

very soul. GTA IV gives us characters and a world with a level of depth previously unseen in gaming and elevates its story from a mere shoot-em-up to an Oscar-caliber drama. Every facet of Rockstar's new masterpiece is worthy of applause. Without question, Grand Theft Auto IV is the best game since Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time.

You play as Niko Bellic, an Eastern European attempting to escape his past and the horrors of the Bosnian war. He arrives in Liberty City to experience the American dream, only to discover his cousin, Roman, may have fibbed a bit in his tales of success. Starting from nothing, Niko makes a living as a killer and enforcer, a bad-ass foreigner who appears to have no morals. The longer we stay with Niko, the more we see that there is a broken human being inside, one who would give anything to escape the person he once was.

Don't worry, GTA's famed over-the-top action and tongue-in-cheek humor are intact, but there is a new level of sophistication in the characters and the game world that raises the story above the norm. As Niko becomes mired in the death throes of American organized crime, he begins to become more self-aware. Niko's struggles with his ruthless nature never inhibit the gameplay, but instead enhance the emotional gravity of a brilliant storyline. The more absurd the action becomes, the greater we feel the very real pathos of Niko Bellic.

Much of the credit goes to the artists at [Rockstar North](#) who created as believable a city as possible. Liberty City is inspired by New York, but not beholden to it. While there are many parallels, Liberty exists in its own universe and rightfully so. Many open-world games have cities that feel as if they existed only from the moment you first turned on your console, but Liberty City looks lived in. It's an old city and each block has its own vibe and its own history.

Drive around Liberty City and you'll be able to identify each individual block. Though Liberty is filled with brownstones and a myriad of similar brick buildings, you can tell one from the other, just as you can in New York. Go to an affluent neighborhood and the street is likely to be newly paved, the pedestrians better dressed, the cops more plentiful. But head to Dukes or Bohan and you'll find streets nearly stripped of asphalt, homeless people wandering about aimlessly and criminals preying on the weak.



NIKO IS FRESH OFF THE BOAT.

Watch the people and you'll witness some amazing things. At one point, I saw a woman stopped at a light, looking in the rearview mirror right before she was rear-ended by a man ogling a girl on the street. The man got out of his car and went to the woman, checking to see if she was okay. This had nothing to do with Niko or a single action I took. These were the citizens of Liberty City going about their day. And it was just one moment in a day full of incidents.

Hang in one area of the city long enough and you'll see how traffic and pedestrian flow changes as the day progresses. When it rains, people bring out umbrellas or shield themselves with a newspaper and run for an awning. Cops chase petty thieves unaware that walking down the street is Niko Bellic, cold-blooded killer. There's a perfect balance of

mumbling doomsayers to remind you that the reason this city never sleeps is because it's full of nut jobs. People go about their day, only altering course when Niko inserts himself into their lives with his crappy driving or excellent marksmanship.

Liberty City isn't as big as San Andreas, but is far denser. There's a lot to see and do and, like New York itself, very little wasted space. When you enter buildings, there are no load times -- you open the door and you're on your way up a flight of stairs to the roof. The only frustration is that there are literally thousands of buildings in the city, but most of them cannot be entered. With the exception of some clearly marked entertainment hot spots and mission-specific areas, there's nothing to indicate which buildings are open for business. So you might find yourself walking into a lot of doors trying to find which one will magically open. It's a little much to expect to have the interiors of every building rendered, but that doesn't make it any less bothersome that you can't go where you please.

The idea of a "living, breathing city" has always been somewhat of a joke in gaming. Every city in the past has felt artificial in some way. But Liberty City feels like a real place. And its history is built not only into the architecture and the people, but even in the music. There are more than 200 songs in GTA IV and many of them were recorded or remastered with specific references to Liberty City. You'll hear songs on the Classics station referencing the city, as if to suggest there's decades of history built into the culture. The soundtrack is an unbelievable blend of rock, pop, reggae, R&B and hip-hop. But more astounding is how well the songs and the DJs blend into the city itself.



YOU NEVER HAVE TO BE ALONE. A HIGH-PRICED CALL GIRL IS ALWAYS AT THE READY.

It's this level of integration that makes Liberty City such a believable place. You won't just hear "America's Next Whore" advertised on the