

Wheelman

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As the game industry has grown over the years, more and more games are coming out that are movie tie-ins, with almost every major film release having a game released alongside it. Then there are occasions when a game will be so good that it will inspire a film to tell the story, such as Doom or Hitman. Rarer still are the games that are seen as sequels to a previous film, such as John Woo's Stranglehold (with Hard Boiled being the film prequel). Wheelman starring Vin Diesel doesn't fall into any of these current categories. It hasn't used a film for inspiration, and there is currently no film being done about the game. Instead, the game is set up to play out like a film, with a Hollywood star in the leading role and a storyline that they hope will grip you and pull you in. Unfortunately however, following the story can be as difficult as trying to follow a foreign film that doesn't have any subtitles.

Developed by Midway Studios Newcastle, Wheelman is set in a recreation of the city of Barcelona. It tells the story of Milo Burik, who is voiced by Vin Diesel and unsurprisingly looks just like him. Milo is a government man working to get inside the crime syndicates in Barcelona, something you're not made aware of right away as the game drops you straight into a getaway mission. It also sets the tone for the rest of the game story wise, as you're given minimal information, meet various characters whose position and affiliations are never made really clear, and you're often left to wonder exactly what you're in Barcelona for, who you are after, and what your ultimate aim is. It unfortunately means that the story of Wheelman is one of its worst points, as by halfway through the game you effectively give up trying to follow it and trying to figure out exactly whose side you're meant to be on. Instead, you simply follow the instructions that you're given to complete each mission, and hope that somewhere along the line it'll all make sense. The aforementioned first mission of the game, along with being an introduction to the convoluted story, is also used to teach you the basics of the game, and how to make effective use of one of the games cooler features – vehicular combat. By using the right thumbstick you can throw caution and physics to the wind and use your vehicle as a weapon, tossing your car right and left to sideswipe enemy vehicles, as well as using the same moves to dodge the attacks from your opponents. This vehicular combat becomes the main focus of a large part of the game, so becoming good at it becomes somewhat of a necessity, as does understanding the strength of the vehicle you're in. If you're behind the wheel of a 4x4 or a truck, your attacks will cause much more damage to your opponents, and a few hits can send them crashing to an explosive and spectacular death. However, should you be on a bike or scooter, those same driving moves will be defensive only as you weave in and out of traffic and avoid being crushed by cars. Should you try using your bike as a weapon, your face will likely make a very sudden and spectacular impact with the pavement. As well as using your vehicle as a weapon, when driving you also have the ability to shoot your enemies. You can do this in three different ways. You can simply drive by them, using the left bumper to start shooting, with the aiming reticule locking on to your opponent the steadier you drive. You also have two special moves at your disposal, which become available as you build up your focus meter. This is achieved in a similar fashion to the Burnout games, with dangerous driving and causing destruction the easiest way to increase your meter. As it builds up, you can use two special attacks while driving. The first of these is the Aimed Shot, which slows down time and allows Milo to aim at anything in front of him, letting him pop tyres, shoot armed motorcyclists, blow up car gas tanks, and pretty much cause as much destruction as possible. The other special move is the Cyclone, where time again slows down as Milo throws his car into a 180° spin and allows him to take out anyone following him too closely. Both of these moves will be used frequently by anyone playing Wheelman, especially as you get into the later missions where you will often find yourself heavily outnumbered and needing to take out assailants as quickly as possible. As your vehicle takes damage during a mission, which is virtually impossible to avoid, you'll often find yourself needing another car. This is where Wheelman proves itself to be a game heavily focussed on driving, as rather than having to stop and pull over a new vehicle, you can simply Air Jack into another car or bike. By lining yourself up behind a car that takes your fancy, you can hold the B button until the target reticule turns green, then release the B button to watch Milo leap impossibly through the air, swing in through the passenger window, and kick the poor sap driving straight through the door with nary a hiccup. It's another move that you will find yourself increasingly using as you progress through the game, as the toughness and amount of enemies increase and your car quickly goes from a gleaming piece of automotive technology to a smoking pile of metal. Thankfully though for a game which is heavily vehicle based the driving side of things controls very well. There are no simulation style physics here as you weave in and out of traffic, taking corners at impossible speed, driving straight through trees, and generally making a huge mess wherever you go. The cars handle with a pleasing response to your controls, neither moving too quickly or too slowly. It's not quite up there with Burnout when it comes to how the cars handle or how responsive they are, but the fact that it feels so similar says volumes for the driving side of Wheelman. You should never get frustrated by your car when you're driving, as you never feel it's not responding to you properly. As you start to play Wheelman and progress through the story, your initial impression that this will be a simple GTA rip off starts to fade. The amount of on-foot sections are comparatively, with most of the missions being heavily vehicle based, which turns out to be a good thing. The on-foot sections are unfortunately fairly poor and generic, lacking in any real inspiration when it comes to level design. There is no real cover system other than ducking behind crates and boxes, and as you're progressing through sections, you'll know exactly when you're about to be attacked by enemies as the amount of cover increases. They could just put up a sign that says "Beware, bad guys about to shoot you" as it really is that obvious. The aiming system is easy enough to use however, and flicking between targets is easy. There are a decent number of weapons as well, though you're limited to just your handgun and one additional weapon. Given that you'll generally snaffle lots of ammo for the weapon you currently have, and when you swap to

