

# Welcome to Liberty City... Again

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An Analysis of Grand Theft Auto IV for the  
Playstation 3

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## Back to Liberty City

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With the fourth numbered game in the *Grand Theft Auto* series (there have been several non-numbered spinoffs), *Grand Theft Auto IV*, developed by Rockstar North for the Playstation 3 and the Xbox360, returns the series to its well known locale, Liberty City. The city has been featured in four *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* games prior to this rendition, with a cameo in another two. However, this time the city, and the game itself, is more fleshed out and offers a far more engaging experience for the player. Even though the city has seen improvements, it is *GTA IV*'s new features and enhancements (and the series' tried and true sandbox style gameplay) that set it apart from its predecessors. New game features such as GPS, autosave, the ability to make friends, an in-game cell phone, online gameplay, and much more make this a very detailed, enjoyable gaming experience that not only surpasses any previous *GTA* experience, but may very well surpass almost any other game ever developed.

## Autosave Saves Lives

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Autosave really does save lives, well virtual *GTA* lives that is. That was one of the most frustrating things I found with every *Grand Theft Auto* game before this one. I would complete a long, challenging mission, only to perish (or get busted by the police) on my way back to the "Safe House". What also frustrated me was that it would sometimes take me ten minutes to get back to the safe house. For the most part, my routine was to complete a five minute mission and then spend another five to ten minutes driving back, making sure to avoid a wanted level or keep myself from "sleeping with the fishes." This frustrated me as I spent most of my time driving back to my safe house simply to save my game before I could continue with a new mission. Now some may consider this part of the game and would argue that dying or getting busted does not really disrupt the gameplay. It always frustrated me as I generally liked to keep a clean profile. Now this was my choice, I simply could have gone on to the next mission and accepted my fate, but I preferred to save before venturing back out.

Needles to say, I was very excited when I found out that the developers were going to implement an autosave feature in *GTA IV*. I felt it should have been option in the other *GTA* games far before this. However, now that it is included, it really makes the game more enjoyable. The developers also implemented it very well. The minute you finish a mission it autosaves before any possible mayhem can befall you. Believe me there were a few missions in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* where I would complete a mission with very little health left only to get immediately mowed down by a passing Taxi (the *GTA* series has continually depicted the taxi driver stereotype). With it autosaving immediately, I do not have to fear random fatalities. Also, since it autosaves, I no longer have to spend ten minutes driving all the way back to the safe house. I can freely go on to the next mission. This has allowed me to string together many missions at once. I find this far more enjoyable as it lets me get three to four missions in without having to trudge all the way back to safe house between each mission. Should I perish during a mission, I can just load the autosave and I will start back at my safe house. The autosave feature lets me not only get further in the game quicker, but it keeps me playing longer. Now, the only time I save at the safe house is before I quit my gaming session.

Now the developers also did a smart thing with the autosave feature. As mentioned, I thoroughly enjoy the feature. However, some may think that it takes away from the original game experience for one

reason or another. As such, Rockstar North decided to give the player the option to disable this feature. This is always a good idea when it comes to implementing new features. There can be many players that liked it the way it was before. Giving them the option to turn it off allows them to play the game however they want.

## Follow the GPS-bricked Road

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Another new feature Rockstar North decided to include in this iteration of *GTA* was the GPS system. This again is really another must have feature that saves much frustration and valuable gaming time. With this feature you know exactly where you are going and do not have to drive aimlessly around the city trying to find your next location. Before you were just given a dot and you had to find the best route yourself by either knowing the location or using the map. For the most part the in-game map was the best way to find your way around. However, most of the time you would quickly forget which way you needed to go. This would lead to constant swapping back and forth between driving and the game map. This was frustrating because you had to stop gameplay to continually look at the map. Also, there were times where you would just not be able to find a way to get to the desired location. This would cause you to drive around wasting time.

