

Act Four • Opinion

Gold coins, million-dollar contracts and the John Wick economy

By **Sonny Bunch** February 15, 2017**This post discusses plot points from “John Wick” and “John Wick 2.”**

The “John Wick” flicks are almost universally adored by critics, pulling down Rotten Tomatoes scores of 85 percent and 90 percent fresh. And audiences have clearly grown to love the cold-blooded puppy avenger on home video, as “John Wick 2” more than doubled the opening-weekend gross of its predecessor and will almost certainly surpass the original’s domestic box-office run in its first six days of release.

A portion of this intense adoration for a film with a rather basic idea — a man kills the guys who killed his dog and stole his car — comes from the deftly shot action scenes, staged with care and caution by director Chad Stahelski. His fluidity and grace are a welcome respite from the herky-jerky hyper-edited aesthetic that has come to dominate action sequences in the multiplex in recent years. More entertaining than that, though, is the effort spent on creating a world that feels outrageous and real, bizarre yet familiar.

At the center of this universe is The Continental, a sort of hit-man hotel run by Winston (Ian McShane), one of the few people who can get away with referring to John Wick (Keanu Reeves) as “Jonathan.” The Continental is a fascinating place: Like holy ground in “Highlander,” all assassins are welcome yet all are prohibited from doing harm to anyone, lest they risk incurring the (deadly) wrath of Winston. The economy of The Continental — indeed, the economy of John Wick’s life, generally — revolved around the exchange of vintage-looking gold coins for goods and services.

In the sequel, we get another glimpse into how this means of exchange works. Early on, as Wick is seeking out Winston’s advice on how to handle the would-be head of the Camorra, we see the hotelier signing off on a new batch of gold coins. Here is another clue as to how the Wickonomy operates: These are not ancient doubloons, as one might have thought, but newly minted and injected into The Continental’s monetary flow for, one would presume, distribution to the brotherhood of assassins who wander its halls.

How these gold coins actually get into the hands of the assassins is still a bit of a mystery, given that the contracts we hear of are priced out in dollars. One wonders what the dollar-to-gold-coin conversion rate is, exactly, especially since the price-per-item for goods and services in The Continental seems relatively uniform: a coin for a drink, a coin for a gun, a coin for a favor, etc.

Outside of the hotel, things appear a bit more varied: Wick pays a corpse-removal service one coin per body in the first film, for instance, while doling out several coins at once for information on infiltrating the Roman catacombs in the sequel. What are we to make of all this? Well, as Marginal Revolution blogger and George Mason University economics professor Alex Tabarrok might say, “a price is a signal wrapped up in an incentive.”

So what are the signals and incentives in the gold coin system? It seems clear that Winston has used his prices to incentivize hit men into using The Continental as little more than a way station. By pricing a cocktail and carbine at similar levels, Winston is making it far too expensive for the average assassin to use The Continental — with its rules against murder and such — as a permanent safe house. The relative cheapness of guns combined with their impotence onsite means that murderers are incentivized to go elsewhere, to pick up contracts and be on their way. In other words, the economic system serves to keep the motor of the movie turning as much as anything else.

It is telling, then, that what causes Wick to break Winston’s one rule is an explicit repudiation of this signal. When the wealthy Camorra titan Santino D’Antonio (Riccardo Scamarcio) — bereft of protection after his minions were mercilessly murdered by Wick — intimates that he will be spending a long time in The Continental even as other killers try to collect the \$7 million bounty D’Antonio put on Wick’s head, Wick shoots him. This costs Wick access to The Continental and its services, but it also restores balance to the assassin ecosystem — and serves as a shocking reminder that Wick is not a man to be trifled with.

It was a high price for Wick to pay. But the signal it sent to the underworld? That was priceless.

 **2 Comments**

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