Jacked

THE OUTLAW STORY OF Grand Theft Auto

David Kushner

From the author of *Masters of Doom*

Contents

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DAVID KUSHNER

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To Andy Kushner

This book is printed on acid-free paper. ♾

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Author's Note

This book is based on more than ten years of research. I first played *Grand Theft Auto* in 1997 and began reporting on its creators, Rockstar Games, two years later. As the franchise boomed, I chronicled game culture and industry for publications that included *Rolling Stone*, *Wired*, the *New York Times*, *GamePro*, and *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, as well as in my first book, *Masters of Doom.*

My reporting took me across the country and around the world—from the offices of Rockstar in New York to the streets of Dundee, Scotland, where *GTA* began. There were long days and endless nights at game conventions and start-ups. I spent hundreds (thousands?) of hours playing games. I played *Pong* with Nolan Bushnell, the founder of Atari, and, for one particularly awesome afternoon in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, rolled the dice with Gary Gygax, the cocreator of *Dungeons & Dragons.*

As the industry grew, I saw the controversies rise over violent video games—especially over *GTA—and covered both sides of the disputes.* I sat with a crying mother in a tiny town in Tennessee, where her sons had just murdered one person and maimed another—and triggered a $259 million lawsuit against Rockstar and others for allegedly inspiring the crime with *GTA.* I went to Coral Gables, Florida, to visit *GTA*'s chief opponent, Jack Thompson, at his home.

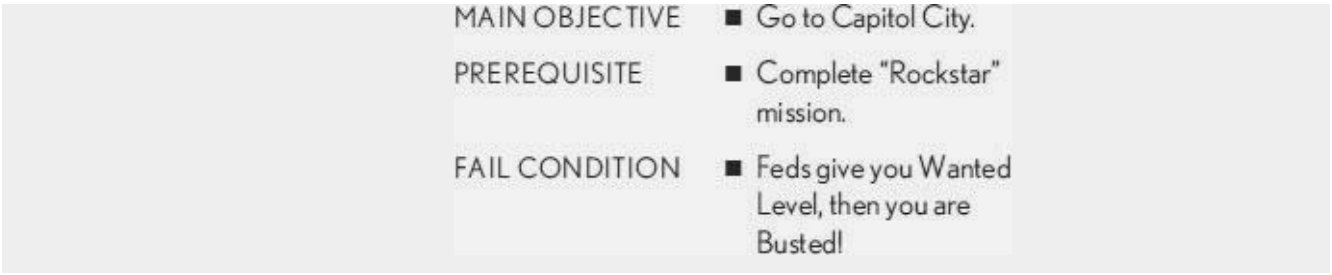
I spoke with leaders from the Entertainment Software Association in Washington, D.C., and went behind closed doors at the clandestine Entertainment Software Ratings Board in New York to see how games are rated. In Iowa City, I sat in a small stuffy room hooked up to electrodes while I played *Grand Theft Auto*—and university researchers studied my brain. Yeah, it was strange.

Though all of these adventures don't appear explicitly in this book, they inform it. This is a work of narrative nonfiction, a recreation of the story of *GTA.* The scenes and the dialogue are drawn from hundreds of my own interviews and firsthand observations, as well as thousands of articles, court documents, and TV and radio reports. The *Rolling Stone* reporter who appears in the book is me.

Over the years since I first visited Rockstar Games, I've interviewed many people at the company including each of the cofounders. Though the current helm at Rockstar declined to participate in this book, I was able to draw freely from my previous interviews with them and speak extensively with those who have left. A few sources didn't want to be identified, due to personal or professional concerns. Others were reluctant to talk, then eager, or eager, then reluctant. In the end, the vast majority went on the record. A funny thing happens when you write a book like this. People start to realize and appreciate that they are part of a larger story, not only their own, but everyone's.

Prologue

Players vs. Haters



How far would you go for something you believe in?

One winter day, Sam Houser was going farther than he'd ever imagined or feared—all the way to Capitol Hill to answer to the Feds. The thirty-four-year-old had achieved the universal dream: rising from nowhere to make his fantasies real. Yet now reality was threatening to take it all away.

A scrappy Brit running an empire in New York City, Sam cultivated the image of the player he had become. Scruffy hair. Shaggy beard. Eyes hidden behind aviator shades. Gripping the wheel of his jet-black Porsche. Buildings towering. Taxis honking. Flipping stations on the radio. Pedal to the metal as the world blurred like a scene from the video game that made him so rich and so wanted: *Grand Theft Auto.*

GTA, the franchise published by Sam's company, Rockstar Games, was among the most successful and notorious video games of all time. *GTA IV* alone would smash the Guinness Record to be the most profitable entertainment release in history—leaving every blockbuster superhero movie and even the final Harry Potter book in its pixilated wake. Players bought more than 114 million copies and shelled out over $3 billion on the titles. The juggernaut helped make video games the fastest-growing segment of the entertainment business. By 2011, the $60 billion global game industry would dwarf music and film box office sales—combined.

GTA revolutionized an industry, defined one generation, and pissed off another, transforming a medium long thought of as kids' stuff into something culturally relevant, darkly funny, and wildly free. It cast players at “the center of their own criminal universe,” as Sam once told me. You were a bad guy doing bad things in fictional cities meticulously riffed from real life: Miami, Vegas, New York, and Los Angeles.

For the mad frat of Brits who invented the game, *GTA* was a love letter from England to America in all of its fantastic excess: the sex and the violence, the money and the crime, the fashion and the drugs. As the game's phenomenally talented art director Aaron Garbut once told me, the goal was “to make the player feel like he's starring in his own fucked-up Scorsese-directed cartoon.”

Ostensibly, players had to complete a series of missions for a motley crew of gangster bosses: whacking enemies, jacking cars, dealing drugs. Yet even better, players didn't have to play by the rules at all. *GTA* was a brilliantly open world to explore. There was no high score to hit or princess to save. Players could just steal an eighteen-wheeler at gunpoint, crank up the radio, and floor the gas, taking out pedestrians and lampposts and anything else dumb enough to get in the way of a good time. The fact that players could also hire hookers and kill cops made it controversial and tantalizing.

More personally, *GTA* made Sam Houser the rock star of his industry. Sam was passionate, driven, and creative, and *Time* ranked him among the world's most influential people, alongside President Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Gordon Brown, for “creating tapestries of modern times as detailed as those of Balzac or Dickens.” *Variety* called *GTA* “a hit-machine arguably unparalleled in any other part of the media business.” The *Wall Street Journal* dubbed Sam “one of the leading lights of the video game era. A secretive, demanding workaholic [with] a temperament and a budget befitting a Hollywood mogul.” One analyst compared his company to “the kids on the island in *Lord of the Flies.*” But the hard work and long hours were all in service of Sam's ultimate mission: to take this maligned and misunderstood medium, video games, and make it as awesome as it could be. But no one had anticipated that making a game about outlaws could seem so outlaw for real. And that's what was bringing him to Washington, D.C., on this cold day.

After years of blaming *Grand Theft Auto* for inspiring murder and mayhem, politicians had what appeared to be a smoking gun: a hidden sex mini-game in the new *GTA.* The discovery of the scene, dubbed Hot Coffee, exploded into the industry's biggest scandal ever, the Watergate of video games. Rockstar blamed hackers. Hackers blamed Rockstar. Politicians and parents wanted *GTA* banned.

Now everyone, it seemed—from the consumers who filed a multimillion-dollar class-action suit over the game to the Federal Trade Commission investigating Rockstar for fraud—wanted the truth. Had Rockstar purposely hidden porn in GTA to cash in? If the company had, its game might be over. As Sam's rival, moral warrior attorney Jack Thompson, warned, “We are going to destroy Rockstar, you can count on that.”

How did this all happen? The answer is the story of a new generation and the game

that defined it. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan once said, “The games of a people reveal a great deal about them.” It's hard to understand those who came of age at the turn of the millennium without understanding *GTA. Grand Theft Auto* marked the awkward adolescence of a powerful medium as it struggled to grow up and find its voice. It was an artifact of the George W. Bush era and the fight for civil liberties.

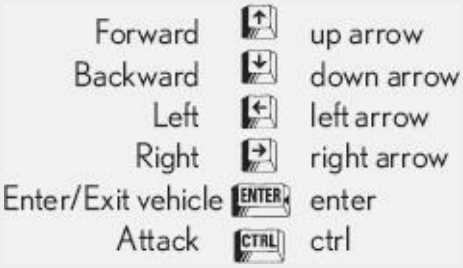
The fact that it hit during one of the most volatile chapters in the history of media was no accident. It symbolized the freedoms and fears of the strange new universe dawning on the other side of the screens. *GTA* seemed to split the world into players and haters. Either you played, or you didn't. For the players, jacking a car in the game was like saying, This is our ride now. This is our time behind the wheel. For the haters, it was something foreboding.

As Sam sat before the FTC investigators, the moment brought to mind an e-mail he had sent to a colleague when faced with compromising *GTA.* “The concept of a glorified shop (walmart) telling us what we can/can't put in our game is just unacceptable on so many levels,” he wrote, “all of this material is perfectly reasonable for an adult (of course it is!), so we need to push to continue to have our medium accepted and respected as a mainstream entertainment platform. We have always been about pushing the boundaries; we cannot stop here.”

1

The Outlaws

Controls



Grim city. Aerial view. A man in black runs along a river as a red sports car chases after him. Suddenly, a white convertible peels up in his path. “Over here, Jack!” shouts a beautiful young British woman behind the wheel. Jack leaps into her car, and she floors it. She has long auburn hair and stylish silver-framed shades. “You didn't know you had a fairy godmother, did you?” she asks, coyly.

“So where are we going, Princess?” Jack asks.

“To the demon king's castle, of course.” She shifts into high gear, speeding through a parking garage to safety.

In 1971, there was no cooler getaway driver than Geraldine Moffat, the actress in this scene from *Get Carter*, a British crime film released that year. Critics dismissed it, saying, “One would rather wash one's mouth out with soap than recommend it.” Yet as is often the case with anything new and controversial, the fans won out in the end.

The scene of Moffat lounging nude in bed with Michael Caine—a Rolling Stones album propped on the nightstand beside them—epitomized how hip movies could be. *Get Carter* became a cult classic, and Moffat, one of London's most fashionable stars. She married Walter Houser, a musician who ran the hottest jazz club in England, Ronnie Scott's.

Shortly after *Get Carter*'s release, Moffat and Houser welcomed their first child, Sam. The boy's brown eyes sparkled with possibility. Every kid determines to be cooler than his parents, but when your mom's in gangster flicks and your dad's hanging with Roy Ayers, that's no easy game. Sam found inspiration in movies like

his mom's. He became fascinated by gangs, the grittier the better. He'd trudge down to the local library, checking out videotapes of crime films: *The Getaway, The French Connection, The Wild Bunch, The Warriors.*

One day at Ronnie Scott's, the great jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie asked young Sam what he wanted to be when he grew up. The boy resembled his mother—the heart-shaped face, the wide flat bushy black eyebrows. “A bank robber,” Sam replied.

WAVES CRASHED the sands of Brighton, the beach town south of London, but Sam wasn't interested in the shore. His parents had taken him and his stocky brother Dan, two years younger, here to play outside, breathe the fresh air, and listen to the gulls. Instead, Moffat found Sam banging at a tall, psychedelically illustrated cabinet. Sam had discovered video games.

At this time in the early 1980s, games were in their family-friendly golden age. Innovations in technology and design brought a hypnotic new breed of machines into arcades and corner shops, from *Space Invaders* to *Asteroids.* The graphics were simple and blocky, the themes (zap the aliens, gobble the dots), hokey. One of Sam's favorites was *Mr. Do!* a surreal game in which he played a circus clown, burrowing underground for magic cherries as he was being chased by monsters. The news shop near his house had a *Mr. Do!* and Sam would eagerly fetch cigarettes there for his mom just so he could play.

Sam's parents bought him every new game machine for home, from the Atari to the Omega and the Spectrum ZX, a popular computer coming out of Dundee, Scotland. Dan, more interested in literary things, didn't take to games, but Sam always shoved a controller into his hands anyway. “I don't know the buttons!” Dan would protest.

“It doesn't matter!” Sam replied, “You have to play!”

When Dan didn't comply, he suffered big brother's wrath. Sam later joked of having once fed Dan poison berries, sending him to the hospital. The terror subsided when Dan outgrew him. Dan proved his power by leaping onto Sam below from a balcony of their house, which resulted in a fistfight—and Sam's broken hand. One of Sam's favorite games didn't require an opponent at all. It was a single-player game called *Elite*, and it was his world alone to explore. *Elite* cast the player as the commander of a spaceship. The goal was to trick out your ship however you could—mining asteroids or looting. Sam reveled in the pixilated rebellion, being what he called a “space mugger.” Video games, perhaps because they were still so new, had long been seen as a second-class medium, and gamers, as a result, felt a bit like

outlaws, too. Now Elite was letting them live out their bad boy dreams, if only on screen.

The game wasn't the prettiest or most realistic, but it offered something tantalizing: freedom. At the time, most titles kept players in a box—sort of like moving through a scripted shooting gallery—but *Elite* felt radically open. Players could chose from an array of galaxies, each with its own planets, to explore. It had become a phenomenon around England, selling hundreds of thousands of copies and earning its collegiate creators a following. *Elite* was so immersive, so transporting, it epitomized the essence of what a game, for Sam, could do: transport you to another world.

ONE BY ONE, the boys inched uniformly down the line—taking their plates of, say, shepherd's pie, or steamed jam sponge and custard. They looked as neat and orderly as their trays. The dark blazers with the badges. The crisp white button-down shirts and dark ties. The charcoal pants and dark socks. The black leather dress shoes. All of the boys identical, almost, except the one seen around school with the Doc Martens boots poking out from under his slacks: Sam.

If Sam wanted to escape the real world, he would have to start here at St. Paul's, the storied prep school on the River Thames. Since the 1500s, St. Paul's had weaned some of the brightest young minds in the country, from Milton to Samuel Johnson. Now Sam and Dan, like many of the privileged young sons of London, had come to learn the finer things across forty-five leafy acres in Hammersmith: playing cricket on the lawns, studying Russian history, listening to the orchestra perform.

Yet as Sam's unconventional choice of footwear proved, he had little interest in playing by the rules. Brash and iconoclastic, he was already living the rock-star lifestyle. He wore his hair long, let his shoes scuff, and was occasionally seen leaving school in a Rolls-Royce. By their teens, he and his brother dispensed of their dad's music for something more vital: hip-hop.

Specifically, they dug Def Jam Recordings, an American music label already become legendary among hip kids in the know. Founded by a punk rocker named Rick Rubin in his New York University dorm room, the company had become the coolest and shrewdest start-up for the burgeoning East Coast rap scene. Rubin, along with his partner, club promoter Russell Simmons, began putting out singles from the freshest acts in the five boroughs. As a white Jewish kid from Long Island and a black guy from Queens, they were a unique and potent mix. They fused their love of rap and rock into acts with a decidedly mainstream flair, from a cocky kid named LL Cool J to a trio of bratty white rappers, the Beastie Boys.

They had more than great taste, though. Def Jam pioneered a new generation of guerrilla marketing. Simmons and Rubin had come from the urban underworld of street promotions—do-it-yourself campaigns used in both punk rock and rap to create word-of-mouth buzz. Simmons called it “running the track,” promoting each artist in as many ways as possible. They slapped stickers—bearing the iconic Def Jam logo, with its big letters D and J—on lampposts and buildings. They threw parties around New York, producing elaborate concerts with over-the-top props—such as the huge inflatable penises at the Beasties show.

Devout fans like Sam consumed not only Def Jam records, but the lifestyle. When Rubin's single “Reign in Blood,” for the heavy metal band Slayer, came out, Sam hungrily bought it—slipping out the Def Jam patch that he wore like a badge of honor. Sam had taken on a way of ranting about his fixations. His mouth would motor, words firing like *Missile Command* bullets, hands gesturing, head swaying, as though he couldn't contain the sheer awesomeness of his pop culture love.