With the new GPS system Rockstar North incorporated into this version of *GTA*, all you have to do is go into the in-game map one time and set a desired point on the map. It then maps the route automatically for you. It will then draw a line to your location on the game's minimap so that you can follow directly to your destination, without ever having to pause and go back to the larger map. Now should you get chased by cops, flip over a bridge, or somehow deviate from your course, the GPS automatically recalculates a new route. If you are driving a more luxurious car, the GPS system even has a voice that will tell you when to turn and when alert you when you have arrived at your destination. For the most part, you can never seem to hear the voice and you generally just look at the minimap to follow the line. So it may be a nice touch, but it was not really necessary. All the voice really does is increase the authenticity.

During a mission, the GPS will automatically calculate your route, without you having to set it. This eliminates having to worry about where to go during a mission. You can just drive to that location and spend more time doing the mission rather than trying to figure out where to go. However during missions the GPS does become controlled. If you are trying to chase someone down, it will just show you a red dot but not give you the route to their location, much like the previous *GTAs*. The GPS system is also limited in that it will sometimes give you a longer route than really needed. There are shortcuts found throughout the city such as alleyways and dirt roads that cut off some the distance. The GPS system will only give you directions using just the main roads, so you have to find these shortcuts on your own.

Much like the autosave feature, some may feel this takes away from the original *GTA* experience. I feel the developers were smart to include this feature. It simply takes away an unnecessary frustration. There were many times in previous *GTA* games where I would I gain extra wanted level or die simply because I could not figure out where I was going. This in turn would often cause me to fail a mission. With the GPS system you can still drive the cars really fast, dodge oncoming traffic, flip the car over and cause destruction, all without worrying about trying to find your way back.

## Duck and Cover

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A third new major feature Rockstar North intelligently included was the new cover system. During gunfights, you can now press R1 (PS3) to jump to the nearest area of cover. This can be a wall, a car, or even a trash can. You can also duck by pushing in the left analog stick (L3). This gives the combat system a more realistic feel to it. While in cover mode you can move left and right along the object to give you a better angle. Like previous versions you can also push a trigger button (L2 in this case) to lock on to an enemy. While locked on in cover mode it will fire quick shots, only coming out of cover for a few seconds to shoot at the enemy (whether they are thugs or cops). If you are taking heavy fire, you can also just hit the fire button (R2) and it will blind fire into direction of the enemy. The player is not the only one that is capable of going into cover mode. Most of the artificial intelligence (AI) will hide behind cars or other objects. This feature is a nice addition and it is evident that Rockstar North put good effort into creating a simple cover system that is both effective but yet not too complex. *GTA IV* is meant to be more of action-adventure style of game and a duck and cover system found in such games as *Gears of War* may have been too much. The cover system in *GTA IV* comes in handy while not being overly complex.

Even though it does come in handy at times, and it does add a level of depth to combat, I find myself not really using it that often. For the most part I find it slower and less accurate. I usually duck behind a car or obstacle, popping up only to fire when the enemy comes out from behind their cover. For some reason when it is in cover mode it is sometimes hard to control the rate of fire. I think it depends on where the enemy is currently located as well as if you are locked on to them. Regardless, I usually find it fires too slowly. Generally I come out from the cover with guns blazing. This generally defeats the enemies faster with minimal damage taken. However, when heavily outnumbered it does seem to be the more effective way to go, making the feature a really must have during more difficult gunfights. Overall, it is a very nice addition to the series and makes the firefights that more engaging and enjoyable for the player, all while adding a sense of realism.

## Social Networking is Everywhere

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Even in *GTA IV*, you can spend time doing some social networking. Rockstar North decided to implement a cell phone as a way to interact with certain elements in the game. With this cell phone you can make phone calls to anyone, including the ability to literally dial 911, causing the cops to come to your location. You can also call up some of the friends and girlfriends that you will acquire through many of the game's missions. With the girlfriends, you may call them up and take out on dates. For your friends, you can contact them and hit up the local pool hall or bar. Once they become a friend, their number is automatically stored in the phone. You may also receive text messages from your friends or mission contacts. This feature the developers decided to include adds even more depth. For the most part some of the functions of the phone are not required to enjoy the game experience. Some functions of the phone merely allow the player to enjoy the game in different ways. With that said, the cell phone is still commonly used in missions. During a mission the game will automatically call the person you are working for asking for more details. You may also receive text messages during missions with instruction. This adds another level of realism to the game. The cell phone is also used to sometimes initiate new missions. Often a contact will call or text you telling you to come visit them for more work.

