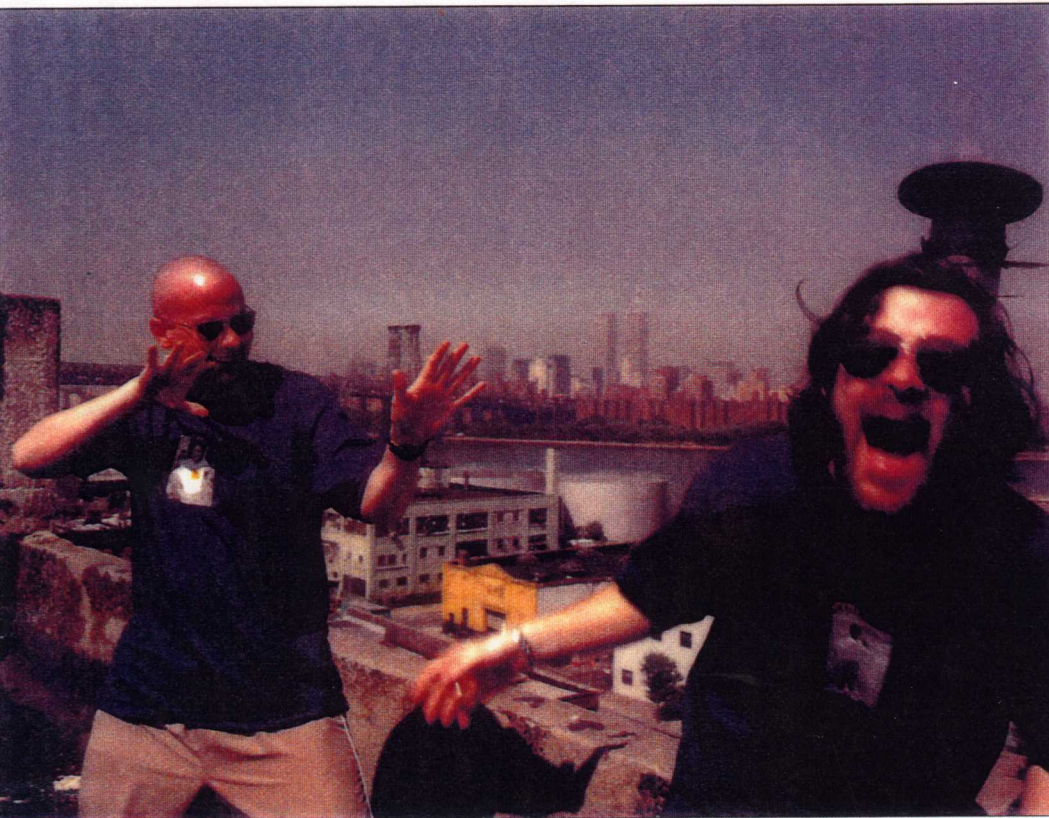
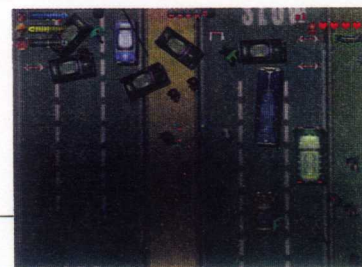


Get Your Game On

AMIDST INCREASED SCRUTINY OF VIDEO-GAME VIOLENCE, THE MAKERS OF *GRAND THEFT AUTO* STEP INTO THE SPOTLIGHT WITH AN ENTICING SEQUEL. BY ERIC GLADSTONE



Roofies: Donovan, left, and Houser take Manhattan.



"It's all about respect." These well-worn words might sound typical coming from a mob boss or hip-hop kingpin. But they're not what you would expect from a video-game tycoon by the name of Terry Donovan.

Donovan, 28, is describing his company Rockstar's new sequel to the controversial carjack carnival that put them on the map, 1997's *Grand Theft Auto*. The tagline to *Grand Theft Auto Two* is "Respect is Everything," which apparently pertains not only to the game's central "respect-o-meter," but also to Rockstar's attitude about game players in general.

"Part of what we're trying to get away from is that image of the lone, girlfriend-less, pizza-ordering fat guy in the bedroom, which isn't really relevant," says Donovan. "When you think that there's 56 million [Sony] Playstation units. . . there aren't 56 million of those people worldwide. It's in people's front rooms, and it's part of their social life. . . . We're just raising the tone of the entertainment to a point that we feel comfortable with."

Donovan (who looks like he could be an English soccer player) and partner Sam Houser (ringer for a young Stanley Kubrick), 27, point out the obvious—that they are not your typical game company CEOs. Sitting in Rockstar's offices in New York City's Soho, Houser holds up the front page of a trade paper, with head shots of two buttoned-down execs, to emphasize the point.

"This is the games business," he says. Then, pointing to himself and Donovan, "This isn't the games business."

But Rockstar (a division of BMG's Take Two interactive) is quickly making itself the games business. The first *GTA*, created with Scottish designers DMA, made a big splash (almost too big) upon its initial release about two years ago. Despite admittedly clunky graphics, its premise—you are a car jacker, drug runner, and cop killer—caught on quick. It has sold an estimated two million copies worldwide, massive numbers for a video game, and in its home country of England has taken up residence in the top 20 sales chart.