“For me, a guy like Rick Rubin is such a fucking hero,” started one of his breathless rants, “to go from pioneering in that world to doing hip-hop and to doing the Cult. When he did that album *Electric*! When you can hear Rick Rubin and his sharp hip-hop street production coming out of these rockers from Newcastle! For me, seeing someone like him suddenly being in rock and the hardest form of rock—Slayer!—I was, like, ‘These guys don't get any better, it doesn't get cooler than that.' And he kept on delivering . . . People like that inspire me so massively.”

Even better, Def Jam hailed from New York. Sam deeply admired the city, the fashion and culture and music. By day, he wore the stiff uniform of St. Paul's, by night he fashioned the uniform of NYC. He sat in his room, piled with vinyl records and videotapes, weaving chunky shoelaces as the rappers in New York did. It wasn't just a superficial love of fashion, it was about underdogs on the fringes who revolutionized a culture.

For Sam's eighteenth birthday, his dad took him to New York. On arrival, Sam bought a leather jacket and Air Jordan Mach 4 sneakers, as he'd seen on MTV. He roamed the open world downtown, soaking in the sights and the sounds. The yellow taxis. The rising buildings. The surly pedestrians. The hookers in Times Square. “From that point I was chronically in love with the place,” he later recalled.

For lunch one afternoon, Sam's dad took him out with his friend Heinz Henn, a marketing executive for BMG, the music label for the German company Bertelsmann. BMG, Henn explained, was struggling to cash in on youth culture. As Sam sat there listening, he couldn't contain himself for long. “Why is everyone in the record business so old?” he asked. “Why don't you have young people working in this business?”

Henn eyeballed this rich white kid dressed like Run DMC, then spoke to Sam's dad. Who was this hot-tempered but very self-assured boy? “Your son is an utter lunatic,” Heinz told him, “but he has some good ideas.”

Sam had just scored himself a job.

2

The Warriors

Random Character Unlocked: Jack Thompson

Follow the "**J**" icon to Beverly Hills. Find Jack Thompson. Forty-one-year-old from Miami. Attorney. Golfer. Expectant dad.

I got my twelve gauge sawed off. I got my headlights turned off. I'm 'bout to bust some shots off. I'm 'bout to dust some cops off."

It was July 16, 1992, as the performer rapped onstage in Beverly Hills, but this wasn't Ice-T, the artist who wrote these lyrics. It was the square-jawed superstar actor Charlton Heston. Though best known for his portrayal of Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, Heston brought his booming voice to the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel for a higher cause today: getting this song, "Cop Killer," banned.

The occasion was the annual shareholders meeting of Time Warner, which owned the label that put out this record. Since the release of the track in March, "Cop Killer" had become a national controversy, decried by police groups and President Bush. Ice-T, who had written it in the wake of the recent Rodney King riots, defended it as an honest portrayal of a character fed up with police brutality.

Yet the shareholders in the crowd today seemed to be believing everything Heston had to say. As he bellowed the refrain—"Die die die pig die!"—one man watched the performance in awe: Jack Thompson. Born-again and Republican, Thompson had the readiness of a schoolboy dressed for a yearbook photo. He wore his suits crisp, his prematurely graying
hair neatly combed at the part, his blue eyes twinkling. He could feel the electricity of the moment. Heston had, as Thompson later put it, "lit the fuse on the culture war."And this young warrior was ready to fight.

Compared to the NRA supporter onstage, however, Thompson hardly seemed like the warring kind. Growing up a scrawny straight-A student from Cleveland with a debilitating stutter, Thompson was so myopic that he'd run across the Little League field chasing balls that didn't exist. His fellow players hated him. "It was fairly traumatic," he later recalled. One day he acted out. He went into his garage, poured gasoline on the floor, tossed gunpowder caps around, and started pounding them with a hammer until they exploded in flames.

Thompson survived the prank but enjoyed the heat. An eighteen-year-old Robert Kennedy acolyte and liberal, he got his tires slashed and life threatened after leading a student protest to desegregate housing. He listened to Crosby Stills and Nash, and hosted a radio show at Dennison University.

But Jack had a Ripper growing inside. When a Black Panther student replaced the school's American flag with a Black Power flag, Thompson confronted him. “What are you doing?” he asked. “We share the American flag!” The guy pulled a machete on him. Thompson recoiled, literally and philosophically. “It was a radical time, and you had to choose sides,” he later recalled. “I became a conservative over the lunacies of political correctness.”

With a William Buckley book tucked under his arm, Thompson entered law school at Vanderbilt University, alongside classmate Al Gore. He preferred playing golf to attending class and, despite graduating Phi Beta Kappa, flunked the bar. After moving to Miami and feeling like a failure, he accompanied a friend to a church service where everyone was dressed in shorts and T-shirts. Thompson felt at home and became born-again. Before retaking the bar, he prayed and, when he passed, took it as a sign from God to go on a crusade.

In 1987, after hearing a local shock jock on the air, Thompson hit the law books. With painstaking research, he discovered a little known fact at the time: the Federal Communications Commission had the power to regulate the airwaves for obscenity, and this station, in many ways, seemed to violate the standards. After Thompson took the unusual measure of filing a complaint with the FCC, the shock jock angrily broadcast his name and phone number. Death threats, unwanted pizza deliveries, and the local press followed, transforming Thompson into an overnight rock star of Miami's right.

Confident, unflappable, and speedy with a sound bite, Thompson deftly played his part, faxing complaints to corporate sponsors until ads began to get pulled from the air. Despite the radio station's legal proceedings against him, Thompson won the right in court to continue lobbying advertisers and the FCC under First Amendment protection. His hard work paid off in historic proportions when the FCC fined the shock jock's station for indecency—the first time ever for such levies. Thompson took it as more divine purpose. “God's people were going to be warriors with me through prayer,” he later wrote in his memoir.

Yet he already had others warring against him. Acting on the radio station's assertion that Thompson was obsessed with pornography, the Florida bar convinced the state's Supreme Court to determine whether Thompson was mentally ill. Faced with losing his license to practice law, Thompson underwent psychiatric testing. The test results concluded that he was “simply a lawyer and a citizen who is rationally

animated by his activist Christian faith." As Thompson later liked to joke, "I'm the only officially certified sane lawyer in the entire state of Florida."

Empowered, Thompson assumed higher-profile battles. He took on incumbent Dade County state attorney Janet Reno for prosecutor, publicly challenging her to declare her sexuality. He made his name nationally by spearheading an obscenity conviction of rap group 2 Live Crew for their album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*. With the controversy fueling demand for the record, however, the group's leader, Luther Campbell, laughed all the way to the bank.

Thompson was on his way, though—right to Charlton Heston's side at the shareholders meeting over "Cop Killer." With the impossible task of following Heston onstage, Thompson warned, amid the boos of protesters, that "Time Warner is knowingly training people, especially young people, to kill. One day this company will pay a wicked price for that."

Thompson returned to Miami for the birth of his first son, whom he and his wife named John Daniel Peace. Three weeks later, on August 24, 1992, Hurricane Andrew bore down. As his windows rattled and lightning slashed the sky, Thompson braced himself at the door in a scuba mask, holding it tight so that the glass wouldn't blow through. His wife stood behind him holding little Johnny in a blanket. Thompson relished the biblical imagery and equated it to his own fight against what he called the "human hurricane" of rappers, pornographers, and shock jocks.

He survived the storm—and won the battle against Ice-T, who was dropped from Time Warner soon afterward. The ACLU voted Thompson one of 1992's "Censors of the Year," a title that made him proud. "Those on the entertainment ship were laughing at those on the other vessel," he later wrote. "I felt that I had grabbed the wheel of the decency ship and rammed that other ship, convinced that the time for talk about how bad pop culture had become was over. It was time for consequence. . . . it was time to win this culture war."

"COME ON, come on, come on, come on, take that, and party!"

Sam Houser stared into the smiling white faces of five clean-cut boys singing these words onstage. The group was Take That, a chart-topping boy band from Manchester, Britain's answer to New Kids on the Block. In his new job as a video producer for BMG Entertainment, Sam was directing their full-length video, named for their debut hit, "Take That & Party." For a kid weaned on crime flicks and hip-hop, this scene couldn't be further from his more rebellious influences. The videos showed the boy band break-dancing, chest-bumping, and leaping from Jacuzzis. But it was a job—a creative job that fulfilled Sam's lifelong ambition of working in the music industry.

By 1992, Sam had successfully retaken his lackluster A-Level tests and enrolled at

University of London. Between classes, he headed over to intern part time at BMG's office off the Thames on Fulham High Street. After his fateful lunch in New York, Sam had gotten his break interning in the mailroom at BMG—an accomplishment he took to heart, considering the obnoxious way he got in. Yet it epitomized his style: risking everything, including pissing people off, if it meant achieving his goals. “I got my first job by abusing senior executives at dinner tables,” he later recalled.

Sam already had his eyes elsewhere: the Internet. Though the World Wide Web had not yet become mainstream, Sam saw the opportunity to bring the kind of DIY marketing approach pioneered by Def Jam into the digital age. He convinced the BMG bosses that the best way to promote a new album by Annie Lennox was with something almost unheard of at the time, an online site. They relented, and Sam got to work. When *Diva* hit number one on the UK charts, it bolstered his cause.

BMG soon made waves in the industry by partnering with a small CD-ROM start-up in Los Angeles to create what the *Los Angeles Times* heralded as “the recording industry's first interactive music label.” The newly formed BMG Interactive division saw the future not only in music CD-ROMs, but in a medium close to Sam's heart, video games.

In 1994, the game industry was bringing in a record $7 billion—and on track to grow to $9 billion by 1996. Yet culturally, games were at a crossroads. Radical changes had been sweeping the industry, igniting a debate about the future of the medium and its effect on players. It started with the release of *Mortal Kombat*, the home version of the ubiquitous street fighting arcade game. With its blood and spine-ripping moves, *Mortal Kombat* brought interactive violence of a kind never seen before in living rooms.

Compared to innocuous hits such as the urban-planning game *SimCity 2000* or Nintendo's *Super Mario Brothers All-Stars*, *Mortal Kombat* shocked parents and politicians, who believed video games were for kids. The fact that the blood-soaked version of the game for the Sega Genesis was outselling the bloodless version of the game on the family-friendly Nintendo Entertainment System three-to-one only made them more nervous.

The *Mortal Kombat* panic reached a sensational peak on December 9, 1993, when Democrat senator Joseph Lieberman held the first federal hearings in the United States on the threat of violent video games to children. While culture warriors had fought similar battles over comic books and rock music in the 1950s and over *Dungeons & Dragons* and heavy metal in the 1980s, the battle over violent games had an urgently contemporary ring. It wasn't only the content that they were concerned about, it was the increasingly immersive technology that delivered it.

“Because they are active, rather than passive, [video games] can do more than

desensitize impressionable children to violence," warned the president of the National Education Association. When a spokesperson for Sega testified that violent games simply reflected an aging demographic, Howard Lincoln—the executive vice president of Nintendo of America—bristled. "I can't sit here and allow you to be told that somehow the video game business has been transformed today from children to adults," he said.

Yet video games had never been only for kids in the first place. They rose up to prominence in the campus computer labs of the 1960s and the 1970s, where shaggy geeks coded their own games on huge mainframe PCs. From there, the *Pac-Man* fever of home consoles and arcade machines lured millions into the fold. By the early 1990s, legions of hackers were tinkering with their own PCs at home. A burgeoning underground of darkly comic and violent games such as *Wolfenstein 3-D* and *Doom* had become a phenomenon among a new generation of college students.

At the same time, Sam's peers were riding a gritty new wave of art. Films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and music like Def Jam's shunned cheesy fantasy for gutsy, pop-savvy realism. These products were bringing a lens to a world that had not previously been portrayed. When Los Angeles erupted in riots after the Rodney King beating, Sam watched—and listened—in awe to the music that reflected the changing times. The fact that Time Warner had dropped "Cop Killer" only seemed to underscore how clueless the previous generation had become.

Now the same battle lines were being drawn over games. To ward off the threat of legislation as a result of the Lieberman hearings, the U.S. video game industry created the Interactive Digital Software Association, a trade group representing their interests. The industry also launched the Entertainment Software Ratings Board to voluntarily assign ratings to their games, most of which fell under E for Everyone, T for Teen, or M for Mature. Less than 1 percent of the titles received an Adults Only or AO rating, the game industry's equivalent of an X—and, effectively, the kiss of death because major retailers refused to carry AO games.

Yet with *Mortal Kombat* still burning around the world, the media eagerly fanned the flames. Nintendo, which ruled the industry, had sold a Disneylike image of gaming to the public, but this was now in jeopardy. Video games were "dangerous, violent, insidious, and they can cause everything from stunted growth to piles," wrote a reporter for the *Scotsman*, ". . . an incomprehensible fad designed to warp and destroy young minds."

While the medium was being infantilized by politicians and pundits, however, one of the biggest corporations in the entertainment business was taking up the fight. In 1994, in Japan, Sony was working to release its first-ever home video game console, the PlayStation, built on the idea that gamers were growing up. Phil Harrison, a

young Sony executive tasked with recruiting European game developers, thought the game industry was being unfairly portrayed as “a toy industry personified by a lonely twelve-year-old boy in the basement.” Sony's research told another story—gamers were older and had plenty of money of their own to spend.

The problem with reaching these players started with the hardware. Sony found that although children had no problem pretending their blobs of brown-and-peach pixels were Arnold Schwarzenegger, adults needed more realistic graphics to suspend disbelief and engage. The answer: CD-ROMs. Unlike the cartridges used by Nintendo, a CD-ROM could hold more content—including full-rendered video—and offer games that were more like what Harrison described as “sophisticated multimedia events.” Combining a high-end graphics machine with an entertainment console was sending a clear message to the industry: it was time for the medium to become more mainstream and grow up.

Sam couldn't agree more. With the new BMG Interactive division pursuing game publishing, he desperately wanted in. Games were the future, he was sure, and he saw this as a medium through which a guy like him could finally leave his mark. The challenge was to change the meta-game, to bring the experience into a new era, just as the films and the music he loved had redefined their own industries.

Sam urged the BMG brass to give him a break. “I want a go at this,” he told them. “I want to get involved. I'm not involved, but there's a lot of things I can bring to this situation.” Once again, his doggedness paid off. After graduating from college, he got transferred to the Interactive Publishing division. The game industry worked similar to the record industry. Just as labels put out CDs created by bands, publishers put out software created by developers. They oversaw the production of the game, doling out editorial direction while handling the business, marketing, and packaging. Developers dealt with the front-line creation of the games, from the art to programming.

Hits paid for flops, and if one out of ten games scored, that was enough. BMG's early games (a backpacking title, a golf simulator), however, fell on the losing side. Yet Sam never gave up hope. Maybe he was crazy. Or maybe, somewhere out there, someone was making a game crazy enough for him.

3

Race 'n' Chase

FRIEND PROFILE: DAVE “CAPO DI TUTTI CAPO” JONES

Joining Jones for the following activities goes toward 100 percent completion of the game.

Special Ability: Game Design

Call Jones and ask him to make you a computer game. You can pick up the game and sell it for cash.

It would be a grand theft. Stealing the high score in another gang's territory. Dave Jones couldn't help himself, though. He could see the *Galaga* machine flashing inside the fish-and-chips shop like a beacon. The tall black cabinet with the red-eyed, bug-shaped alien warlord on the front. The spiraling electronic theme song. He wanted to touch it. Slip his coin in the vaginal slot, and pound the buttons. Zap the invaders, get the high score, and put his initials at the top.

Yet this was not the part of Dundee, the industrial town north of Edinburgh, Scotland, where he lived. This was Douglas, one of the rougher neighborhoods in a city known for being rough. Once famous for its jute, marmalade, and the invention of Dennis the Menace, Dundee's economy had tanked by this time in the early 1980s, taking its working-class residents down with it. Teenage gangs with names such as the Huns and the Shams prowled the street, looking for a fight like some Scottish version of *The Warriors.* Anything could set them off. The wrong look. The wrong football jersey. And especially a gawky, carrot-topped geek in glasses like Jones.

Still in grade school, Jones lived with his parents across town near his dad's small newspaper shop. When he wasn't fishing for salmon in the River Tay, he played *Space Invaders* at the greeting card store near his bus stop. Every day before and after school, he'd make sure to keep the top score.