During missions you can even receive phone calls from your friends who are looking to hang out. If this occurs, the game will automatically tell the friend you are busy and unable to hang out. However, if you are not in a mission and you either hang up or blow them off, your relationship will suffer and you will miss out on opportunities these friends have to offer. If the friend likes you enough, you can get special favors from them or be given extra work on the side. On top of that, you can even set your own ringtones and customize the phone to a certain degree. Although it seems like a small unnecessary feature, it is pretty impressive to see the level of detail in this game. It also gives the player more content and it offers a good break from the games main missions.

Along with the cell phone, you can even access a computer through a few café's located in the city. Here you can read online news, use dating services, and even check your email. Through email you can receive photo attachments. In fact a whole series of missions is done via email where you are required to boost cars, with the contact sending you a picture of the car via email. This feature really engrosses the character in the gaming environment. It may seem silly, but it shows that Rockstar North put an insanely high level of detail into the game as shown through many of these social networking features. For the most part I find myself not using these, but they definitely offer a different gaming experience for other players.

## Even More Mayhem

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Although it may seem impossible, you can now cause even more mayhem, chaos and destruction in this version than you could in previous *GTAs*. First, there are now several buildings you can enter at will. It is not always evident which buildings can be entered as there is no sign notifying you. You just have to walk near the door and if it opens you can go in. Many of the missions now require you to go into buildings, while in previous *GTAs*, most missions were outside. For missions, you will be directed to any buildings you need to enter. However, when you are just traveling the city there are many doors around that may or may not open. So you pretty much have to stumble across the buildings that are accessible. To help clear up the confusion with the buildings, the developers probably should have included some kind of flashing arrow or icon to notify the player that this building was accessible. When you do manage to find a building, it becomes a pretty fun feature that I have found is very useful for causing massive mayhem.

A good example of this new feature and its ability to create more mayhem is evident in one of the hospitals that can be found in the game. One of the hospitals is open allowing you to literally walk in and interact with the nurses and patients. This also allows for even more mayhem. You can now barricade yourself indoors and start terrorizing the city. The cops will attempt to send the force in after you, but instead of being forced to stay outside surrounded by cops, you can nullify their numbers by hiding in a corner or barricading behind a desk with the new cover system. With this, it is very hard for the police to capture you, allowing for massive chaos. Although this may not be the most morally acceptable new feature, and it does allow for honestly some pretty twisted massacres, it does make the game a more enjoyable experience (in a twisted way). With the developers giving you the ability to take cover indoors, it again adds to the level of detail and depth and gives the game a more realistic feel. In previous *GTAs* you were stuck to open areas for the most part, making the gunfights usually short and sweet. Now with the cover system and the ability to hide out inside buildings, you can literally be in a firefight for hours on end.

The ability to go into the buildings is not the only new feature that increases mayhem. You can now have all new kinds of fun with explosions. The animations for explosions are pretty impressive, and I find myself blowing stuff up just to see the great particle effects and ever changing, non pre-animated explosions. When a car blows up pieces will fly in all different directions. These pieces will even cause other cars and people to catch fire. This allows for more mayhem. You can now also cause more noticeable damage to the vehicles. You could shoot the tires out in previous *GTA* games, but now when you do it, you will start to see sparks flying around and the car while driving and it will handle erratically. You can now also totally rip apart a car. Bumpers will fall off, the entire side or front end can be smashed in, you can even take out the head lights, or If you like, you can even blow out all of the windows in the car. When you shoot at a car you will clearly see the bullet holes. In fact the windshield will have realistic bullet holes and a nice rippling shattered glass effect. If you were to hit pedestrians while driving, their blood will stay on the car. One of the new animations that I find really fun is the ability to fly through the windshield. If you are traveling at a high speed and you crash into a guard rail or wall, you will be thrown from the car, through the windshield, crying in pain.

