The Streets of San Francisco in Games: A Look at Driving Games Set in San Francisco

As we are getting ready for GDC, the Game Developers Conference, we realized we are not only getting excited about it being one of the industry's biggest events and one of the highlights of our year, but also because it's in San Francisco! We are thrilled to be spending a few days in the heart of the Silicon Valley, America's hub for the tech and gaming sector, and to be able to roam the iconic streets of San Francisco.

Games have put their own unique spin on San Francisco's streets, often imitating the look and feel of the hilly city by the bay. Even if they don't provide an exact replication, many games have tried to capture the feel of driving through or racing around San Francisco. Here are a few of Alpha's favorite representations of San Francisco's streets.

Crazy Taxi

The premise of Crazy Taxi is simple: You're a crazy driving…well, taxi driver. You pick up passengers in various locations around a fictional San Francisco-like city and drop them off at their destinations. Some destinations are farther away than others. These more difficult destinations will give you extra fare money. Since the game originated in the arcades, it's all about high scoring and beating your personal best, represented by a dollar amount. The more difficult fares will contribute to a higher dollar score.

Crazy Taxi simulates a very stylized, bright imitation of San Francisco. Trolley cars travel through the streets. Streets can be tight with sharp turns, and the terrain is often hilly. You'll zoom past the ocean, slide around tight corners, and race to drop off passengers. There's no map, but an onscreen arrow points you in the general direction to go. However, learning the city will allow you to take shortcuts, quickening your trip and enabling you to deliver more passengers in a set amount of time.

The streets help compliment the arcade gameplay. Completing fares faster will get you a tip bonus added onto to your base fare. Completing crazy driving stunts like near miss collisions will also add to your tip. The scoring system and the layout of the streets encourage you to drive crazy and max out your scores.

SEGA's arcade racer was released originally in 1999, then later ported to the Dreamcast in 2000. Crazy Taxi was popular enough to spawn ports, multiple sequels, and a Crazy Taxi mobile idle game, and it all started from imitating the look and feel of San Francisco's streets.

San Francisco Rush: Extreme Racing

Like Crazy Taxi, the Rush series started out as an arcade game.

At first glance, it's a straightforward arcade racing game. There are a handful of tracks, cars with different handling abilities, and races are lap based.

However, Rush has a lot of shortcuts on each level, encouraging some exploration. Your cars are also fragile, resulting in an explosive fireball when you clip a wall or obstacle.

Due to technical limitations, the version of San Francisco seen in Rush is very loosely based on the actual city. As a result, the developers spent their time trying to capture the major highlights of San Francisco. Depending on which platform you're playing on, you might find yourself racing across the Golden Gate Bridge in foggy weather, around the city and past Fisherman's Wharf, or past Murphy Windmill in Golden Gate Park. The game may be set entirely in San Francisco, but there's enough variety in the track layout and scenery to make each track unique.

Driver: San Francisco

The long-running series Driver debuted in 1999, with the first game set in both Miami and San Francisco. The fifth installment, Driver: San Francisco, takes place entirely within the Bay Area and San Francisco, giving players a massive environment to drive around in. The game's world is equivalent to 208 miles / 335 km of roads.[1]

Driver: San Francisco is an objective based driving game. Detective John Tanner is on a mission to take down the criminal overlord Jericho, a notorious smuggler, and cop killer.

The game's breakout mechanic was Shift, an ability that allows John Tanner to possess and take control of nearby cars, allowing the player to hop from one car to another. That means you never exit a vehicle and traverse on foot. You do cool stunts, build up your Shift, and then hop into a different vehicle if you get too far away from your objective.

Driver: San Francisco blends realism and fiction, using real-life locations and areas of San Francisco to capture the feel of the city while ensuring that the driving is still fun. There's a mix of the usual San Francisco favorites: wide streets, narrow alleys, hilly roads, and trolley tracks. But Driver: San Francisco also adds some of San Francisco's iconic locations: Lombard Street, The San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, Pier 39, Fisherman's Wharf, The Embarcadero, the Chinatown Gate, the Golden Gate Bridge, Coit Tower, the Japanese Tea Garden, and more. These landmarks can all be seen as you navigate the streets of Driver: San Francisco.

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San Francisco is a city of personality. It's been portrayed in movies, games, and books for decades. It's easy to see San Francisco as an iconic city. The streets of San Francisco might not get as much attention, but it turns out they can be a fast, chaotic playground for developers.

1 https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/driver-san-francisco-hands-on