in gami magazines. It's about telling kids on the edge that they are not a lost cause.

"For those of us out here struggling to prevent gang violence it's frustrating to see the media glorify it," said Perez. He said he and other struggling to prevent an all-out gang war in San Mateo County "and when you hear kids coming in here and talking about the game, it n challenge to reach them."

'They see it as vindication'

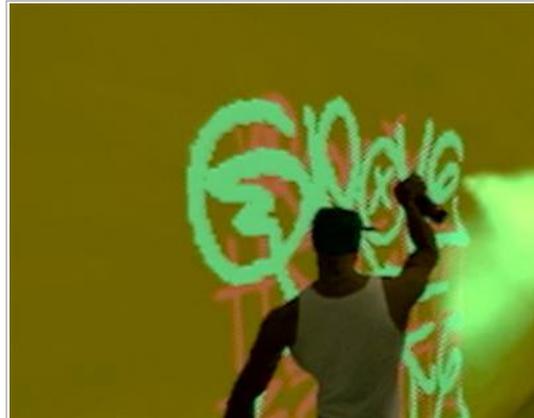
Pop culture, and particularly gaming's, role in putting its stamp of approval on abnormal behavior has long been a controversial topic. those on the front lines, there is no argument.

"I don't care what any criminologist or psychologist says, but repeated exposure to any level of violence does alter the psyche of a person Ernest L. Cuthbertson, a police detective in Greensboro, N.C.

Cuthbertson actually uses "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City," the predecessor of "San Andreas," as part of his work with at-risk kids. He film as they play the game and then challenges them on their in-game decisions to shoot cops and beat up prostitutes.

Sometimes the kids are able to look beyond the game and recognize the repercussions, said Cuthbertson. But other times they reveled in ability to wield automatic weapons.

"The same technology used to train the military and law enforcement is going into games. We are raising a society of natural born killer Cuthbertson.



Tagging is one of the many gang-related quests in "Grand Theft Auto:

Most gang counselors agreed that playing a game doesn't necessarily lead to picking up an Uzi, but based on their experiences, they do think that virtual violence numbs players to actual violence. And the at-risk kids they mostly work with aren't exactly overloaded with great role models to begin with.

"Kids are culturally inoculated by other kids. So then they see this game selling in the store, about gang life, they see it as vindication," said Stephen Cliff, an educator who works with troubled children in upstate New York.

Cliff's comments were echoed by Lisa Taylor-Austin, a Connecticut-based counselor and "gangologist."

"I don't think a video game is going to cause someone to shoot," she said. "But the kids I deal with, they don't talk about "Grand Theft Auto" like it's a game. They talk about how realistic it is."

Taylor-Austin, who spent the late 1980s and early 1990s in Los Angeles studying gang culture, said she was actually approached by the makers of "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" to critique the game to see if it was realistic enough. She refused.

"It would be counterproductive to what I do, which is keeping kids from killing kids."

Spreading the word

"Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" also has the misfortune of launching at a time when gang membership is on a rise. Thousands of gang jailed during the late 1980s and early 1990s during the height of the crack wars are due for release, say gang experts.

This is not just a problem for large cities in the West and Northeast. In the last 15 years, gang violence has spread to the Southeast and Midwest. And when gangs in places like Arkansas and North Virginia call themselves Crips and Bloods, it may stem from a gang member who's new to the cities, say experts. But often the clues come from pop culture.

"The underlying message you get is that gangs are cool, gang banging is cool and crime is cool," said Alejandro A. Alonso, a gang scholar and publisher of streetgangs.com. "And when you go to a place like the Netherlands and see white dudes doing the Crip walk you know where they learned it."

A former gang member from the Bronx, George A. Monger now works to stem a troubling rise in gang violence in the leafy suburbs of Northern Virginia.

"Most kids in northern Virginia are wannabes," he said. "And so when they look at a game and play a game they see how it's done and they want to act it out."

As Mindy S. Gizzard, a probation officer in Richmond, Va., said: "Great, just what we need, one more thing for yahoos to imitate."

Meanwhile, back in 'San Andreas'

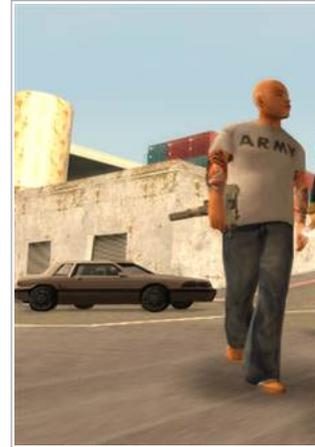
In California, the cultural homeland of "San Andreas," gang counselors grit their teeth and prepare for the worse as kids say the game just reflects life.

Rafael Vazquez, a gang counselor in Sonoma County, California said he talked recently with a teen who played the game and praised its realism. "He said that it kind of relates to me because it talks about where we come from and where we live."

Jose Perez, the San Mateo County councilor said that one of his kids described playing "San Andreas" in an "almost orgasmic rush."

"And the kids I work with say they're kind of glad that finally someone came out with a game that represents the 'hood. They say that they relate to the characters," he said.

Perez can, too. He spent 23 years as a gang member in the Bay Area before exiting the life to become a counselor in 1998. "Being an ex-gang member myself, I can say that some of those acts in the game are not far from reality," said Perez.



Gang members roam the streets in "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas"

Several hundred miles south in San Bernardino County, Terrance Stone is grappling with the same issue. Now the president of a youth group, he's witnessed, first hand, how pop culture has glamorized the gang lifestyle. Stone was a former gang member and leader for 15 years before he got out. A brother, however, began a 36-year prison sentence at the age of 16.

"I have been to something like 50 gang funerals where the guy in the coffin was no more than 20," said Stone. "The game companies do a lot of family crying and the people in the coffin. They don't see the impact this has on our culture.

"They make or play their games in the studio, but for kids on the street it's a real life."

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