Again these features are probably not the most morally accepted features, but the game is rated M for a reason. These features may seem small, but as mentioned many times already, it just gives the game unprecedented depth. These small little details are causing *GTA IV* to receive perfect scores in pretty much every popular gaming magazine and website. For the most part this series is renowned for its sandbox play and its ability to allow the player to cause mayhem and destruction at will. In *GTA IV* it is brought to a new level and you can now cause even more massive chaos with many of the new features.

## Log Me On Scotty

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The final feature to mention is the new ability to take the mayhem online. Using the Playstation Network (or Xbox live in the Xbox 360 version) players can now cause mayhem with others around the globe. Should you complete the game's main story, or just want to tear up the city with others, the online features offered in *GTA IV* are a huge addition. Rockstar North was finally able to include some online gameplay and it will prove to be a very important feature. In this day and age almost all games now come with an online component and it is a great way to extend the life of a game. For some gamers it is the main reason they buy certain games. So including online functionality is almost becoming a must. I have been mostly engrossed in the single player experience, so I have not found myself using the online component much, but I know many players will find this addition very enjoyable.

Using the cell phone mentioned earlier, the player can select the online game mode. Here you will find a variety of game types to choose from, fifteen to be exact. For the series' first dabble into online gameplay, fifteen game modes is pretty impressive. I won't go over each of the online modes, but I will highlight a few of them. For the most part you will still find some of your standard online gameplay modes. There is the ever common Team Deathmatch where you strive to get the most kills. However, there are a few gameplay modes that are rather interesting and unique. For example, there is Team Mafia Work where you can, in teams, complete jobs which may include killing certain targets or boosting certain cars. Another mode is Car Jack City where again in teams you can work together to jack various cars around the city earning money for returning cars undamaged. Finally, another interesting online mode is the Free Mode where you can simply just cause random mayhem around the city with many other players. Here you are free to cause chaos as you would in the single player experience,

except this time you can cause even more destruction as there are now multiple people playing at the same time.

All of these online modes show that Rockstar North was serious about having a solid online component. It is evident that this was not something they glued together at the last minute. In fact none of this game feels slapped together or rushed at all. These online game modes simply complete the package. Although I have yet to use much of the online component, it is definitely a very smart addition and the developers pulled it off quite nicely.

## So Long From Liberty City

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It is impressive to see what Rockstar North was able to do with this title. For the most part *GTA IV* is very similar to its predecessors. It has the same great sandbox play and is heavily revolved around mission based play. However, at no point does it ever seem stale, even though the series is continually the same type of gameplay experience. I can honestly say I can find almost no flaws in this game. The load times are almost non-existent, it runs smoothly on the PS3 with 1080p, with no rendering issues, and all game functions and features work properly without a hitch. It would seem that all parties involved put forth massive effort into making this game the best possible product and they may have in fact created a flawless piece of video game art. It appears that the several delays this game faced were well worth the wait.

What makes this GTA different and even more enjoyable than its counterparts are all of the aforementioned features. You do really have to applaud Rockstar North's ability to keep the same concept continually fresh and enjoyable. With *GTA IV* they included terrific new features in the autosave and GPS that takes away a lot of the tedium found in previous versions. These two new feature help streamline gameplay and really keep you from ever getting bored with the game. The new cover system makes gunfights more realistic and strategic, all while adding a more engaging and in-depth experience. Also, Rockstar North somehow managed to allow the player to cause even more mayhem, again finding ways to make it fresh with the new explosion animations and ability to go into buildings. To wrap it all up, they manage to find time to fit in a pretty robust, unique online gaming experience. With the plethora of new features found in this game, combined with *GTAs* overall addictive sandbox play, *GTA IV* is an easy early candidate for Game of the Year. The game is already the fastest selling game in industry history. In fact it could be argued that it may be the most detailed and enjoyable gaming experience ever developed.