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Forza 4 not real thing, but close



You can design your own racing car, as this frame grab from Forza 4 shows.

NICHOLAS MARONESE
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

To call Forza Motorsports 4 a "racing video game" is to miss the point.

It's more of a wholly immersive automotive experience.

It's a new genre: it's a "car video game."

There's racing in the game, yes, but there's also a virtual mechanic's garage.

There's a supercar showroom, too, and access to a worldwide network of car enthusiasts.

There're so many features you might find yourself asking, as Top Gear's Jeremy Clarkson does — indirectly — in the game's opening sequence: What can real life offer you that Forza 4 can't in the comfort of your living room?


Put another way, why would a 22-year-old with an Xbox 360 gaming console, like me, wrench on an engine, photograph cars at a cruise night, or pay dues to a car club when I can do it all in-game?

"The next generation of car guys [is] no longer being bred in garages and under shade trees," writes Ray Wert, editor of car blog Jalopnik.

"They're growing up in their parents' basements playing car video games."

Wert isn't exaggerating when he argues Forza Motorsports 4 will "change car culture forever."

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And when he explains that Forza 4's popularity poses a threat to his blog, that the game is his competition and not other websites or car magazines, he's not kidding, then, either.

Forza Motorsports 3, Forza 4's predecessor, and rival franchise Gran Turismo sold more than 10 million games in 2009 and 2010; and the Forza franchise, produced by Microsoft's Turn 10 Studios, has seen sales grow with every new version.

Hundreds of thousands of players log millions of hours competing against each other in the game's online races every month. The community's so large it even has its own subcultures based on a player's preference for certain game modes or car decaling skills.

It's gotten to the point where some gamers can say that everything they know about cars they learned from Forza and other games.

But that doesn't mean Forza 4 has kicked real-life car culture to the curb.

Steve Engels, who teaches video game design at the University of Toronto, says that while the variety of car-related video games has become more diverse, and some have become more realistic, they haven't really changed much since titles like Pitstop and Test Drive first came out in the 1980s.

We didn't worry about video games replacing reality then, and we shouldn't now, he adds.

"Games have always been around to allow people to live out scenarios they can't in real life, to let kids too young to drive have a turn behind the wheel," says Engels. "But they're never a complete substitute for the real thing."

And even if Forza Motorsports 4 could arguably replace real-life car culture, its developers say that's not what it was designed to do.

"What we wanted was to develop the next generation of car lover. I want to ignite that spark in the younger generation," says Dan Greenawalt, Turn 10's creative director.

He explains that since 2002, when he first pitched Forza to Microsoft, the goal has been to turn gamers into car lovers and car lovers into gamers, to get them both thinking about cars in a new way.

"That doesn't mean tomorrow's car enthusiast is only going to play Forza. They'll play it, and from there maybe get into actual racing, or start watching Top Gear. They'll get into car culture one way or another," says Greenawalt. "I just want our games to spark that."

And spark it they have.

Though they're only now getting their driver's licences, plenty of the youth who grew up on car video games are already making that virtual-to-real-life-enthusiast transition.

Like 20-year-old NASCAR driver Trevor Bayne, who this year became the youngest winner of the Daytona 500. Like many young racing drivers, Bayne's spent hours in a simulator — in his case, Only a year earlier, the only racing experience he could boast were the hours logged in an iRacing's.

Or like California gamer Adam Pintek, who fell in love with the Ford GT90 in 1997's Need for Speed 2 arcade game and recently decided to scratch-build his own replica of the one-off concept car.

Engels agrees the relationship between car culture and games like Forza is symbiotic.

"Game designers look to the automotive community for inspiration, and their games end up shaping new car enthusiasts, who enter back into that same community."

"It's not about replacing old ways, it's about embracing new media," says Greenawalt. "Could it replace the real thing for some people? Maybe. But that's not our goal. We're just trying to supplement it, to create new experiences that speak to a new audience."

Simply put, video games aren't replacing car culture — they're just redefining it. If anything, Forza 4 is helping preserve enthusiast culture by fixing in youth the itch to get out of their parents' basement and onto a real race track.

Why would I wrench on an engine, go to a cruise night or join a car club instead of staying at home playing Forza Motorsports 4?

Because, as immersive as Forza is, all it does is get me revved up for the real thing.

What's it like to play?

To really understand Forza Motorsports 4, it helps if you've played Forza 3: Turn 10 Studios' latest effort basically takes everything about its predecessor and makes it better, then adds bonuses.

Unfamiliar with the franchise? In short, it's an experience.

The variety of game modes and features mean there's something in Forza 4 for just about everyone.

The racing is fantastic, but the new car mini-games, like car bowling and soccer, are even more

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fun; the garage where you upgrade and paint your car is as good as Forza 3's (i.e. amazing); and everything — from races to menus — comes with a photo mode where you can snap some pics.

The new AutoVista showroom mode lets players enjoy the game's nearly photo-realistic graphics as they examine million-dollar supercars. Each comes accompanied with a monologue by Top Gear's Jeremy Clarkson.

The Kinect system (sold separately) lets you use your body as the controller, but it's clumsy and feels like a gimmick. Same goes for the wireless Speed Wheel.

The online community is worth signing up for, though. Besides buying and selling cars and racing each other, players can now form car clubs or compete as direct rivals.

If you like gaming or cars — and especially if you like both — you'll want to check out Forza Motorsports 4.

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