another you'll often only have a few shots left, there is little incentive to swap between weapons unless you get really low on ammo. These sections also aren't helped by facing enemies who have had their common sense surgically removed. Instead of finding cover and popping out to fire at you, they will inexplicably run straight towards you and stand in the open firing at you, almost begging you to put them out of their misery. I'd say it's like shooting fish in a barrel, but at least they have the good sense to not stand still while you take careful aim at their heads. As I said though, the on-foot sections are not altogether that common, especially when you add the side missions in. There are 7 different types of side mission, each of them completely vehicle based. They range from missions such as Taxi, where you have to transport a passenger from one point on the map to another, to Rampage missions, which task you to cause the most amount of damage in a set time limit as possible, to the standard Street races, though these tend to be much more violent than in other games of this type. While the 7 different types of side missions do show some variation between the others, they unfortunately get very samey within each type as you complete more of them. All of them rely on the same techniques and skills that you use during the storyline missions, so they do tend to become quite a chore after a while. There is an incentive to complete them however, as doing so with a high enough rating will unlock bonuses for you, such as extra garages which will help you lose the police, to extra health for your character and car, to an increased Focus Gauge. These bonuses are useful but not altogether essential, so it's really whether you can stand grinding your way through the side missions to gain the rewards. Graphically, Wheelman is unfortunately average at best. As you'd expect, Milo Burik is a near perfect representation of muscle-bound movie man Vin Diesel, when he's standing still anyway, as the character animations when running and moving are pretty poor. Everyone else you meet in the game is fairly generic, and you can tell they've spent much more time getting Diesel's likeness right than they have on other character models. Barcelona itself is a pleasant enough city, though it's unfortunately not very memorable. Unlike other games such as GTA where you can learn a city and know the shortcuts just from looking around, in Wheelman you will find it very hard to identify your location based on what you can see, other than in a few select areas. From an audio point of view, Wheelman again sits mired in mediocrity. The voice work from Diesel is exactly what you'd expect as he delivers his lines with a hint of cheesiness, but it works as the game doesn't try to be too serious. The rest of the voice work is instantly forgettable, as is the music in the game. When driving you do have various radio stations to listen to, but I never bothered with them as the music is sub-standard at best. Wheelman feels like a huge missed opportunity for me. While the driving side of the game can be quite fun, the way the rest of the game lets it down is bordering on unforgivable. With a much tighter story, better on foot action and a greater variety of side missions, Wheelman could have been an enjoyable and over-the-top experience. As it stands, it finds itself outgunned at virtually every turn by the rest of the games in the sandbox genre. With a story that's near impossible to follow for the 8 hours or so that it lasts, I find this very hard to recommend to anyone except the die hard Vin Diesel fans who are desperate to play another game starring the big man. Discuss this in our Forum