As he passed through Douglas on an errand, he couldn't resist having a go at the *Galaga* machine. His coin dropped inside with a satisfyingly metallic plunk. Jones

positioned his right pointer finger over the smooth red convex plastic button. He gripped the stick. Hit Start. The onslaught of alien insects on screen began. In a flurry of taps, Jones obliterated the invaders and took the top score—entering his initials for all to see. Who was the real player now?

But the local toughs lurking outside had seen enough. Just as Jones stepped out the door, the gang surrounded him. *Who comes here and sets the high score on our turf?* Jones ran down the gray cobblestone streets, past the old ladies with their bloated plastic shopping bags, past crusty men smoking unfiltered cigarettes under the overcast sky. The gang tackled him to the ground. As the blows came, he could do nothing but wait for the punches to end. Wait and hope that he would be alive long enough to limp back to the safety of his neighborhood and his own machines.

AS JONES AND HIS OWN GANG of Scottish geeks knew, something electric was coursing over the cobblestone streets of Dundee. A computer revolution had begun. It started at the big brown Timex plant in town, which was churning out the UK's first popular wave of home computers, the Sinclair ZX81 and the Sinclair ZX Spectrum.

The Spectrum, with its jet-black keyboard and rainbow streak on the side, looked like a control panel to another world. All you needed to know was the code, and you were in. Word had it that Spectrums were “accidentally” falling off delivery trucks —and winding up in the hands of aspiring hackers.

Jones's high school was among the first in the United Kingdom to offer computer studies, a course that he immediately took. Gifted at math, he taught himself to program and build his own rudimentary machines. On graduation, he scored a job at the Timex plant as an apprentice engineer, but what he really wanted to do was make games. A homebrew computer game scene was percolating from San Francisco to Sweden. Gamers made and distributed their own titles on Apple II and Commodore 64 machines. Jones joined a ragtag gang of computer coders called the Kingsway Amateur Computer Club, who met at the local technical college.

With cuts facing Timex, the company offered Jones £3,000 in voluntary redundancy pay—which he happily blew, in part, on a state-of-the-art Amiga 1000 computer (much to the envy of his pals). Though Jones had begun to study software engineering at the local university, his professors and family thought he was nuts. “This is never going to take off,” they told him. “You're never going to sell enough games to make a living.”

Yet Jones believed in his dreams. With his grades plummeting, he spent late nights in his bedroom at his parents' house, hatching his plan. While the homebrew scene

was dominated by fantasy and sci-fi games, Jones wanted to bring the fast action of arcade hits such as *Galaga* to home machines. His first game, a kill-the-devil shooter called *Menace*, was released in 1988 and sold an impressive fifteen thousand copies, earning critical acclaim and £20,000—enough for this car fanatic to buy a 16-valve Vauxhall Astra.

To capitalize on the buzz, he left school and started his own game company, DMA Design, a reference to a computer term, Direct Memory Access. Jones hired friends from the computer club and moved the team into a two-room office on the second floor of a narrow red-and-green building, just above a baby accessories shop called Gooseberry Bush. Pasty-faced with polygonal hair, they looked like extras from a Big Country video. By day, they'd code; by night, hit up the local pubs or compete in games at their office. It was *Animal House* for nerds. They trashed the office so much that Jones's wife insisted on coming over to clean the toilet.

This wasn't just fun and games, though. DMA exemplified the DIY spirit of the times: all you needed was a computer and a dream. Jones was on a mission to make games as cool and fast as his sports car. “We have three to five minutes to capture people,” as he once said. “I don't care how great your game is, you have three to five minutes.” The edict worked again. *Blood Money*, billed as “the ultimate arcade game,” came out in 1989 and sold more than thirty thousand copies in two months. Jones felt elated. He was on his way.

In the competitive arena of game making, developers would compete to exploit the latest, greatest programming innovations. One day, a DMA programmer discovered how to animate as many as a hundred characters on screen at a time and made a demo for the team. Jones watched in awe as a line of tiny creatures stupidly marched to their deaths—smashed by a ten-ton weight or incinerated in the mouth of a gun. It was just the sort of dark Scottish humor that got everyone laughing. *Let's make a game out of that!*

They called it *Lemmings*. The object was to save the creatures from dying. Jones's crew devilishly dreamed up the most punishing fates for the little beasts: falling into holes, getting crushed by boulders, being incinerated in lakes of fire, or getting ripped to shreds by machines. To survive, you had to assign each creature a skill, from digging to climbing, building to bashing. With more than 120 scenes of zig-zagging creatures, the game didn't only play—it teemed with life.

Lemmings was released on Valentine's Day 1991 with a warning label: “We Are Not Responsible For: Loss of sanity. Loss of Sleep. Loss of Hair.” *Lemmings* became an immediate hit, selling fifty thousand copies on its first day alone. The game would go on to earn DMA more than £1.5 million, selling nearly 2 million copies worldwide. “To say that *Lemmings* took the computer gaming world by storm would

be like saying that Henry Ford made a slight impact on the car market," one reporter wrote.

Just twenty-five, Jones was one of the wealthiest—and most famous—game designers on the planet. His journey from drop-out to millionaire made him one of the industry's biggest success stories. Ecstatic, he treated himself with his flashiest sports car yet, a Ferrari. Jones hit the road, speeding through the grim city past the gangs. If only there was a game in that.

"FUCK! Fuck! Fuck!"

It was just another day at DMA, and the biggest and most pungent coder on the team was having one of his tantrums again. Game making could be a mind-numbing craft—fashioning living worlds from abstract code—and sometimes this guy had to blow off steam. But as he stood banging his head against a wall and shouting, he saw a sprightly Japanese man beside him. "Oh, my God," muttered another coder nearby, "that's Miyamoto!"

Sure enough—it was him, Shigeru Miyamoto, the elfin genius of Nintendo, the inventor of *Mario*. Not long before, it would have been unthinkable that the biggest name in gaming would grace this little indie start-up in Dundee. Yet with the extraordinary success of *Lemmings*, Jones had scored a multimillion-pound contract to create two games for the Nintendo 64. "We think David Jones is one of the very few people in the world that are in the Spielberg category," Howard Lincoln, now the president of Nintendo of America, told the press. Miyamoto, who took the screaming coder in stride, had come to experience the magic of DMA firsthand.

Flush with cash, DMA had moved to a 2,500-square-foot office in a mirrored, militaristic building inside the Dundee Technology Park on the west end of town. Jones invested £250,000 in outfitting their rooms with the best technology they could buy. DMA was said to have one of England's biggest installations of refrigerator-size Silicon Graphics computers—so big that the minister of defense expressed security concerns. DMA needed the muscle power to bring Jones's geekiest dream to life: "a living, breathing city."

Virtual worlds were the stuff of science fiction but still not much of a reality in gaming. The appeal was obvious. Real life could be unpredictable and frustrating, but a synthetic world was something you could control. Jones had, as he put it, "a fascination with how alive and dynamic we could make the city from very little memory and very little processing speed. How could we make something living inside the machine?"

Jones set his team free to come up with their answers. Programmer Mike Dailly

engineered a cityscape from a top-down point of view. Another DMAer coded dinosaurs running through the streets. Another replaced the dinosaurs with something cooler, more contemporary, and closer to the boss's heart: cars. As Dailly watched the little virtual cars speed through the city, he thought, “We have something.”

Jones liked the concept of *Cops and Robbers*—casting players as the police out to bust the bad guys. “Cops and robbers is a natural rule set that everybody understands,” he said. “They know how to drive a car. They know what a gun does.” Thinking *Cops and Robbers* too generic a title, they renamed it *Race 'n' Chase* instead.

Walking into DMA was like seeing a bunch of grown men playing with a Hot Wheels set—except on their PCs. From the overhead view onscreen, tiny pixilated cars cruised the streets, blips of people climbed onto buses and trains that stopped along their routes. Jones pushed for a more and more realistic simulation. Though cars could speed down the street, they had to stop at traffic lights that blinked from red to green. Jones watched gleefully as his little world teemed with life.

When a demo was ready, he took the game to a prospective publisher in London, BMG Interactive. The company wooed Jones heartily, eager to get into business with the UK's boy wonder of gaming. Jones left with a deal to deliver four games over the next thirteen months for Sony, Sega, and Nintendo. He retained ownership and received an estimated £3.4 million. “They will treat computer companies in the same way that they treat their music companies,” Jones effused to a reporter.

Back in the BMG office, Sam and the others booted up *Race 'n' Chase*. There was just one problem: the game kind of sucked.

4

Gouranga!

WEAPONS

NERF CROSSBOW. The Crossbow takes three Basic Arrows or five Mega Darts, with a maximum firing distance of forty-one feet and one shot per 2.28 seconds. The range makes this killer ideal for long-range battles.

NERF BALLZOOKA. This blaster pumps out a whopping fifteen ballistic balls in just 6 seconds, with a maximum distance of thirty-four feet. Rate of fire is an impressive one shot per .37 seconds. It will have your enemies screaming, “It's raining balls!”

If you took a job at BMG Interactive, you needed to be properly armed. At any given moment, the Nerf guns would be drawn, unleashing a flurry of bright-yellow foam darts and balls across the room. The playful atmosphere went with Sam's new territory. He was making only £120 a week, but he was living his dream. As the English oddballs of the German music conglomerate, the gamers relished their outsider status, having taken over a backroom of the company's London headquarters.

They had reason to get their game on. By 1996, a new era in video gaming had dawned, thanks to the success of the Sony PlayStation. After releasing the new PlayStation console in Japan in December 1994, the company had sold five hundred thousand machines in the first three months. Sony called the £300 million debut “our biggest launch since the Walkman.”

Sony hired the stylish Chiat\Day ad firm to handle the U.S. release. In England, they marketed the machine to an edgier, hipper demo-graphic—“the cool kids of London,” as Sony's Phil Harrison put it. The company created a promotional lounge at the Ministry of Sound nightclub, filling it with PlayStations and sleek displays. Fliers got passed out to clubgoers with the words “More Powerful Than God.” Sony was on its way to sales of more than 8 million PlayStations worldwide for the fall of 1996.

So much for *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong.* Games were becoming edgier, and Sam had a kinetic new colleague who shared his passion, Jamie King. A slim, handsome twenty-six-year-old with a nervous excitability, King was a fledgling music video producer who'd been introduced to Sam through a mutual friend. King could keep up with Sam's encyclopedic passion for pop culture. They shared a love of John

Cassavetes and the French black-and-white gang flick *Le Haine*, fashion and art, Tribe Called Quest, and JVC Force. King, brought on as an intern, quickly proved he could keep up with Sam's indefatigable work ethic, too.

What they needed to work on now more than anything was this new game: *Race 'n' Chase*. Though it had technical chops, it was missing something crucial: balls, preferably as big as the yellow ones flying around the room. On his screen, Sam looked down on the virtual city, the buildings rising in chunky colored blocks. Little cars puttered along gray streets with white hash-mark lines. Traffic lights blinked from yellow to red. Antlike people paced the sidewalks. Sam pressed one button on the keyboard, and the door of a car swung open. He pressed another, and it closed.

Senior producer Gary Penn—a former journalist with a streak of Johnny Rotten and a taste for bright green socks—felt dejected. “This is a fucking simulation,” he said, bemoaning the game's “stupid details.” Up in Dundee at DMA, the developers were starting to agree. By casting the player as the cop, they realized, they had cut out the fun. Some dismissed it as *Sims Driving Instructor*.

When an unruly gamer tried to drive his police car on the sidewalk or through traffic lights, a persnickety programmer reminded him that the stop lights needed to be obeyed. Were they building a video game or a train set? Even worse, the pedestrians milling around the game created frustrating obstacles. It was almost impossible to drive fast without taking people down, and, because the player was a cop, he had to be punished for hit-and-runs.

Race 'n' Chase hit a road block. There was just no way to have a fast and furious arcade-style game while playing by the rules. The DMAers stared at the screen, as the cars and the people raced around. Maybe there was another solution, they realized. Instead of having to avoid all of the pedestrians, what if you got points for running them over? What if you were the bad guy instead?

VIDEO GAME DEVELOPMENT is a highly collaborative work in progress, with constant feedback along the way. As the publishers of *Race 'n' Chase*, Sam and the others at BMG would frequently get new iterations—or builds—of the game to evaluate and comment on. The developers would then go off and implement necessary changes.

One day a new build of *Race 'n' Chase* arrived for Sam and the others to try out. At first, it seemed the same. With the top-down perspective, the gamer felt as if he were hovering over a city in a balloon, looking down on gray and brown rooftops. Puffy green trees poked of out of green parks. Horns honked. Engines roared. When you tapped your forward arrow on the keyboard, you saw your unnamed character, a tiny

guy in a yellow long-sleeved shirt, stride across the street.

With a few more taps of the arrow keys, you maneuvered the character toward a stubby green car with a shiny hood, then tapped the Enter key. That's when it happened. The door flew open, and the driver—some other little dude in blue pants—came flying out of the car and landed on the pavement in a contorted pile. He got jacked. As you held down the forward arrow, the car careened forward, supple to the flick of the side arrows—left, right—with a satisfying *vroooom.* You headed toward a flickering traffic light. Why stop? This was a game, right? A game wasn't life. A game takes you over, or you take over it, pushing it in ways you can't for real.

So you drove through the light, squealing around a corner. As you took the turn too wide, you saw a little pedestrian in a white long-sleeved shirt and blue pants coming too close, but you couldn't stop. Actually, you didn't want to stop. So you just drove. Drove right into the ped—only to hear a satisfying *splat*, like a crushed grape with a wine-colored stain on the sidewalk, and the number “100” rising from the corpse. Score! This wasn't the old *Race 'n' Chase* anymore.

The moment that DMA let players run over pedestrians—and be rewarded with points, no less—changed everything. Instead of cops and robbers, the game became robbers and cops. The object was to run missions for bad guys, such as jacking cars, the more the better. The leap was radical. In the short history of games, players had almost always been the hero, not the antihero. You were the heartsick plumber of *Super Mario Bros.*, the intergalactic pilot of *Defender*, the glacial-paced explorer of *Myst*. One obscure arcade game from the 1970s, *Death Race 2000*, let players run over virtual ghosts, and it got banned. Nothing put you behind the wheel to wreak havoc like this. As Brian Baglow, a writer for DMA, said “You're a criminal, so if you do something bad, you get a reward!”

Sam loved it. He had always been drawn to rebels, and now he was pushing games to be more rebellious too “Once we made you able to kill policemen, we knew we had something that would turn heads,” he later recalled. Yet this wasn't about manufacturing controversy. In fact, that didn't enter their minds. The game—with its ugly top-down view—was clearly so cartoonlike and absurd, someone would have to be crazy to take it for the real thing. The focus instead was on milking the tech to make it as insanely fun as possible.

Ordinarily, game making was a machinelike system carried out by artists, programmers, and producers. A designer would come up with the overall idea, then producers would dispatch programmers to code the engine—the core code that drove the game's graphics, sounds, physics, and artificial intelligence. Artists would create models of objects in the world and fill in the details of the scene with objects and textures.

But at DMA, the system had become a free-for-all. The developers scurried back to their desks in Scotland, to come up with crazy shit. DMA's nearly one hundred employees had taken over two nearby buildings, including one that housed a £500,000 motion-capture studio that no one had quite figured out what to do with. The *Race 'n' Chase* team worked separately in their own back section and quickly became the rebels of the group.

Up front, where coders worked on *Lemmings* sequels and other titles, bookish geeks toiled quietly at their desks. Yet the thump of rock music could be heard blasting from behind the wall in the *Race 'n' Chase* room. Back there, a dozen or so members of the team had transformed their corner into their own bad playground. A team of seven musicians had set up real instruments to record a soundtrack for the title (far removed from the electronic soundtracks popular at the time).

DMA's screaming gamer, in particular, was not real concerned about his hygiene. One day, someone stuck air fresheners under his desk. The next, little pine-tree fresheners hung from his lamp. Finally, he came back to find his entire desk covered in variations of air-freshening aids. For fun, they'd leave rotten food in one another's desks over the weekend.

