Gran Turismo visionary and workaholic Kazunori Yamauchi spent three years making the fourth instalment of his epic driving simulation.

Unlike many of his more scurrilous car-yard counterparts, the world's best car salesman has never lied or pocketed a commission. But as the driving force behind the gaming world's premier driving simulation, Kazunori Yamauchi has influenced millions of car buyers.

The Gran Turismo series has sold more than 32 million copies, and has become so realistic that many car manufacturers are using the game as a marketing tool to promote their latest creations - even Australia's Ford and Holden. Manufacturers such as BMW, Subaru, Honda, Alfa Romeo, Mazda, Nissan and Toyota have distributed Gran Turismo demonstration discs as a way of enabling potential customers to sample new cars.

Gran Turismo 4, due in Australia in March, features Australian-made cars for the first time, with the Holden SS Commodore and Monaro Series 2, plus the new Ford Performance Vehicles GT and F6 Typhoon.

"It's a good way, from our point of view, to increase brand awareness and create an inspirational brand with the younger audiences," says Mark Behr, FPV product planning and brand marketing manager.

Holden licensing manager Jane Marshall says Holden supplied Sony with detailed data about its cars and would like to explore more opportunities with games such as GT: "We see it as a fantastic branding opportunity, developing enthusiasm and excitement, giving (people) the opportunity to experience the pleasure of actually driving our cars."
Yamauchi is pleased that Gran Turismo enables people to sample many different vehicles, and that car companies are using GT as a marketing tool. "We've seen it increasing," says Yamauchi. "We've been very happy about that. Their cars are what made us so passionate about driving, so it's good to give something back."

Yamauchi is just one of 80 astonishingly dedicated Japanese game developers who invested more than three years of their lives to make Gran Turismo 4. Most routinely slept under their desks and some went months without going home.

But GT4 can still be accurately described as Yamauchi's baby. Whereas most games in the West are designed by committee, Yamauchi is the sole visionary behind the Gran Turismo series.

A passionate, driven and focused designer, Yamauchi creates Gran Turismo titles not for the legions of fans, but for himself. The petrol hedonist had already logged more than 3000 laps with the game before it was finished, most of it on Nurburgring, the world's toughest 21-kilometre circuit.

Seven years after the first Gran Turismo was released, Yamauchi is still surprised by the simulation's success. "We really are kind of car nerds, but the game has surprisingly wide appeal. It's true that I really make it for me, but it makes me happy that so many people have enjoyed driving the game."

Gran Turismo product manager Jason Fitzgerald says it is Yamauchi's zeal and commitment that makes GT the ultimate driving simulation. "He has an absolute passion for cars and the experience of driving. In 100 years we might have run out of petrol, but Kazunori appreciates cars for what they are today, everyone else takes them for granted. He appreciates their design, handling, feel, their art.

"He is the director, even more so than Hollywood directors. He decides on the look, the feel, the way it plays, the physics, everything. GT is such a quality game because he does look after every detail."

Fitzgerald adds that Yamauchi is a "total workaholic", usually working from 11am until 4am, and even longer when a deadline is approaching. "But he has so much passion and enthusiasm, I think it doesn't feel like work. He's enjoying every moment."

Yamauchi says he was committed to painstaking realism in GT4 and pushing PlayStation2 to its limit. But the game has become so realistic (and consequently demanding) that a mode was introduced where the game almost plays itself, a recognition that the average punter has no chance of ever successfully mastering a course such as Nurburgring in an exotic, high-performance car.

Known as B-Spec, the new mode is like an interactive replay, where users direct how aggressive the computer-controlled driver should be as the car winds around the circuit.

"This is a driving simulator where you don't drive at all, simply specifying the driving pace like a director or race team manager," explains Yamauchi, who hopes the mode will assist beginners and entertain aficionados.

"I like trying to drive a lap in under seven minutes on Nurburgring," he says. "I enjoy trying to get a best time, but I know that not everybody is like me. I hope that B-Spec will be able to be enjoyed by many different players." Yamauchi has a vision of "Gran
Turismo cafes", where fans can relax over a beer or coffee "and watch the beautiful cars compete".

Many players will consider B-Spec an esoteric addition, but Gran Turismo 4 is hardly lacking content. It has 700 cars and 50 circuits.

Yamauchi describes the cars as GT's "actors". The range is staggering, including concept cars, memorable vehicles from the '70s, '80s and '90s, historical cars going back to 1886, and highly customised street racers with superchargers and nitrogen boosts. There are too many desirable rides to mention, including cars from manufacturers such as Ford and BMW that have yet to hit showrooms.

But including so many vehicles was not a simple task. It took one designer a day to construct a virtual ride for the original PlayStation game, but the staggering detail in GT4 means that each car constituted a month's work.

"Car culture is a very segmented world, with disparate, individual tastes," Yamauchi explains. "To try to realise those different tastes and worlds, we needed 650 cars. Actually, I wanted double the number, but it wasn't possible."

The game includes a combination of new tracks and old favourites, blending real circuits with fictional layouts. Every track was rebuilt, starting from course measurements, to improve their accuracy.

On tracks such as California's Laguna Seca, dedicated players will notice the topography is more accurate, while the increased detail is also evident in old GT favourites such as Tokyo Route 246. Yamauchi says the proof of the game's realism is that GT lap times at each circuit accurately match real-world performance in any car.

New tracks include El Capitan, a scenic tour of the Yosemite National Park, and Infineon Raceway, an American mecca for the tuning crowd. Japan's cherished Suzuka is also finally included.

Yamauchi explains that Gran Turismo in Italian means a trip around the countries. "Our philosophy is to try to provide driving entertainment, but also provide the joy of travelling around the world."

The game's graphics are breathtaking, pushing the ageing PlayStation2 hardware beyond what was thought possible. The sense of speed when driving and the astonishing detail of the cars and spectacular roadside scenery must be experienced to be appreciated.

The human element has also been improved, making previous games in the series seem sterile. Crowds are more lifelike, particularly on rally courses, where fans occasionally run out to take photos before scrambling to safety. Pit stops feature realistic mechanics, and when driving a convertible you can watch an astonishingly accurate driver constantly moving, steering and changing gears.

Realistic vehicle damage, something of a holy grail for GT fans, must wait until GT4's sequel. "With the current PS2 hardware, it is impossible to include vehicle damage without losing something else, and I don't want to compromise anything," Yamauchi says. "But it is still a feature I want to include in the future."

GT4 includes a Photo mode akin to automobile erotica, with users able to hook up a printer to their PS2s and produce realistic photos of their cars. Players can shoot their cars
in front of backdrops such as New York, Shibuya, the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas and Venice, and the photos would not look out of place on the cover of a motoring magazine. B-Spec and Photo mode reveal much about Yamauchi's personality. "One of my dreams was to become a movie director, ever since I was in high school watching hit movies by Spielberg and Lucas. Part of that dream has been realised in the game. I put a lot of effort and work in the replay mode with different camera angles. And now you can also take photos and be a director."

Yamauchi has a long-term vision for the series, saying it will continue to develop alongside new technology and as a social record of new cars as they are released. He also recognises the product is already a behemoth and will need to specialise.

"I don't have any concrete plans at the moment, but I would like to make a kids' version of Gran Turismo, as well as a professional version and a tuning version," Yamauchi says. "There are so many aspects of car culture that I'd like to tackle."

"But, for now, we are ready to come up with an amazing game. I hope it will live up to your high expectations."