

Video game offends Haitians

Leaders decry violent dialogue of Vice City

By Monica Rhor, Globe Staff, 12/8/2003

Carline Desire has seen the signs of cultural pride among young Haitians: the Haitian flag that her US-born nephew hung in his room, next to the American flag, or the success of singer Wyclef Jean, who boasts of his Haitian heritage.

Then, last week, she learned about Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, a top-selling video game that portrays Haitians, Colombians, and Cubans -- among others -- as gang members and drug lords. At one level in the game, a character says: "I hate these Haitians" and "I'm gonna kill me a Haitian."

First, Desire's heart sank. Then, anger turned to action. Desire, the executive director of the Association of Haitian Women in Boston, added her voice to a protest campaign that is quickly growing within the local Haitian community and in Haitian strongholds across the country .

"Everyone is upset about it. It's another blow to us," said Desire, who first heard about the game from a friend in New York, and then from a flurry of e-mails sent from around the country. "A lot of young people are so controlled by the media. Something can be on screen for one second and have such a damaging effect to us as an immigrant community."

The video game, produced by New York-based Rockstar Video Games for Sony's Playstation 2, has been out for more than a year, but the protests began only after a New York television station aired a consumer report about the video game late last month.

Since then, Haitian-American communities in New York, Miami, Boston, and other cities have spread the word about the game's depiction of Haitians through e-mail dispatches, Internet postings, and Haitian radio shows.

Last week, Haitian activists, the Haitian consul general, and state and local officials in New York rallied on the steps of New York City Hall to protest the game. Another protest is planned in front of the Rockstar offices next Monday, said Yvon Rosemond, community coordinator at Haitian Centers Council in Brooklyn, one of the groups leading the protests.

In the Boston area, with a Haitian population that the 2000 Census put at 43,819, Desire and other Haitian leaders said they have been contacted by dozens of people in the community who are concerned about the video game's impact -- particularly on young people.

"They think it's outrageous," said Eno Mondesir, chairman of Haitian-Americans United, one of the largest Haitian organizations in the area. "They think it is just stereotyping and sending out a message that is disrespectful."

Haitian radio call-in shows in Boston have been buzzing with debate about the video game, said Osvald Neptune, who hosts a show on Radio Concorde, 1580 AM, which broadcasts to Mattapan, Dorchester, Hyde Park, Somerville, Cambridge, and Brockton.

"Many people say it's a case of discrimination and prejudice against Haitians," said Neptune, who said he had fielded dozens of calls on the subject, including some from Haiti. "They wonder what people have against Haitians."

Neptune found out about the game's content after his 17-year-old son purchased Grand Theft Auto, and discovered that the game urged players to kill Haitians.

"I had to talk to him and tell him that Haitians have been victimized so many times. We have faced this kind of discrimination before," said Neptune.

The video game, which has sold more than 10.5 million copies worldwide and is one of the best-selling games ever, is set in the "glamorous, hedonistic metropolis of Vice City" -- a pastel-hued, drug-infested city that resembles the city made famous by the TV show "Miami Vice."

The objective of the game, which is rated "M" for mature, is to take control of Vice City and amass points by killing enemies, police, or innocent bystanders. In addition to Haitian gangs, the game also features Cuban and Colombian drug dealers and Italian mobsters.

Take-Two Interactive Inc., the parent company of Rockstar, issued a written statement saying the game was not intended to offend anyone.

"We empathize with the concerns of the Haitian community and we are giving serious consideration to them," the statement said. "Some statements made by fictional characters in Grand Theft Auto: Vice City have been taken out of context. There was no intention to offend any ethnic group and we take these claims very seriously."

In Boston, Haitian community leaders say they hope to organize community protests against the video game. They plan to meet today at the offices of the Association of Haitian Women to plan a strategy, said Desire. "It's a continuing struggle," said Desire. "After all these years, I don't think we as a Haitian community have been fully accepted by American society. So the fight continues."

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