With so much freedom to play and design *Race 'n' Chase*, anything was game. The developers included references to *Reservoir Dogs*, James Bond films, *The Getaway*, and chase scenes from the *French Connection.* They reported back to the meeting a week later, where Jones would shape the overall vision to go where no game had gone before. If someone brought him a feature he'd never seen in another game, he gave it his full backing.

He had Sam's and Penn's complete support, too. Sam had grown from an iconoclastic kid to a renegade businessman. “Fuck it,” Sam would say. “Just put it in the game, I don't give a shit what people think!” He had a goal to push games into new terrain and wouldn't let any obstacle get in his way. He knew what he was up against: a surprisingly monolithic industry that had grown comfortable with formulaically heroic tales that, by and large, lacked originality.

He had refined his own style in working with DMA to produce the game. “If the game isn't coming together properly, I'll apply focus, drilling it in and pushing it through,” he once told Dan. “I don't lay down the law, I'll just go in with enthusiasm and energy and do it in a pleasant but aggressive way. I don't take no for an answer. I don't do it by being difficult. I do it by putting the right effort in.”

The simplest thing Sam wanted was clear: freedom. Just like *Elite* and the other games he had loved as a kid, the newfangled *Race 'n' Chase* seemed like more than just a game. It was, most important, a world. The game takes place within three fictional cities, each modeled after a real town. Jones, the savvy entrepreneur,

wanted to choose cities that would have the most impact on the market—and that meant the United States.

There was palm tree–lined Vice City, based on Miami; hilly San Andreas, based on San Francisco; and gritty Liberty City, based on New York. To receive a new mission, players had to stroll up to ringing telephone booths in town. A mob boss, say, Bubby, would then explain the mission, described in a subtitle on the bottom of the screen. You'd have to go, say, steal taxis or kill rival gangsters. One mission, taken from the movie *Speed*, required you to drive a bus at more than fifty miles per hour; otherwise, it would blow up.

The thing was, some play testers didn't want to do the missions at all. Given the bad-boy nature of the game—cars to steal, pedestrians to crush—they had more fun recklessly joyriding around. Baglow, who oversaw the play testers, would politely tell them it was time to stop driving and go answer a phone for a mission, but he could sense their disappointment over being restricted from simply joyriding around.

Penn, the producer at BMG, thought the game should let players do what they wanted. “It's a virtual space,” he fumed, “you're allowed to do what the fuck you like!”

THE AMAZING THING about creating a video game was that you could code your own solutions out of thin air. You didn't need to reshoot a massive scene of a movie with thousands of extras, you could just think and type. Gary Foreman, the thoughtful young programmer in charge of the technical production for BMG, came up with a solution for the mission structures on his own. There was no technical reason why the missions had to progress in a linear fashion. “Can't we just make it so you can answer *any* phone?” he asked.

Why not, in other words, just let the players proceed along their own paths, at their own pace—answering a phone whenever they wanted to or simply speeding off and having fun? This wouldn't be the first time that a game would let players freely roam in an open world or a sandbox. Games such as *The Legend of Zelda* offered degrees of undirected exploration. The *Race 'n' Chase* team also reminisced about an old Spectrum game called *Little Computer People*, which let players roam a two-story house doing random chores. Yet bringing that kind of freedom to a criminal world would break down the fourth wall as nothing ever had before.

Sam knew this sort of DIY freedom was revolutionary for the medium. “The problem with other games is that when you hit a point that's frustrating, you can't get past it,” he once said, but in *Race 'n' Chase*, “when you hit a point that's tough, just

go do something else. That's fucking great!” Even the audio became freer. If players could drive anywhere in the cities, why not have different radio stations in their cars, too? Such as country music when you steal a truck. Late into the night, the musicians stayed up recording the different radio tracks.

Jones had his worries about creating such an open-ended game world. Games were all about having an object, a purpose, a goal—shoot the aliens, get the high score. How would gamers respond to something as unrestricted as this? He hatched an idea of how to give them some focus: setting a goal of accumulating one million points. When he looked at *Race 'n' Chase*, the cars zipping around from here to there, he thought of a different model for the game: pinball. “Pinball, for me, is the ultimate,” he said. “You have two buttons, and that's it. It's just superb for teaching players about getting feedback and hooking players for hours.”

Race 'n' Chase could be similar, encouraging players to rack up as many points as possible—even by running people over. Not everyone dug the increasingly untamed direction of the game, though. One programmer stubbornly insisted on continuing to play the game as a simulation—and others walked by to find him dutifully stopping at the traffic lights in the game. Yet they realized that was the beauty of what they had created. You had the freedom to do anything, good or bad.

The only limitation was your “wanted” level. If you caused enough mayhem, a cop's face would appear on a meter at the top of the screen. Police cars would give chase if they spotted you. Commit more egregious crimes, and your wanted level increased. Now an in-game APB was put out on you. At wanted level three, police would begin to set up roadblocks. If you got busted, you got carted off to jail, and your weapons were confiscated. Yet to keep all of this from happening too frequently and ruining the game, Baglow suggested that there be Respray Shops, where you could pull in the car and get a new coat of paint.

Their living, breathing world teemed with life. DMA programmers would sit at their PCs and pull back the camera on the game, just watching cars drive on and off the screen. “The good thing about [the game],” said one coder at DMA, “is that you don't have to go down a predetermined path. And there's nothing as much fun as spinning a car over your friend's head six times.”

They weren't only running over one another, however. Baglow, DMA's writer and PR guy, had an idea of other people they could mow down in the game. The inspiration came from his own real-life travels. Whenever he passed through London airport, he always got hassled by Hare Krishnas, urging him to be happy. “Gouranga!” they'd say, a Sanskrit expression of good fortune. Baglow hated it. Then a lightbulb went off over his head.

Back at BMG, a new build of the game arrived. King slipped it into his PC and

began to play. As he tore down the road, he could see a line of small orange-robed figures moving down the street. The closer he came, the louder he could hear them chanting and drumming. Holding down his forward arrow, he careened toward them, plowing down each one as a point score floated up above them. As he smashed the last one, a bonus word flashed onscreen: “gouranga!”

“Dude!” King exclaimed, “I'm running over Hare Krishnas!” The BMG crew marveled at this wicked weird world the gang in Scotland had created. *Race 'n' Chase* had come a long way from the geeky simulation that DMA had submitted a year before. It was time to give it a new name, something that captured its outlaw spirit: *Grand Theft Auto.*

5

Eating the Hamster

WANTED LEVEL

Grim city. Aerial view. A blaring police car tore through narrow streets in pursuit of two cars. Inside the vehicles, the gangsters seemed young, dressed in black suits, white shirts, black ties, and shades. They leaned out their windows, waving guns in the air. The cars passed phone booths and restaurants, buses and pedestrians.

It looked like something out of a video game, but this was real life. Down by the docks along the river in Dundee, the cop pulled the car over. When he approached, he saw one of the blokes holding a video camera. "We're making a promotional video for a computer game called *Grand Theft Auto*," said Baglow, the diminutive DMAer with short blond hair and glasses. The get-ups and the toy guns had been inspired by *Reservoir Dogs*, and, as Brian Baglow and the other geeks from DMA in the cars explained, they were just making the video for fun. The cop arched his brow. *Grand Theft Auto*? What kind of crazy game was that?

Though the cop let the guys off, he had reason to be dubious. As *Grand Theft Auto*—or *GTA*, as the crew had begun to call it—developed, the darkly comic urban action game couldn't be more different from the biggest title around: *Tomb Raider.* Released in the fall of 1996, this action adventure of swashbuckling Indiana Jane, Lara Croft, had become gaming's greatest phenomenon in years. It milked the muscle power of the PlayStation like nothing else, with players jumping and swimming and shooting from mountains to crypts. Lara, with her big breasts and almond eyes, was eye candy personified.

This couldn't have come at a worse time for *GTA.* Games were often judged by appearance alone, and compared to glitzy *Tomb Raider*, the top-down, 2-D racing scenes couldn't look more outdated. The brass at BMG wanted to cut the game. Or, as Penn put it more bluntly, "they were trying to kill it every fucking month." Jones remained defiant. "Gameplay! Gameplay! Gameplay!" he said. "Graphically, it may not be at the cutting edge, but I believe this is going to change the world."

Luckily for Jones, he had BMG's crew of Nerf gun–wielding players on his side—

along with a new member of the BMG team, Sam's younger brother, Dan. Fresh from studying literature at Oxford, he'd begun to compose questions for what would be a hit trivia video game, *You Don't Know Jack.* Dan shared Sam's passion for *GTA* and how it defied the wizards-and-warriors fare usually associated with the industry. “Here was a game that was commenting on the world,” he later said. “It was like being in a gangster movie, rather than a game.”

The decision to focus on gameplay over graphics was well thought out. As with any creative endeavor, making a video game was all about the allocation of resources. A computer had limited processing abilities. Rather than spending that currency on power-sucking eye candy, DMA took a counterintuitive approach: putting the power toward the city's action, physics, and artificial intelligence instead. They shared the stubborn conviction that players would agree. “It doesn't matter what it looks like. If it is a compelling and fun experience,” King said, “people will play it.”

The Nerf gang succeeded at keeping BMG at bay, while assuring Jones to stay on target. Yet privately, they were starting to sweat. Something about *GTA* was amiss. The cars drove unresponsively. The story seemed clichéd and uninspired. Worse, the game kept crashing—freezing to a halt mid-play. It was, as Penn distilled, “a fucking mess.” When the DMA guys sent around an unofficial in-house survey to see which game they thought was most likely to fail, *GTA* topped the list.

THE PHONE RANG URGENTLY, as it always did, at Max Clifford Associates. In the United Kingdom, publicists didn't get much bigger or more controversial than Clifford. Having built his career representing everyone from Frank Sinatra to Muhammad Ali, the quick-witted, silver-haired Clifford had become, as one journalist put it, “a master manipulator of the tabloid media, the man many Tories blame for discrediting their government with a string of well-publicized scandals.”

Perhaps most notoriously, Clifford resurrected fledgling singer Freddie Starr's concert tour in 1986 by planting the sensational headline “Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster” in the *Sun.* Like the rumor of Ozzy Osbourne biting off the head a bat, the story generated so much attention that it sold out Starr's tour. Clifford pioneered a new game of journalism in which publicists could feed the most outrageous stories to a willing and hungry press.

On this day in 1997, however, the caller from BMG Interactive didn't want to publicize a celebrity or a politician. He needed help promoting an upcoming computer game, *Grand Theft Auto.* Could Clifford feed their hamster to the press? The decision by the marketing team at BMG Interactive to hire such a powerful

publicist—let alone a specialist in scandal—was unheard of in the game industry. BMG, with roots in the music business, thought a bit of rock-and-roll flair might do justice to their little punk game.

Yet as Gary Dale, the avuncular head of BMG Interactive, made clear, they had to get it just right. *GTA* was clearly going where no game had gone before—portraying an over-the-top criminal underworld of carjacking, Krishna-killing, drug-dealing, and chaos. It made Lara Croft look like the Church Lady, and the parent company wasn't willing to go to hell for its deeds. “Bertelsmann is a very large private company,” Dale told Clifford, “and we want to check out that we can manage the nature of the content in the right way. This is a new area. We want to get advice from a corporate responsibility point, and make sure we get the right positioning on the game and the right messaging on the game.”

Blunt and opportunistic, Clifford urged BMG to forget about convention and embrace *GTA*'s criminality in all of its glory. “If it's part of the game,” he said, “it's part of the game. In the same way in the music and the movie business, the rating system governs what's legal or illegal. As long as it's complying with that, my advice to you is don't shy away from the fact. It won't appeal to everybody, but it will appeal to some.”

Clifford recommended not only owning up to the violence, but cooking up the most outrageous hamster possible—and shoving it down the media's throat. What better way to get people talking? Clifford said he “knew there would be the wonderful elitist members of the establishment that would take and find something like this absolutely repulsive.”

Dale relayed the news to his team. “The advice from PR was as long as you're legal, you shouldn't back away,” he said. Sam loved the plan. *GTA* needed a marketing plan as brash and bold as the game. Jones, however, wasn't so convinced. He didn't want controversy for controversy's sake. Sam and the others at BMG seemed more intent on being rock stars, but Sam argued it was more about pushing boundaries. “Look,” Sam said, “you're pushing the envelope for gaming.”

“Yeah,” Jones said.

“Apart from this, games have been seen for kids. Here's one doing something different, like movies. We can actually use that as a marketing angle.”

Jones wasn't so sure and had an additional concern. Looking to grow his business, he was striking a deal to merge DMA with a publisher called Gremlin Interactive. As word spread that the company was going to float itself on the market, the press put the value at £55 million—and heralded Jones as UK's next digital titan. Jones didn't want to rock the boat. Others at DMA shared his ambivalence about hiring Clifford to promote *GTA* on controversy alone.

When Jones met Clifford, he marveled at the assuredness of his plan. Clifford told him how he'd put the word out to his high-powered contacts in politics, telling them to plant the bug in the appropriate ears. “We'll encourage the right people that it would be good for them to speak out on how outrageous this is and criticize it,” Clifford said. This, he promised, “would get publicity and, most of all, encourage the young people to buy.”

Yet, as Jones later recalled, he began to grow skeptical the more Clifford talked. “It was like…I offer a three-month plan, what I'll say is, ‘I'll feed these stories—Shock! Horror! You should see this!—into the ear of a lord somewhere, that there's this game developed in Scotland which is utterly despicable and encourages people to drive over pedestrians and kill them!' He'd say these things, and then, at the end of three months, ‘You'll be in prime time.' And I was, like, ‘Yeah, right.'” His skepticism about Clifford didn't last long, though. “Everything he said came true,” Jones later said.

It started while the game was still being developed, six months before its release. On May 20, 1997, Lord Campbell of Croy, the former Scottish secretary and a member of the cross-party Consumer Affairs Group, spoke in the House of Lords about a scandalous new computer game called *Grand Theft Auto*. The game, he explained, had hit-and-runs, joyriding, and police chases. “There would be nothing to stop children from buying it,” he warned. “To use current terminology, is this not ‘off message' for young people?”

“The government is very concerned about violent computer games, as are the public,” concurred Junior Home Office minister Lord Williams of Mostyn. “All computer games which encourage or assist in crime, or which depict human sexual activity or acts of gross violence, must be passed by the BBFC [British Board of Film Classification], which can refuse classification. If there is a refusal, that automatically makes supply illegal.

“I do understand that the general description which you attached to *Grand Theft Auto* is correct,” continued Lord Williams. “One has to bear in mind very carefully the vice of these computer games. It deals not only with the sort of activity you referred to but also to acts of gross violence.”

“We simply cannot allow children and young people to be given the idea that car crime or joyriding is in any way an acceptable or an enjoyable thing to do,” added Lord Campbell, who called on the BBFC to examine *GTA* and determine whether it should even be legal to release. It wasn't bluster. The BBFC had recently refused to rate *Carmageddon*—a darkly comic destruction-derby title marketed as “the racing game for the Chemically Imbalanced”—unless it toned down the violence and gore, all but ensuring that it wouldn't be carried at major retail stores.

With the politicians' debates making headlines, Clifford's carefully scripted battle over *GTA* played out in the tabloids on cue. “Criminal computer game that glorifies hit-and-run thugs,” the *Daily Mail* hyped. “Imagine yourself being an up and coming low-life car thief, stealing exotic cars, and then add murder one, cop killing, car-hacking, drug-running, bank-raids and even illegal alien assassination!”

Despite the aging demographic of the industry, the sheer mention of the word *games* set off a load of critics who feared *GTA* would corrupt kids' impressionable minds. A spokesperson for the Scottish Motor Trade Association said, “It is deplorable to open young minds to car crime in this way.” “This game is sick, and parents should refuse to buy it for their children,” said a spokesperson for a group called Family and Youth Concern. “But even that may not be the solution, because children will still get their hands on a copy. This kind of material is dangerous and will make children think it is OK to rob cars and kill.”

As the press spread, BMG and DMA rode the back of Clifford's hamster. “Once those quotes got quoted, we were happy to have them out there because, of course, they generated interest in the game,” Dale later said.