"I think we set out with DMA to make a really fun game," says Houser, earnestly. "And once we made you able to kill policemen, we knew we had something that was going to turn heads."

To say the least: UK and French officials have denounced the game, and Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman (the man who instigated the US video game rating system) has called it "graphic, gruesome, and grotesque." Brazil has banned it outright.

"But I think one of the core features of *GTA* is the humor," Donovan stresses.

"It's totally tongue-in-cheek," Houser adds. "That was the whole idea."

Still, it's obvious that with their completely rebuilt new version (available for Playstation and PC), they've responded to the criticism with at least a modicum of more responsibility. While all of *GTA*'s felonious activities return in the sequel, *GTA2* has upped the ante (obviously) in interestingly complex and politically astute ways. There are again three levels of city streets in which to roam, and seemingly endless complexities within them, including elaborations on the original's choice of weapons (try a flame thrower, or the new taser!), different vehicles with different responses (yes, VW Bugs are a lot peppier than cargo vans) and fully functioning street life (EMTs, trains, bomb shops, waterside docks, etc.) with random bystanders (some are psychos, others cowards). But now, you can work for a number of different crime families (from admittedly stereotypical gangs like the Russian mob and Japanese Yakuza to rednecks, Hare Krishnas and radical scientists) and manage your levels of "respect" with each of them.

"If one really likes you, at least one other is going to really hate you," Houser explains. "If the police are chasing me, I can run to my gang who do like me, and they will protect me from the police. If they like each other, you can take a Yakuza vehicle, drive it into redneck territory, take a few people out, and instantly you'll start a gang war. You can sit and watch gang wars taking place while you're around the corner having a cigarette—and he does actually smoke in the game. And it's completely non-linear."



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—Rockstar's Terry Donovan

The most pervasive gang, pointedly, is an omnipotent evil corporation called Zaibatsu. In the original game, you garnered points for killing officers of the law. In *GTA2*, if you attack them, not only will they pursue you relentlessly, but the more violence you do to them, the more extreme their response: cop-killers will deal with everybody from street cops to the F.B.I., S.W.A.T. teams, to finally, the Army. Real-life consequences in a videogame? Shudder to think.

"Our responsibility is to 99.9 percent of the population who aren't actually planning to murder anyone in the next two weeks," says Donovan, in all seriousness. But then, he and Houser also emphasize that video games have a ratings system in place which should be enforced—and then it's up to parents.

"I think you consistently underestimate the people who actually own Playstations and PCs by hitting them with the lowest common denominator," Donovan continues, criticizing his industry as much as the press. "Other forms of media, either the people selling them the shoes they wear or the films they see, are hitting them at higher levels of their cortex than this industry is. You've got to raise the tone. Otherwise, we're just a toy."

One of the ways Rockstar has raised the tone is with its use of music—a logical arena considering the duo's background. Donovan is a veteran of Arista UK's A&R department and the turntables at Berlin's notorious club Tresor. Houser, his friend since childhood, directed videos for Brit boy band Take That. Whereas most video game music tends to be pumping techno and dance music designed to drive the game's pace, the Rockstar team compiled a tuneful array for their *GTA* series: It's comparable to a film soundtrack, meant to reflect the game's varied ethnicities, and changes with different vehicles' own radios (which also include fake radio DJ patter). In *GTA: London 1969*—a "mission pack" add-on which takes the game back to the seamy days of England's organized crime families, familiar to fans of films like *The Krays* and *Get Carter* (a film in which, coincidentally, Houser's mother appeared)—music includes ska/reggae classics and vintage Italian crime themes. And for the new skateboard challenge *Thrasher: Skate & Destroy* (due in November for the Playstation), they've assembled a who's who of hip-hop classics.

Not all of Rockstar's output is quite so real-world violent. There is *Wild Metal Country* (coming in 2000, for Sega's new Dreamcast), *Monster Truck Madness* (a current Nintendo 64 chart-topper), and the new, more lighthearted *Earthworm Jim 3D* (for Playstation and Nintendo). They are also already working on titles for the upcoming "unspeakably powerful" (in Sam's words) Playstation Two and Nintendo Dolphin, which may include something called "State of Emergency," described as a "social disturbance simulator." Hmm.

Then there are the extracurriculars. Dipping their toes in the cinematic waters which obviously inspire them, Rockstar produced a nine-minute cliché- and stereotype-filled promotional film which basically outlines *GTA2*. It was shown at the E3 convention and is presented at the beginning of the game in an edited "trailer" version. And they're launching a clothing line designed by Haze, as well as a New York nightclub in collaboration with respected club owner Jon Davis (Body & Soul), which is set to make its debut as you read this.

"If you could do something that plugged into other areas of culture and entertainment that [gamers] are into," Houser figures, "that's got to be a formula that for a good portion of the audience is going to click. That's really what we're trying to do."

"The same 15, 20, 25-year-old person who owns a Playstation does all these other things," Donovan reasons. "But our one criteria for getting into those worlds is, if you're going to do it, you've got to stand on your own two feet in those worlds. It should be the very, very best we can possibly do. And if they happen to notice that it's the same company doing videogames, so be it."

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