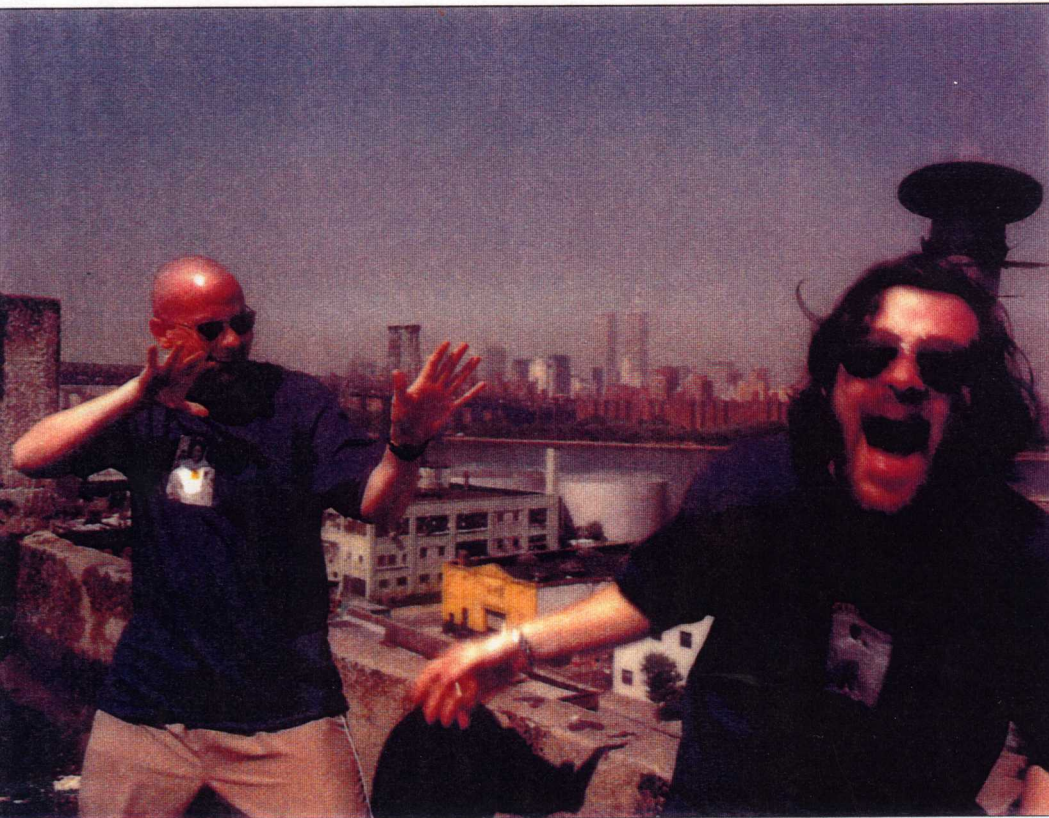


Get Your Game On

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."