To keep the controversy brewing, they launched a radio ad campaign featuring excerpts of the House of Lords debate. At a video game convention, they left fake parking tickets on cars that read “Penalty: For Having a Flash Car is to have it nicked and driven in a high-speed car chase with gunplay involving the Police until it is spectacularly written off. You have been warned.” The *GTA* logo appeared below in red-and-orange letters with a trail of flames, along with the tagline, “it's criminal not to.”A *GTA* promotional poster showed a car careening in the street. A list of crimes was printed along the side: “Murder, drug busts, hijacking, smuggling, bank raids, police bribes, road rage, bribery, extortion, armed robbery, unlawful carnal knowledge, adultery, pimping, petty thievery, and double parking!” The penal code for *Grand Theft Auto* appeared on the game's cover. Said Baglow, “The BBFC didn't really get the joke.”

Yet the joke was also on him. One night he was driving home when he brushed against a tree. It was a minor fender-bender for his beat-up old car. When Clifford heard about it, however, a sparkle of possibility flashed in his eyes. Baglow later cracked open the *News of the World* to find the story that had been entertainingly spun.

“Sick car game boss was banned from driving,” it read. “The computer buff behind the sick car-carnage game *Grand Theft Auto* was once banned from the road after writing off a car. Programmer Brian Baglow was at the wheel of his high-powered Ford Fiesta XR2 when it careered out of control and smashed into a tree. Baglow was arrested and taken to court, where he received a year-long ban for careless

driving. ‘It was unfortunate, but you learn,' said the businessman, who stands to make a fortune from the game this Christmas.”

While Baglow laughed off the controversy, Jones wasn't taking it so well. When asked how he felt about the press, he said, “Good and bad.” Clifford, in a way, had done his job too well. Jones couldn't believe how many people were willing to criticize an unfinished game that they had yet to even see. He wasn't the golden boy of *Lemmings* anymore.

The press lamented that “the computer genius who developed the best-selling *Lemmings* was at the centre of a storm . . . over a new game which encourages players to steal cars and knock down pedestrians in a hit-and-run joyride.” As the *Sunday Times* later put it, “It is quite a shock to realize that the charming naivety of *Lemmings* and the Grand Guignol bloodthirst of *Grand Theft Auto* were both developed by a reticent Dundonian, Dave Jones.”

With the BBFC threatening to refuse classification, the game developers had a serious problem on their hands, potentially causing them to miss the lucrative holiday season. BMG commissioned a psychologist from Nottingham Trent University to study the game, which he ultimately approved for adults. Baglow defended the game's wanted levels to the press. “We are being moral,” he said. “Every time the player does something illegal, that increases the determination of the police to catch them, and they will be caught. In fact, we stress that crime does not pay.”

Finally, just before the game's release, came the ruling on *GTA*. “We are confronted with new problems and new forms of violence,” the BBFC said in a statement. “This kind of video has already provoked concern in Parliament and government. They involve the player in potentially criminal behavior and the infliction of violence on innocent parties. Such subject matter is unprecedented.” But not something to ban. The game would be rated for players eighteen and over.

Max Clifford had scored big time and soon let the cat out of the bag. “We got it across to twelve to thirteen million people because it's controversial,” he said. “Do you think the *News of the World* would have come out with a piece like they did just because it was a great game? I don't.”

Jones tried to transform the controversy into a teaching moment. In the final weeks leading up to the release, the team had been coding around the clock to improve the handling of the cars (each of which now drove with the appropriate physics, like big vehicles with sluggish maneuvering) and work out the bugs. He didn't want their achievements to get lost in the noise. “People assume that computer games are for kids, and that's very wrong,” he said. “The trouble is when people judge games on hearsay and out of context. *Grand Theft Auto* is all in the best

possible taste.”

ON NOVEMBER 28, 1997, gamers in England got their first spin at *GTA.* The plan was to release it first in the United Kingdom, then, some time later, in the United States. By now, however, the release of *GTA* seemed like an afterthought to the hype, with it having already been declared, as the *Guardian* put it, “the most controversial game in a decade.” This left DMA and BMG with the unenviable by-product of such an elaborate PR campaign: living up to the buzz. The cheeky tagline under DMA's credit read “Disgusts Governments, Policemen, and Parents.”

Yet it didn't take long to get the verdict. As *GTA*'s producers feared, some players thought it paled in comparison to games such as *Tomb Raider.* One player dismissed its “horrendous game play due to the crappy controls. Graphics are terrible. I've seen better on 8 bit systems. When you answer the phone, it sounds like you are talking to a chipmunk.”

The guys at BMG found such criticisms infuriating. “What the fuck does that mean?” Dan once said. “If it's fun to play, it doesn't matter how it looks!” Yet as more reviews came in, there were plenty of gamers who didn't care about the graphics at all. “Though not up to the moral standards, *Grand Theft Auto* is great fun, in a twisted sort of way,” wrote one gamer in a review. “*GTA* is quite addictive, as there is so much freedom in the way one can accomplish the different missions.” “*GTA* is a gas,” another effused. “You find yourself becoming immersed in the role of being the best criminal in the city.”

Across the United Kingdom, a small but passionate cult following began to form. One day, the guys at DMA found a website where gamers had assembled a timetable to keep track of the trains that randomly pass through the cities of *GTA.* A story spread that a shopkeeper had come back to find that his store had been broken into, and all of the copies of *GTA* had been stolen. Though the numbers were modest, the game sold steadily out of the gate, churning more and more copies out by word of mouth, while others would have long gone by the wayside. *GTA* was moving about ten thousand copies a week. Before long, total sales were approaching five hundred thousand—at roughly £50 a clip—bringing revenues of £25 million. Considering that the game cost roughly £1 million to make—largely, the cost of salaries—the game more than earned its right to a sequel.

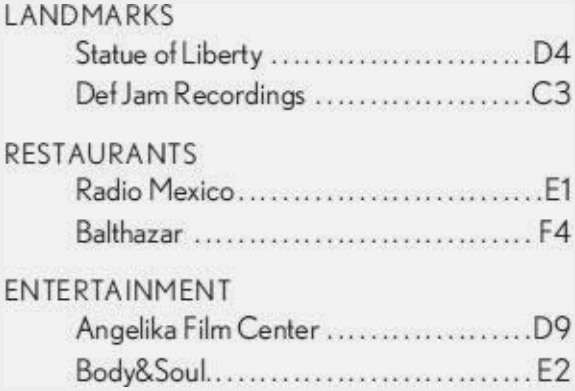
Though Sam wasn't in a position yet to get rich off the game, he seemed vindicated. The twenty-seven-year-old had long admired Rick Rubin—an iconoclast who changed the music industry on his own terms. Maybe Sam could do the same for video games. This little Scottish outlaw fantasy had finally put him in the

driver's seat, and he knew just where he wanted to go: Liberty City.

6

Liberty City

MAP 01: POINTS OF INTEREST



Just as Sam was riding high on the success of *GTA*, he hit a new obstacle: BMG Interactive was being sold. The division had been bleeding cash. Though still relatively green in business, Sam saw examples of mismanagement—such as opening offices in twenty-seven countries around the world. The executives of the German conglomerate were souring on video games. With buzz building about the nascent Internet, Bertelsmann had turned its sights on television and the Web. Dale, BMG's head, tried to convince the company to stay in the game business, but to no avail. “Bertelsmann ultimately decided they didn't want to be in the video game business,” he later recalled. “Games just weren't part of the strategy.”

With the Interactive division on the block, Sam panicked. “I gotta put the food on the table!” he said. His heart sank as he looked for opportunities with more corporate publishers. Sam felt too iconoclastic to fit in. “They didn't want nutters like us,” he later said.

Then he met a nutter just as bold as him: Ryan Brant, a young guy in New York City who was considering buying BMG Interactive. They had plenty in common. Like Sam, Brant had been born into a glamorous family steeped in popular culture. His father, Peter, owned the magazines *Interview* and *Art in America* and cofounded the tony Greenwich Polo Club. Unlike Sam's mom, who had merely acted in gangster films, Brant's father had actually served time for tax evasion. Brant's stepmother was the supermodel Stephanie Seymour.

After graduating from the prestigious Wharton School of Business, Brant, a wiry guy with close-cropped hair, wanted nothing to do with his father's world of old media. In New York, Internet start-ups dotted the downtown area newly dubbed Silicon Alley. Brant knew exactly which part of the high-tech industry he wanted to crash: video games. At the time, the game industry was dominated by big publishers such as Electronic Arts and Activision and then a number of smaller companies. Yet Brant saw opportunity. In 1993, at the age of only twenty-one, he used a $1.5 million investment from his dad and other private investors to found Take-Two Interactive, his own game publisher.

Brant, who had grown up hobnobbing with downtown celebrities, decided to differentiate himself by putting out CD-ROM games that resembled B-movies. He wanted to cast real stars, a practice still largely unheard of in the mainstream game business, and combine them with adult subject matter, cinematic pretensions, and a deliberate, if ham-handed, edginess. *Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller* starred cult actor Dennis Hopper and sold three hundred thousand copies worldwide, earning Take-Two $2.5 million in profits. For a game called *Ripper*, Brant spent $625,000 of its $2.5 million budget to cast Christopher Walken and *Indiana Jones* heroine Karen Allen. “I want to create the best possible software,” Brant told *Forbes*, “and make as much money as possible.”

Brant showed an Ivy League prowess for figuring out how to cash in, completing an initial public offering that raised $6.5 million for the company. Yet he knew he couldn't remain stagnant for long. One morning, he woke up with the terrifying thought: “We're going to get killed here unless we get bigger.” He began to gobble up distributors from the United States to the United Kingdom and Australia to provide both an outlet for his games and another stream of revenues. By 1997, with a number of games on the market, the company's revenues neared $200 million, with more than $7 million in profit.

With licensing deals in place for Sony and Nintendo, Brant needed to shore up his publishing resources, and that's what led him to BMG Interactive. Jamie King, the BMG producer, thought that Brant was “ballsy as fuck,” a newbie willing to take on the big boys at Activision and EA. Sam desperately wanted in and pitched Brant on his vision of the future of games. “I gave a very energetic pitch to him, where I must have sweated through three layers of clothing in my own insane sweaty way,” Sam later recalled, “and everyone in the office is like ‘Who the fuck was that guy?”

The pitch worked. In March 1998, Brant paid $14.2 million in stock for BMG Interactive. The deal gave him staff and the rights to *GTA* and other games. Promoted to Take-Two's vice president of worldwide product development, Sam would now be in charge of both the development subsidiaries and third-party

developers, including DMA Design and Jones, who would continue work on the *GTA* games in Scotland. Yet there was one catch: Sam had to move to New York.

Everyone wants to live a dream life, working at a job that isn't a job at all but a passion. Making video games in New York City, for Sam, felt like a dream come true. Eager to convince his friends to join him, Sam broke the news to his peers at BGM. “I gotta go to New York,” he told King one day. “You want to come?”

King's mind raced with images of a past trip to New York. He had been staying at a model's apartment in the Village and roamed Fifth Avenue in the snow while listening to Pharcyde on his headphones—determined to one day live here. Did he want to come to New York and oversee game production? “Done!” King replied. “I'm there! Just book the fucking ticket!”

Then Sam made a call to his other key buddy: Terry Donovan. A childhood friend from St. Paul's, Donovan was a towering Brit who'd grown up in the same kind of pop culture trend–setting family as Sam and Dan. His father had directed the iconic video for the Robert Palmer hit “Simply Irresistible.” Donovan wore his lineage with rock star pride, boasting of his early brushes with greatness. “My first drug experience was at age seven, sitting in my living room with Mick Jagger, smoking a spliff,” he once said.

These days, Donovan had been working as head of artist relations at Arista, putting out dance, trance, drum, and bass records. He'd also been deejaying around town, marketing himself and the clubs. Though his only work with computers was getting his PC to write “terry is cool” as a schoolboy, Donovan listened intently to Sam's pitch. “You gotta come out here because we're starting a new label within the Take-Two family,” Sam told him. “It's almost like an independent, we're going to try doing our own stuff from BMG, try and make games that are more modern, more accessible.” Donovan, who would oversee marketing, was in.

Gary Foreman, BMG's quiet tech whiz, got the pitch to be technical director at Take-Two. When he told his erudite gamer friends at home about his opportunity with Take-Two, however, they scoffed. Compared to *GTA*, the games that Take-Two made seemed cheesy and lame. “Take-Two?” they told Foreman. “What have you done? Are you kidding me?” No matter, he was in, along with the others. It was time to move to Liberty City for real.

SAM AND THE OTHERS WEREN'T the only British invasion coming to the States in 1998. So was their prized game, *GTA.* By now, Clifford's hamster had grown into a Godzilla-size monster, thanks to the British media. *GTA* madness had even spread to Brazil, which banned the game outright, ordering all copies to be taken off the

shelves. Violators faced up to $8,580 in fines.

After hearing about *GTA* on the Internet, gamers in the States were rabidly awaiting its release. An early *GTA* website, launched by a fan at the University of Missouri, went viral online. Players added news and tips about the game, spreading the word until the site had more than a hundred thousand visitors. Sam and the others made it the official hub for the game. Reports came in that hackers were copying the game and distributing it online, a practice that had yet to really break beyond the indie underworld. When the press caught wind, they hyped the real-life criminality of the game. “A top-selling Scots computer game is being stolen . . . by teenage nerds in America,” wrote the *Sunday Mail*.

Although Take-Two had purchased the rights to release the PlayStation version of *GTA* later in the year, the game arrived in the States first on PC. A small start-up in Connecticut called ASC Games, which had released a bowling title and the Jeff Gordon racing game, secured the rights. ASC followed BMG's lead by milking the controversy to fuel sales. The company hyped the game in a press release titled “Amidst Storm of Controversy,” and irreverently promised “to unleash a crime wave on America.”

On its release in the United States, the U.S. press heralded *GTA*'s inventiveness and rebellious spirit. Official *PlayStation Magazine* called it “one of the most original, innovative, technically impressive and controversial PlayStation releases ever.” *Computer Games Magazine* effused, “The game's gleeful embrace of anarchy is a refreshing change from the normal do-gooder activities found in most games. Crude and profane, this brilliant little game allows us all to get in touch with our inner Beavis.” *GameSpot* said, “It won't win any awards. [But] Wanna-be sociopaths who can deal with the shortcomings will have a lot of fun.”

Yet ASC quickly experienced the real battles that followed *GTA.* The ASC publicist handling the game learned this firsthand when he demonstrated the game for *Entertainment Weekly*. As he watched the writer, who seemed entranced with the experience, he figured he could count on a high score. He was wrong. The review came out with the lowest—and rarest—letter grade yet, an F. *GTA* got slugged off as a “shock-schlock game . . . as monotonous as it is discomforting (you earn brownie points with your Mob boss, though), leaving you with outdated graphics and a game that's guilty but hardly a pleasure.”

The publicist called up, begging for an explanation. “Why the bad review?” he asked.

“The editors,” he was told.

“Why?”

“Because of the content. The content's so awful, I couldn't give it anything higher

than an F."

By the time the game came out for PlayStation in the summer of 1998, however, even the worst review couldn't slow it down. *GTA* had arrived in the United States, and so had the unlikely stars behind it.

THEY CALLED IT THE COMMUNE. It was a ground-floor apartment on Water Street in the South Street Seaport area of Manhattan. Practically no windows. A cave of darkness. This was where Sam, King, Foreman, and Donovan moved in—along with Sam's three cats—when they landed in New York in the summer of 1998.

Just to be in Manhattan was electrifying, especially after so many years idolizing the States. The honking horns. The *Noo Yawk* accents. The salty smell of hot dogs wafting up from street vendors. The Empire State Building, and the Statue of Liberty. All of the great restaurants, from the dive Radio Mexico down the street to the trendy Balthazar in SoHo. The guys spent hours flipping through the channels on TV, just watching the wonderfully American excess pipe in: sensational crimes on local TV, the game show models, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, pornographer Al Goldstein on public access flipping off rivals with a big "Fuck You!"

"I can't believe what's being pumped into the living room," Donovan said.

"We're here!" King effused. "We work on the games, they're risky and ambitious, we don't know what we're doing! It's exciting. It's amazing. Now we're here in games industry and totally high profile, whether we like it or not."

They were young, far from home, with no real clue how to run a video game company, but they had something crucial: the dream and the drive. Working out of a cramped office in SoHo, the guys began mapping out plans for a *GTA* mission pack set in London in 1969, along with a formal sequel, *GTA2*. At night, they'd return to the Commune to stay up late playing video games and plotting their future. Sam's job was to oversee the company's publishing efforts in the United States, including games beyond *GTA*. He also had a personal mission of his own: "to bring our attitude, try to make games that felt more relevant to the audience that was playing them."

The guys knew just how they wanted to do it, by starting their own video game label—"a hip, happening label, more about lifestyle, not toys or technology," as Donovan once described it.

"Take-Two has an identity, EA has their identity," King agreed, "it's important that we have our own identity, and let consumers know what we stand for, a certain kind of branding." As Baglow, who had come from DMA to handle PR for Take-

Two, said, they wanted to create “an outlaw label,” something that reflected the renegade spirit of *GTA.*

Sam phoned his brother Dan, who was still in London but planning to join them in the States soon to work at Take-Two and oversee the writing of the games. Dan, like Sam, was sick of an industry telling grown men to play the roles of elves and wanted something more. He was convinced, as he said, “that there was this huge audience of people who play console games in particular and who were very culturally savvy and culturally aware, but who were being fed content when playing games they found slightly demeaning.”

They wanted to make the games that they wanted to play. To do this, they didn't want to model themselves on other game companies such as EA, which they considered a crass, sequel-spewing machine. Their goal, as King later put it, was simple but bold: “to change everything.”

ONE DAY SAM and the others piled into a car for a road trip to Six Flags Great Adventure, the theme park in Jackson, New Jersey. The guys loved roller coasters almost as much as hip-hop and wanted to celebrate their new move with a day on the rides.

GTA was on its way to selling more than one million copies worldwide. They still weren't rich, but they were emboldened. They wanted to brand themselves while they were hot, so that consumers knew they weren't just buying into a game but a lifestyle. They just needed a name. They would still remain part of Take-Two Interactive but as a branded label. Grudge Games was Donovan's favorite, suggested because they were, as Sam once put it, “world-class grudge bearers.”

“Minimum ten years,” Dan said.

When they had run the idea by Brant, though, he balked. “You know, guys,” he said, “I know where you're going with that, but it's a little on the negative side.”

During a recent trip to London, Sam had tossed out the name Rockstar. “I like everything, from the Keith Richards it evokes to the campiness it evokes,” he later said, “and everything in between. . . . at the end of the day you can't fuck with Keith Richards!”

“It's a nod to the past and a snipe at it at the same time,” Donovan agreed. “And also, in a weird way, a snipe at the lameness of the present. In some ways, the golden age of the rock star is done. Not many Keith Richards around now. Now they're drinking herbal tea!”

Foreman had one concern about calling themselves Rockstar: they had better

deliver. “People will make fun of us,” he said, “we'll get shit, but then pressure would be on. We'll have to live up to it. We have to make sure our games are really, really good.” Yet that, for them, was a given. Now the cofounders of this label simply had to make it official.

Over in the midway at Six Flags, they saw a vendor selling wooden plaques. For a few bucks, visitors could have their own messages burned into the wood, such as “Bon Jovi Rulez!” As the acrid smell of sizzling carbon filled the air, they watched the carny etch their new name into the wood: Rockstar Games.

They decided to burn one more sign for good measure. Something they could hang next to this one in the Commune back in New York. A phrase to remind them forever of this day when their mission began. A cheeky message, perhaps, for anyone who might ever try to stop them.

“Fuck Off Cunts,” it read.

7

Gang Warfare

RESPECT-O-METER

Who presently tolerates you and who wants you dead. Depending on who you're working for, you either have respect with a gang or you don't. If you've got it with one gang, then head to their neighborhood and get yourself employed. If you don't, you better mind where you stray. Find yourself in the wrong area with no respect and you'll get a pretty harsh hello.

Fuck off! Go home! Go back to England!”

It didn't take long for Sam and his gang to read how their competitors felt about their calling themselves Rockstar. Game development companies, whose employees are predominantly male, are a unique breed of frats—brainy, creative, self-effacing members who are expected to be comfortable in their underdog status. They'd sooner compare themselves with Napoleon Dynamite than Keith Richards.

After Sam announced his label's name in a December 1998 press release—“the Rockstar brand will finally deliver an elite brand that people can trust,” he promised—the flames hit the online gaming forums. Game developers bristled over the cocky New Kids On The Block. The fact that these Brits were in New York City, far from the hub of game development on the West Coast, only made them more outcast.

Yet characteristically, the antagonism only emboldened the guys further. King, always ready to burst into a stream-of-consciousness rant similar to Sam's, fumed about how no one seemed to get their sense of mission or irony. “Rockstar came from growing up and being in awe of all the rock stars and the musicians and the hip-hop artists having limos, trashing hotel rooms, having stories like you snorted a fucking load of ants because you were so high!” he'd say, breathlessly. “The glamour! The photography! The backstage! The groupies! The T-shirts!”

It was as if the other developers actually liked being dismissed as nerds. “Everyone's saying we're a bunch of geeks in a garage on a Saturday night who should be out dating,” King went on. “Fuck you! We've got *Grand Theft Auto* coming! It's a wake-up call to everyone. Games are going to be cool!”

The plan started with their office. The team moved into 575 Broadway, a gorgeous red brick building in SoHo over the Guggenheim Museum annex. They arrived to work from the Commune, walking from the subway past models, hipsters, and

artists. Upstairs, they took over a rundown loft with glassed-in offices in the back.

Sam hung up a poster of his idol, the late movie producer Don Simpson, who made the blockbusters he'd worshipped as a kid: *Top Gun*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Days of Thunder.* Simpson personified the kind of high-concept entertainment that they wanted to bring to video games. The fact that he died young, a drug-addled sex fiend, only made him more of an antihero to the team. “When you have a vision and you're creating something new, no one's going to understand that,” King later said. “Everyone's going to throw obstacles in your way, and you must overcome that. People like Don Simpson are an inspiration because they did it. They're pioneers, and fuck everyone else.” That's the kind of game makers they wanted to be.

With their office in place, they needed a logo for their label—as iconic as Def Jam's. When they marched into Take-Two's office to unveil their plan, however, they drew blank stares. “We want to make stickers, and we want to make T-shirts!” King said.

The guys in suits just stared back blankly. “Why?”

“What do you mean why?” King responded. “Because it's cool!”

Sam shared King's frustration with his new corporate parents. “What the fuck am I doing here?” he asked Dan. “Take-Two isn't even in the top twenty-five game publishers. They're nobodies. All they have is a few corporate guys and a couple of accountants. That's it.” Yet their ambitious boss, Ryan Brant, insisted on giving the boys their freedom, despite being a subsidiary of Take-Two. Rockstar commissioned a gifted young artist named Jeremy Blake to design the logo. After several iterations, they decided on the winning one: a letter R with an asterisk, R*.

As they battled to brand their identity under the corporate parentage of Take-Two, Rockstar began to build its team. As president of Rockstar Games, Sam would oversee the vibe and the vision of their products. He began hiring people who shared their mission to change the gaming culture and industry. All that it took was a few minutes with Sam for prospective employees to fall under his spell. Who was this shaggy, bearded Brit, spitting and ranting about making games cool? As one early hire said, “I bought into his vision and charisma.”

Yet if you wanted to join the game industry's most elite gang, you had to play by its rules. Baglow, the former writer and publicist for DMA, learned this quickly after he showed up in New York to head Rockstar's PR. Accustomed to the more typically geeky office culture back in Dundee, Baglow had simply bought a bunch of T-shirts to wear to work at Rockstar, a different color for each day. Donovan, mountainous and chrome-domed, looked down at Baglow as if he were a lowly Hobbit. “Fucking hell, mate, are you just changing your texture map?” he joked, referring to the

graphic scheme used to color objects in video games.

The next day, Sam and Dan took Baglow along to the hip shops on Broadway, buying him a wardrobe they felt was more worthy of their new international PR manager: Dockers, hoodies, and a gray T-shirt with their logo and the words “Je Suis Un Rockstar” on the back. “I look more like a Long Island white boy than a dick from Dundee,” Baglow quipped, after he donned his new garb. Baglow was told he had to, as he put it, “learn the Rockstar way.”

The Rockstar way didn't end with the wardrobe. It was built on attitude, as Baglow learned one day during lunch. He had come back into the office with a bag from a nearby Chinese take-out place. Sam snarled at the sight of the restaurant's name on the bag. “Oh, no!” he snapped, “you're not getting that!” Baglow learned that the restaurant had done something inexplicable to piss off Sam and had landed on the boss's burgeoning black list. “There are places we can't go because Sam had a bad experience,” another Rockstar explained to Baglow.

Though they had only about a dozen employees, the sense of loyalty was already tight. King started to call themselves the 575ers, for their Broadway address. With Sam leading by example with his passionate work ethic, they labored into the night, cast in the bluish glow of their screens. Later they'd head to their favorite bar, Radio Mexico, as alive and electric as the city outside, to guzzle cervezas and fried cheese balls.

WITH THE ROCKSTAR BRAND and team in place, they set about on their most important job of all: publishing the kind of games they wanted to play, no matter how strange they appeared to the rest of the industry. Their inexperience, relative to the corporate giants who ruled the business, only made them feel more empowered. Yet they felt that the stakes were high anyway, and their dreams were theirs alone to lose.

Rockstar wasn't limiting itself to *GTA.* The company had *Monster Truck Madness 64* for the Nintendo 64 in the works, as well as *Thrasher! Skate and Destroy*, inspired by the skater magazine. *Thrasher!* gave an early hint of the cultural mash-ups Rockstar wanted in its games. Instead of the standard arena rock soundtrack, Rockstar licensed vintage hip-hop such as “White Lines” by Grandmaster Flash and, even more unusually, released a promo on 12-inch vinyl with a Japanese logo.

By 1999, *GTA* had sold more than a million copies worldwide but remained little more than a culty underground anomaly. PC gaming was still dominated by the fantastical fare of D&D knock-offs (such as *Asheron's Call* and *EverQuest*) and first-person shooters (*Quake, Unreal Tournament*). Console titles, even more mainstream,

stuck to the predictable worlds of zombie killers (*Resident Evil*), cutesy gorillas (*Donkey Kong 64*), and movie tie-ins (*Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*).

Rockstar, however, refused to give up on its quirky urban satire. Next would come *Grand Theft Auto: London 1969*, a mission pack of extra levels for *GTA*. Sam relished the opportunity of doing bobbies and robbers in his hometown, sort of a virtual *Get Carter*. "London in the sixties was slick, glamorous and cool but with an ever-present undercurrent of ultra-violence," he said, when announcing the game.

Of course, he could press more buttons back home, too. When Matt Diehl, a reporter from *Spin* magazine, interviewed Sam about the game, he found a long-haired, frenzied Brit with a White Album beard. "You're running bagfuls of speed to a Member of Parliament's hooker," Sam effused, "and there's both female and male prostitution!" It was all part of his master plan. "We're about doing games that have relevance," he went on. "Most games let you be Tommy the Dancing Leprechaun who slays the dragon. You can't go to the pub and say, 'Wow, I just slayed the dragon, man! But if you say, 'I just carjacked fifty-five cars and ripped off drags, *that's* relevant."

At the same time, Rockstar began work on a full-blown sequel, *GTA2*. Taking a cue from *Blade Runner*, they set the action in the seedy near future of an unnamed city in America. There'd be a sleazy Elvis Presley bar called Disgracelands and an overrun mental institution. Instead of only police chasing the player as his wanted level increased, there'd be the FBI and the National Guard on the trail, too.

Yet what most excited Sam and the others were the gangs. Instead of random people roaming the streets, seven identifiable groups of criminals ruled the three districts of *GTA2*. As the player answered phones in different areas, nearby gangs would send him off on missions to complete. Each gang had its own symbol and style, just as in *The Warriors*: the Loonies, symbolized by a winking happy face, were gleefully violent hoods who doled out brutal jobs of killings and explosives; the Rednecks were represented by a Confederate flag and pickup trucks; and the Krishnas were back, chanting outside their temple.

Depending on how players impressed or pissed off the gangs, they would reap either the reward or the sorrow. Rockstar swiped the tagline from mob films, "Respect is everything." For the 575 crew, the game felt vividly autobiographical, as King said, "from growing up in gang culture and going through thick and thin as teenagers, to the way we were a gang at Rockstar like the gangs within these games."

With Rockstar now driving the future of *GTA*, the pressure mounted on Jones and the gang back in Dundee. Gone were the free-form days of anything-goes development and the luxurious four years they spent making the first *GTA*. Rockstar, for all of its employees' youthful glee, still had a taskmaster parent behind-the-

scenes: Take-Two. Their urge to rebel brought tensions to the fold.

As a public company with milestones to meet, Take-Two demanded a specific date for *GTA2*'s release: October 28, 1999. This gave DMA a little more than twelve months to make the game, with a budget of about $1 million. Making a successful game took an enormous amount of time and effort, because the developers literally had to code—and test—a believable world from the ground up. Six-day workweeks (known in the industry as "crunch time") became the norm. Gone was the time when Jones made games on his own; the development team had grown to thirty-five people.

Despite Sam's rebellious tastes, he always worked as hard as—if not harder than—any guy in a suit up at Take-Two. This is what gave him his edge, having the vision of an outlaw but the work ethic of a Puritan. To show solidarity during crunch, Sam and the others would shave their heads (then let their hair grow long again after a game shipped).

The staff sat hunched at their desks by 8 a.m. and left at 10 p.m., with Sam always the first to arrive and the last to leave. Rockstar producer Marc Fernandez later compared it to the way an NFL quarterback leads a team by example. "Sam wanted everyone to know that no one worked harder than him," he said. "You couldn't really question his critique because he was out-proving you every single day."

The tighter they became in New York, the more a sense of gang warfare emerged between Rockstar and DMA. "They were feeling that Dundee is this backwater place," DMA producer Paul Farley later recalled. "There was definitely friction."

Jones had other reasons to feel disenfranchised. DMA was changing hands again. French publisher Infogrames was acquiring Gremlin Interactive, the company that Jones had merged with in 1997, for an estimated £24 million. Infogrames wanted to become "the Disney of videogames," Jones said—and how could the Disney of games be associated with *GTA*?

"OH, NO," said Jack Thompson, as he tuned to CNN. It was just before noon on April 20, 1999, and the aspiring culture warrior was inside his Spanish-tiled home on a quiet suburban street in Coral Gables. His young son, Johnny, played in the background. With his wife, a successful attorney, paying the bills, Thompson had become a stay-at-home dad, caring for Johnny—as he kept one eye trained on the moral decay of America and his next call to action.

It didn't take long to find it. Thompson watched in horror as terrified teenagers poured from Columbine High School. As the shootings unfolded on TVs around the world, millions of concerned parents desperately tried to make sense of this

incredibly senseless crime. They needed something to blame, something controllable, something to assure them that this would never happen in their families. Thompson had just the answer: video games.

Since his high-profile victories over rappers 2 Live Crew and Ice-T, Thompson had become an unusually potent crusader who built on three powerful traits, a savvy knack for media sound bites, a Vanderbilt-trained understanding of the law, and, perhaps most important, a tireless ability to fight. Thompson's best friend was his fax machine, which he used to flood the media with press releases about his latest cause.

Now he had the game industry in his crosshairs. It started in March 1998, after fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal opened fire on classmates during a school prayer group in Paducah, Kentucky. When Thompson learned of Carneal's passion for violent games such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom*, he worked with the attorney for three of the victims to file a $130 million lawsuit against the companies behind the titles.

“We intend to hurt Hollywood,” Thompson announced at a press conference. “We intended to hurt the video game industry.” The press ate his hamster on cue. Thompson went on national TV to warn *Today Show* host Matt Lauer that the Paducah shooting would not be the last of its kind. Seven days later, Columbine happened—making Thompson an even more credible media darling.

Within moments of the shootings, he had the sheriff's department near Columbine on the phone. “Because of my research on the Paducah case,” he said, “I have reason to believe that school shooting—and now possibly this one—was the result of a teen filled up with violent entertainment and trained on violent entertainment, video games, to kill.” The media erupted the next day with news that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had been inspired by the game *Doom*, copies of which had been found at their homes.

For Doug Lowenstein, the staunch head of the game industry's Interactive Digital Software Association in Washington, D.C., Thompson had fired a devastating blow. Since the *Mortal Kombat* hearings of 1993, he had been successfully lobbying politicians to keep regulation at bay. A former journalist from New York City, Lowenstein had the First Amendment, as he said, “deep in my DNA” since his days working on his high school paper. He believed that it protected both Nazis to march in Skokie and developers to put out violent games. “That's the essence of free expression,” he said. “You can't compromise on free speech.”

Articulate, intelligent, prematurely balding, and dressed in a business suit, Lowenstein presented a safely grown-up face for the industry that was still considered for kids. Yet in recent years, his successes in Washington had a

downside. The industry had been coasting since the Lieberman hearings, regulating itself with its voluntary ratings board, the ESRB, and staying outside the fray of cultural debate—but not anymore.

“Columbine fundamentally transformed everything,” he later recalled. “Suddenly, everything was back to square one, and the worst and most negative stereotypes about the industry were not only revisited, but in a way reaffirmed. You had never been in battle, but now you're fighting a war.”

Lowenstein knew exactly what was on the line: a state and federal push for regulation. Sure enough, Lieberman called for an investigation into the game industry shortly after Columbine. President Clinton soon took up the call, ordering a federal investigation into game ratings and marketing. For Lowenstein, the stakes went beyond games. “Once you [accept] the principle that violent depictions can be regulated and restricted as obscenity can be,” he said, “you've opened the door to most pervasive and extensive government censorship that we've ever seen in this country.”

Yet as Thompson made the rounds on TV, Lowenstein began to feel that he was losing the battle in the most influential arena: the press. Just one week after Columbine, Lowenstein went on the defensive when *60 Minutes* grilled him during a lead segment on violent games. The show then cut to the story of Paducah and Lowenstein's new nemesis: Jack Thompson, who sat alongside Mike Breen, the attorney for the victims in Paducah.

There on the most popular news program in the United States, Thompson, his graying hair neatly combed, had his biggest platform yet. This was his moment to take his culture war to a wider audience than ever before, to send a message to the players of the game industry that he was gunning for them. “What would you say to critics who feel that this is a frivolous lawsuit against defendants who have very deep pockets?” Ed Bradley asked.

“Hold on to your hat,” Breen replied.

“And your wallet,” Thompson said.

8

Steal This Game

THREE WEEKS INTO THE FUTURE

> The city is on the edge of collapse, with law and order beginning to break down completely. People are running wild, half-addled on good-additives and semi-legal pharmaceutical pills. A giant corporation controls every aspect of society, from entertainment to organ transplants. . . . Things are going to get way out of control.

Get away from me!" screamed the half-naked man in the cage, as he struggled to remove the collar from around his neck.

"Shut up, you freak!" shouted his master—an ape chomping a cigar—as he yanked the collar tighter.

The scene came right out of *Planet of the Apes* but wasn't taking place in the movie. It was unfolding live inside the Los Angeles Convention Center. Pasty young guys jostled to photograph the women in leather bikinis inside the cage. A newscaster with spiky blond hair
interviewed one of the actors dressed as a gorilla. "Chasing humans has always been my most favorite," the gorilla explained, as a comely slave stroked its mane. "I like to run them down in the cornfields, yes!"

This promotion for a new *Planet of the Apes* video game was among the featured attractions of the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, the video game industry's annual carnivalesque trade show. For three days in May 1999, more than seventy thousand wide-eyed and sore-thumbed players from the real world descended here to check out the latest, greatest games. More than nineteen hundred titles from four hundred companies flashed on giant screens in booths designed like Hollywood sets.

Publishers spared no expense to dazzle players and outdo one another. Gamers crammed into Electronic Arts' giant booth to watch macho men Diamond Dallas Page and Sting hurl each other across a ring as part of a promotion for a new World Championship Wrestling game. The child star of the new *Star Wars: Episode 1* film hyped the tie-in game. Throughout the sprawling two floors of the convention, seemingly every stripper in L.A. had been hired to work as a so-called booth babe—including a gun-wielding Lara Croft. Even David Bowie, one of the many stars promoting a game at the E3, professed himself a fan. "Of course, I play *Tomb*

Raider," he said. "Like every other hot-blooded male, I was in love with Lara."

Video games were sexy, and celebrities and publishers wanted to cash in. The allure of new technologies electrified the air. With the Internet booming and Wall Street soaring, the dot com bubble was churning out legions of young millionaires. Bill Gates's worth alone topped $100 billion. Video games were the fastest-growing form of entertainment in the world. In the previous three years, the industry had grown by an astonishing 64 percent—on target to gross more than $7 billion in the United States alone and surpass total box office movie sales.

Yet despite the boom, as everyone here knew, video games had never seemed more misunderstood. With less than a month having passed since Columbine, video games had landed in the crosshairs of the culture war. Thompson's crusade had reached Capitol Hill, where Senator Sam Brownback effectively put the business on trial in a Senate Commerce Committee hearing. "A game player does not merely witness violence, he takes an active part," he warned, "the higher your body count, the higher your score." The Feds passed an amendment to the juvenile crime bill in the Senate on the marketing of violent games to kids.

Lowenstein methodically countered the claims, pointing out the vast number of adults (and moms) buying games. "Video games don't teach people to hate," he told *Time*. "The entertainment-software industry has no reason to run and hide." Yet journalists at E3 couldn't find many industry people to talk to. Those who went seeking comments at an E3 panel called "Ethics in Entertainment: Will the Medium Ever Reach Maturity?" found an empty room.

Among the no-shows were the guys from Rockstar Games, who were more concerned about making a splash of their own. To mark the debut of their label at E3—the trade show that epitomized the very corporate industry they were taking on—Sam and the cofounders sauntered past the Pokemon mascots and the furry apes in tracksuits designed by Hanes, the graffiti artist behind the original Tommy Boy record logo, and emblazoned with the R* logo. The fact that few, if any, gamers at the show appreciated the fashion statement was beside the point. "It didn't matter to E3, but it mattered to us," King recalled. "We're an art house! We're an art collective! We were obsessed."

They had earned the swagger. *GTA: London 1969* had debuted at number one on the UK game charts, followed by the original *GTA* at number two. And even more, *GTA* had been in the top twenty for the entire seventy-five weeks since its release, an astounding figure in an industry that usually saw games quickly fall off the charts. "The *Grand Theft Auto* franchise has proven to hold a longevity that is unusual to find in a video game series," puffed Sam in a press release. They had even struck a deal to bring *GTA* to the family-friendly Nintendo 64 and Game Boy systems.

With *GTA2* due in October, Rockstar's British invasion had just begun, but its strategy wasn't merely to promote the games at E3. It was to sell Rockstar as a brand. For Sam, it was a way to evoke the kind of obsession for music he felt while growing up. “People have the same passion toward the game as certainly I would have to Adam Ant or David Bowie or to Abba,” he later said. “People are frenetic about it and want to feel the same passion is going on behind the scenes.”

Rather than demean themselves by joining the circus on the main floor, the guys at Rockstar seeded *GTA2* like a Def Jam street campaign. *GTA2* stickers got slapped on anything that stood. One of Sam's decrees was no longer to refer to the game by its full name but rather by its cryptic acronym. T-shirts were printed up with only the *GTA2* logo on the front. *GTA2* took swipes at other games, too—such as when players would get a message on their pagers in *GTA2* from a Lara, thanking them for the hot time last night. Fake pills embossed with the *GTA* logo were reportedly found by gamers in small plastic bags around the halls though, adding to the mystery, there was no evidence that Rockstar was behind the ploy.

Across the street from the convention, Sam and the cofounders partied with another group of rebellious game makers from Take-Two Interactive called Gathering of Developers—or GOD for short. GOD had transformed a parking lot into a rock-and-roll happening called “The Promised Lot.” Beer flowed. Bands played. Strippers cavorted in Catholic school skirts. King hammed it up in a photo with a fake-boobed dude in the Catholic girl get-up, pretending to chop up a pile of coke with a gold American Express card.

To get a demo of *GTA2*, reviewers had to make a special appointment to meet with Rockstar behind closed doors. The preview couldn't have been more different from the *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy of the massively multiplayer online role-playing games out on the floor. Gamers zipped around the cyberpunk streets of *GTA2*, running missions and road-killing pedestrians.

Publicist Brian Baglow, now rechristened as Rockstar's “lifestyle manager,” made the rounds, hyping the new features—Gangs! Better missions! Better graphics! With Sam's ambitions growing, Baglow desperately tried to fill his boss's burgeoning appetite for rave reviews. Sam didn't want only the game press; he insisted on reaching hipster magazines such as *Face* and *Dazed and Confused.*

Press members would be led into an interview as if they were meeting Oasis. Sam and Donovan would then take over, celebrating *GTA2*'s gangs and grit. “You can sit and watch gang wars taking place while you're around the corner having a cigarette,” Sam would say, “and he does actually smoke in the game.” While other publishers shied away from the post-Columbine furor, Rockstar hit it head on. “Our responsibility is to 99.9 percent of the population who aren't actually planning to

murder anyone in the next two weeks," Donovan said.

Even more unusual for a game company, Rockstar showed off a short live-action film it had shot to promote *GTA2*. With no budget and with King producing, the team approached it like their own indie *Goodfellas*. For props, Foreman and King had tracked down an underground weapons shop in New York. When the gun dealer flipped on the light, Foreman and King looked around to see shelves of MP5s, M16s, and M60s. "Most people making games didn't get to do this kind of stuff," Foreman later deadpanned.

They shot the film in Brooklyn with a small cast and crew, only to have the sky open up in a torrential downpour. Without the proper know-how or permits, the locals freaked out on the guys, throwing them out of locations. Sam and Donovan finally showed up in a huff, furious to find that King had spent $150,000 and counting. Donovan eventually got into the spirit, letting himself get tied to a chair, dressed as a Hare Krishna, as thugs pretended to pummel him senseless. Dan e-mailed a photo of the scene to the *GTA* fansite Gouranga! which promptly posted it online.

Gamers at E3, however, watched the film dubiously. Who did these self-described Rockstars think they were? *GTA*, despite its cult success, was far from a mainstream phenomenon. Compared to the other games at the show—such as Sony's ultrarealistic *Gran Turismo*, showcased for the upcoming 128-bit PlayStation 2 system—*GTA2* looked outdated. One writer dismissed it for having "chess-like 2D graphics."

Undeterred, Rockstar continued its outlaw campaign for *GTA2* beyond E3. Increasingly confident, Sam and the cofounders insisted on doing it themselves, rather than take the standard route of farming it out. "This is a cultural product and we understand how to present it better than an advertising agency ever could," Dan said. Sony, after all, had been brazen with its own outlandish campaigns—which included ads that showed a hip young couple with PlayStation controller button nipples.

Yet Rockstar's overconfidence got the better of Sam and the cofounders when they pushed the controversy too far. The cover of the game showed a car against a black background with the tagline "Steal This Game" underneath. They took out Steal This Game ads on billboards and buses and TV commercials and planned to launch it at a football match in the United Kingdom. They even sponsored a *GTA2* promo with the Monster Truck tour. Retailers didn't get the joke, questioning why they'd want to encourage people to shoplift. "If you run this ad," one threatened, "I'm not buying any games."

Donovan's marketing team tried to salvage the ill-conceived campaign as best they

could, spending a fortune on stickers that they slapped over the Steal This Game ads with the word *Censored*. When Baglow questioned the plan, he was told it was guerrilla marketing in action. “It's not guerrilla marketing,” he replied. “It's a fuck-up.”

The problems didn't end there. As Baglow later recalled, word spread around Rockstar that a website called “Fuckstar” had been set up online by a disgruntled former employee. When the team booted up the page, they found a vandalized version of the Rockstar logo—along with the sound of a toilet flushing. Sam and Dan hit the roof.

After hiring an investigator to look into the matter, they realized they were the ones being had. Unbeknownst to them, a *GTA2* marketing exec had planted the fake site as part of an elaborate ruse intended to build buzz for the game. The plan was to leak word that a Rockstar employee had nearly been killed by real gangs while doing research for *GTA2*—but that Rockstar covered up the mess. In retaliation, the scorned Rockstar had supposedly set up this vengeful site, Fuckstar. The elaborate hoax had been kept from the Housers to try to give it legs, but it proved to be yet another misconceived disaster.

For Baglow, the marketing mishaps demonstrated how easily Rockstar could go off the rails. “During *GTA2*, we engaged PR and tried to court controversy, but it was not the slick PR machine that everyone imagined,” he later said. “It wasn't the shadowy masters behind the scenes engineering controversy. It was more like things came out, and then we were, like, ‘Oh, shit.' ”

DAVE JONES had been called a lot of names since he started making games. Genius. Boy wonder. Spielberg. Yet while Rockstar was busy courting trouble with *GTA2* in the United States, he earned a new moniker: sheep abuser. It had happened on the release of a quirky new DMA game called *Tanktics*. The game challenged players to create tanks from bizarre found parts—including sheep, for power.

When word of *Tanktics* got out, animal rights groups protested. “I am sure they could have thought of something else to make the game exciting,” said a spokeswoman for one. “It has yet to be shown that a serial killer started by abusing animals in a computer game,” a DMA producer responded.

Had it really come to this? Yes, Jones was rich. He had a Ferrari with a vanity plate in front. He saw *GTA* ruling the charts, and geeks were wearing their Rockstar tracksuits around Dundee (one guy gave one to his mother, who was seen sporting a velvety blue get-up while walking her dog). Yet Jones didn't want to be a rock star. He hated the press, the attention, and just wanted to make the next innovative game.

One day, he called in a reporter to show him his dream project: a virtual city. It was something he had wanted initially with *GTA* before the game had gone deep into its criminal direction. Now he was bringing it back. Unlike *GTA*, this world would let players be anyone they choose, from a cop to a businessman. He compared it to "a computerized version of the film *The Truman Show.*"

This as yet untitled game represented the underlying tension between Jones and Sam. Privately, Jones felt that despite their Rockstar posturing, they were increasingly demanding corporate executives at heart. If Rockstar was supposedly the rebel child of Take-Two, the guys seemed more like their parents instead. "There was definitely tension there," he later said. "Should we be making a game to a deadline, or should we be making it to a quality bar?" *GTA2* was proof: a lackluster sequel, in his opinion, that had been rushed out to cash in on the first.

But as far as Rockstar was concerned, they weren't demanding at all. They were just trying to make the greatest possible games. Since Jones had sold his company, the guys in New York were losing patience and wanted to take *GTA* into a new direction: 3D. During a trip to DMA, Sam had become elated when he saw a coder toying around with what the guy called a 2.5D version of the game. Sam's eyes widened as the top-down view on *GTA* suddenly shifted in an isometric way, buildings lengthening, streets receding, until he felt immersed inside it. "Oh, man, if we do this in proper 3D," he said, "it's going be insane!"

He got his chance soon enough. In September 1999, Take-Two bought DMA from Infogrames for $11 million in cash. Rather than enduring a new corporate boss, Jones took the money and vowed to start his own indie company devoted to making the next great franchise—whatever that might be. In the aftermath of the split, Jones and Sam battled over hiring the remaining developers at DMA—with Sam winning the core developers in the end. Take-Two secured the rights for the future *GTA* games and a core team, whom they moved out of Dundee to the hipper locale of Edinburgh for good. This was Rockstar's game now.

9

Rockstar Loft

MESSAGES

Some of your contacts don't like to meet in person and will give out instructions on certain payphones around the city. These payphones will appear on your radar when they want to employ your special services.

How did you hear about Rockstar Loft? Why do you want to go? If you could take someone, who would it be? What is it you don't enjoy about current nightlife in New York? What's the best movie you've seen in the last two years? Who is your favorite DJ? What has been the best moment in your life so far?"

Across New York City in the fall of 1999, club kids stood at payphones, answering each of these seven questions as best they could. They had been lured there by calling a number advertised on fliers that promoted a mysterious new monthly party called Rockstar Loft. They figured they were phoning to get the secret location of the bash, but as they listened to the young person on the other end of the line ticking off interview questions, they realized that whoever was behind this party had a different mission in mind.

The mission was clear to Rockstar Games the moment the guys decided to launch this event. The idea had come after they moved to New York and became disappointed by the club scene. "I realized there wasn't too terribly much to do in the evenings," Sam sniffed. Similar to the game industry, the club scene wasn't hip enough for their tastes. So they decided to do a party of their own with the help of a famous promoter.

Though it seemed odd for a game company to get into party promotion, the strategy gelled perfectly with the guys' unique ambitions. They wanted to build Rockstar as a lifestyle brand that included a clothing line coming from hip label Haze (baby-T shirts for the ladies and pinkie rings for the boys, available at Urban Outfitters around the United Kingdom) and a tour of the *GTA2* movie at film festivals.

The Rockstar Loft interview process was meant to weed out the players from the punks. "Fatboy Slim would be the wrong answer" to the favorite DJ question, Donovan told Zev Borow at the *New Yorker.* "You could have someone who says

Cool Hand Luke and someone who says *Notting Hill*," he said, "but the person who says *Notting Hill* could still actually be party-worthy." As Sam added, "The worst thing people can say is 'I'm so-and-so, and I own this company or run this record label, so I deserve to be invited.' We've made a lot of those people very angry."

Sam, shaggy and bearded, and Donovan, tall and bald, were deftly cultivating their public image to personify their games. When hipster magazine *Raygun* paid a visit, Sam and Donovan hammed it up for the photographer, posing on the rooftop in matching blue T-shirts and shades, Sam caught in mid-howl. Sam held up a copy of the game trade magazine with two stiff dudes in suits on the front. "*This* is the game business," he said, derisively, then pointed to himself and Donovan, "this isn't the game business." Donovan added, "Part of what we're trying to get away from is the lone, girlfriendless, pizza-ordering fat guy in the basement. We're just raising the tone of the entertainment to a point that we feel comfortable with."

For the launch of *GTA2* on October 25, 1999, Sam took his show on the road back to London. During an interview with Steve Poole at the *Guardian*, he seemed energized to be back where it all began—his childhood, St. Paul's, BMG. As he drowned a plate of fries in ketchup at a diner, Sam played the part of being a Rockstar to the fullest. He told Poole how he'd been out to a bar in New York and got to chatting with a girl. "There's this game my friends are playing, and they're all talking about it. I wonder if you can help me?" she told him.

"What's it called?" he asked.

"*Grand Theft Auto*," she said.

Sam started dating her. He insisted that even the cops were groupies. "I met the NYPD," he went on, "and they said, 'We think your game's all right.' And I said, 'What about the fact that you kill cops?' and they said, 'Well, you know what? There's a lot of people out there trying to kill cops, and we'd rather they did it in your game than on the street.'"

This felt like their first moment in the sun, and they were basking in it for all it was worth. To celebrate *GTA2*, Rockstar threw a big party in the East End of London. Word spread that Rockstar had invited convicted criminal Freddie "Brown Bread Fred" Foreman to the bash—only to be turned down. The game was apparently too controversial for the man. "As far as I can ascertain," Foreman said, "the video encourages our youth to rob, steal, and murder indiscriminately, and that is something I'm totally opposed to."

The hype seemed to work. The *GTA2* demo was downloaded more than a million times in only its first three weeks. Take-Two announced it would be shipping 1.2 million copies of the game, estimated to bring in $33 million in revenues by the time the company's fourth quarter closed on Halloween.

Sam jetted back to New York in time for the first Rockstar Loft party on Saturday, October 30, 1999. Out of thousands of applicants, only five hundred had made the cut. The chosen ones rushed the secret location in Chelsea, brandishing their pink tickets. Inside, they heard a Parisian DJ cherry-picked by Donovan. Sam and the rest partied late into the night.

Yet the hangover was harder than they expected. When the *New York Times* dismissed the Loft as "The Anti-Elitist Elitist Party," complaining about the surly doorman and the fruit plates, Sam steamed. "It took one article for me—one journalist to say a bunch of dot com yuppies in Ralph Lauren T-shirts in our parties, some really snippy irrelevant bitchy remark," he said. But the experience focused him. They were Rockstar *Games*, after all, not Rockstar Parties. And games were what they had to create. "That other stuff was very important to us until we figured out how hard being a game publisher is, how much time that takes," Sam later said. "Then we suddenly realized, we've got serious proper jobs here."

AFTER THE INITIAL RUSH of *GTA2* was gone, reality quickly set in. Sam got an unexpectedly forlorn visit from two suits at Take-Two, and they weren't happy about *GTA2*. Apparently, the Rockstars had made a youthful miscalculation about the level of their success. The numbers told a more tempered story. The reviews were middling; the sales, disappointing. Sam despaired that another game, *Driver*, seemed to get better reviews just because of the graphics.

Rockstar had erred in its ways—celebrating prematurely, and losing focus. Yet the guys had the gumption to own up to their slip-up and tried to make it a teachable moment. "That was a humbler," Sam told Dan, "don't count your fucking chickens. Don't take anything for granted. That's what we learn from this." If *GTA2* didn't meet their high expectations, then it was time for them to push their games harder than ever before.

There would be no rest. After building Take-Two up from nothing to become a top-twenty publisher, founder Ryan Brant had his sights set on crashing the top ten. He had just the guy to handle the business side, while Sam oversaw the games: Take-Two's new president and director, Paul Eibeler. A street-smart jock from Long Island with a thick New York accent, Eibeler had started out marketing nail-guns for Black & Decker, before getting into software. He brought a pragmatism to whatever he did, looking at office staplers and video games both as consumer products.

Take-Two continued to innovate. Eibeler landed a creative PR deal to get their games promoted in movie theaters around the country. Brant successfully took Take-Two public, using the money to buy smaller companies—from DVD distributors to

smaller game publishers. They invested in a small developer called Bungie, owning around 19 percent of the company, which was working on two titles at the time, a shooter called *Oni*, and a little sci-fi game called *Halo* (a demo of which was already blowing the guys away).

With his parent company prospering, Sam's cockiness soared. One day, he showed up at Rockstar's office wearing a T-shirt for EA Sports—the label of Electronic Arts that churned out *Madden* sequel after sequel and represented the corporate machine the game industry had become. “I'm going to work for EA!” he joked.

With his infectious passion, Sam attracted a dream team of employees. He had, as he once put it, “a philosophy of hiring very slowly and hiring people extremely talented and those fit in with our culture and committed to the hard work and the insanity.” Few were as committed as Sam's most dogged prodigies: Jeremy Pope and Marc Fernandez.

Pope, a slight and affable young game tester, accepted a pay cut just to be part of Rockstar's renegade band. “We're going to take over,” Sam told him, “we're going to be the Def Jam of video games, and no one going to stop us!” Late at night, they'd pop in the latest PlayStation game and crack up. “Can you believe it?” Sam would say. “People are still making games for kids. We want to make games for adults, games that we want to play.”

Fernandez, an aspiring filmmaker at nearby New York University, shared a love of film, a clincher for Sam—despite the fact that he preferred mainstream fare over Fernandez's artier tastes. “The real fun shit is *Top Gun*! *Beverly Hills Cop*!” Sam told him.

“Why?” Fernandez said.

“Because it taps into the mainstream,” Sam replied. “And if you can create art that communicates to everybody, it's much better than creating art that communicates to five people.” Sam reveled in the details of director Michael Mann's action sequences in *Heat*, such as the opening shot of the armored car whizzing across the street. “I want to translate this kind of craftsmanship into a video game,” he said.

Sam put Fernandez and Pope on the franchise closest to his heart, *GTA.* Fernandez became the self-described “details guy,” in charge of cultural research. This meant everything from making sure that car doors swung open the right way to roaming the streets of Chinatown, taking shots of storefronts for inspiration in the game. Pope would oversee countless hours of play-testing of the game.

Once again, Rockstar would publish the next *GTA* as a subsidiary of Take-Two, overseeing the production and marketing of the game, while the day-to-day development would be handled by the twenty-three coders and artists at DMA in Edinburgh. Sam knew how to bottle the lightning that made *GTA* magic in the first

place: by fostering a highly collaborative work environment. As he later said, “Everyone working on the project, from the most junior to the most senior, everyone's opinion is of equal value.” They were all Rockstars here.

10

The Worst Place in America

OVERVIEW

Liberty City is a complete physical universe with laws, rules, standards, ethics, and morals. They are yours to shatter.

The moment the boxes arrived at 575 Broadway, the Rockstars hungrily ripped them open. They hurled the packaging to the side and pulled out the little black stealth tower with the ribbed spine down the middle. Each resembled a mini monolith from *2001*, and they were the Neanderthals hooting and hollering and clanging bones. As they plugged in the objects and listened to the hard drives rev to life, they sighed deeply. “Oh, my God,” said Sam, “how are we going to do this?”

They had just received the PlayStation 2 development kits, the hardware with which they would create games for Sony's next-generation machine. In the game business, the big three console makers—Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo—advanced their industry and competition by releasing new platforms every three to five years or so. Players and developers breathlessly awaited this dazzling showcase of new technologies.

Coming in 2000 (first in Japan, then other countries), the PS2 promised the most living, breathing worlds yet. A powerful new central processing unit, nicknamed the “emotion engine,” meant uncanny artificial intelligence, characters, and creatures who would move and think more like actual animals. A breakthrough graphics chip would generate more dynamic images in real time, bringing a greater realism and fluidity to the scenes.

Because the PS2 could support DVD-ROMs, instead of only CD-ROMs, games could now store and stream troves more data—animations, music, environments. “Imagine a truck rolling into the level,” Phil Harrison of Sony told Sam enthusiastically, “and the back of the truck bursts open and suddenly fifty people are leaping out of the truck at you!”

With the PS2 in his tool shed, Sam knew exactly what kind of world he wanted for the next *Grand Theft Auto*: 3D. In video games, the term *3D* didn't mean the same thing as in movies—with exploding watermelons flying off the screen when the viewer wore stereoscopic glasses. Instead, it was a misnomer, shorthand for the sort

of vivid, deep, and immersive worlds popularized by games such as *EverQuest* and *Tomb Raider.* Although Jones had always trumpeted gameplay over graphics for *GTA*, no one stood in Sam's way anymore. Even better, they didn't need to spend long hours developing a new software engine for the game. They could simply license one—called Renderware—that would be perfect for *GTA.*

Sam had begun to develop a vital skill for success: intuitively knowing how to exploit the future without losing sight of the past. More important, he trusted himself to make the right call without second-guessing his gut. For the next *GTA*, that meant staying true to what made the franchise so special in the first place—the freedom, the choices, the central idea of casting players as outlaws and giving them choices for how to behave. By marrying *GTA* with PS2, Sam had a new mission with which to push their games: “to make the first interactive gangster movie,” as he said.

GTA III would be the first of a proposed trilogy based on each of the three cities established in the first game: Liberty City, Vice City, and San Andreas. They'd start with Liberty City, all the more perfect because it was based on their new home, New York. Around the office, Sam ranted about the movies and the TV shows he wanted to emulate: *The Getaway*. *Heat.* HBO's new mob hit, *The Sopranos.*

Yet at the same time, Sam was also pushing himself to go beyond the limits of film. He swore off the experiments with live-action sequences, as they had tried in *GTA2.* “I'm not going to fuck with video, I'm not going to fuck with film,” Sam told Fernandez. “I'm going to do everything within the world of the game engine.”

To bring the 3D world to life, they rented out a motion-capture studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Actors would be filmed performing the parts, then the scenes would be translated into animations within the game. Rockstar hired a fearless young Iranian-born director named Navid Khonsari to direct the scenes. Before Khonsari went out, Sam and Dan kept repeating their mantra for *GTA III*: “real, real, real.”

A stylish guy with close-cropped hair and rectangular glasses, Khonsari knew this meant nailing the most iconic moment in the game: the carjacking. He molded a car out of sandbags and gymnast bars, piecing them together like Legos. He added weights to the bars, to make the doors feel heavy to open. When the actors came into the studio, he quietly told the driver to hold onto the steering wheel for dear life. Then he secretly told the other actor to yell at the top of his lungs when he ran up to the car. Khonsari watched with glee as the scene unfolded, with the driver freaking out—as expected—at hearing the unscripted scream.

Soon afterward, Sam, Dan, King, Donovan, and the rest gathered nervously to see an early prototype of the carjacking scene. Despite their bravado, they still smarted from the insults over the early *GTA*'s graphics and hoped they could finally leave

Lara Croft in the dust. Onscreen, the silent scene appeared in wireframe form because the rest of the art had not yet been completed. An orange car appeared, with two men inside. Suddenly, a blue wireframe man stepped up to the side, yanked open the door and pulled the passenger out, then tossed him to the ground. The driver then fled in a panic, as the carjacker took the wheel. “Holy shit!” King exclaimed.

It worked. They weren't just looking down on Liberty City anymore, they had been teleported inside it. They watched the carjacker over and over again, grabbing the wheel and taking off just as Rockstar was determined to drive their industry.

THE ONLY THING more empowering than playing a video game was creating it. Reality was imperfect, but the simulation could be controlled. You could put in what you wanted and leave out the rest. You started with a city of your choice, then filled it with the people you designed. The cars you wanted to drive. The shops you wanted to frequent. The music you wanted to hear. And when the weather wasn't up to snuff, you could change that to your liking, too. No matter how much freedom players had in your game, they were living in your world.

GTA III started with Liberty City, which would be “the worst place in America,” as the Rockstars labeled it, in the best possible ways. They would simulate New York City—not the actual one outside their door, but the larger-than-life fantasy that, in some ways, was more real. They broke Liberty City into three areas: an industrial section, similar to Brooklyn and Queens; a commercial center that resembled Manhattan; and burbs that looked like Jersey. As players drove around, they'd pass seedy and awesome places: the fish market and the Laundromat, the ammo shops and the Pay 'n' Sprays, the Italian restaurants and the busy streets.

With so many places to go, they coded the transit system with which to get there: the tunnels and the trains and the bridges and the boats. Using the Renderware engine, the PS2 created lavish blue waves that crashed and rolled with lifelike physics. The water reacted to the stimulus, too, creating weather systems of storms and rains. A thick Bergmanian fog rolled into a makeshift city block running on the PC screen. And with weather, that meant they could cycle through different times of the day—with missions in the daylight and at night. When the sun set over Liberty City, the creeps would hit the streets.

The muscle power of the PS2 transformed the experience of exploring in the game. The physics of the cars changed, based on the size of the rides, with even greater precision than in the early iterations of the games: the sluggish minivans, the nimble sports cars, the cabs and the ambulances and the ice cream trucks. With eighteen collision points on each car, the vehicles smashed and crumbled even more

realistically, too. In the past they'd had only a handful of speaking characters in the games, but this time they'd have more than sixty. That meant scaling up from ten thousand to more than a hundred thousand lines of dialogue, from a pedestrian shouting, “Haven't you got respect for your elders?” as he got shoved, to a driver in a fender bender screaming, “Watch the wheels, gringo!”

As the city teemed to life, so did the story. Dan drew from his literature studies at Oxford, meticulously shaping the narrative of the game. The action began with the player cast as a nameless crook getting freed from a police truck on his way to prison. From there, he'd have to work his way back up through the underworld, running more than eighty missions for increasingly powerful bosses and gangs.

Rockstar wasn't limited to dispatching in-game missions over clunky phone calls anymore. This time, players would get jobs by meeting a motley crew of gangsters in person. For continuity, Rockstar scripted cut-scenes, interstitial cinematic shorts sandwiched between the missions to, say, burn down an enemy's hangout or whack a rival. Compared to *GTA* and *GTA2*, the cinematics added a layer of drama and intrigue. It was one thing to pick up a phone, and another to sneak through the back door of a sex club to get a job.

To provide voice-overs for the parts, they continued to pioneer the use of celebrities, and hired some of their favorite character actors: Michael Madsen, Kyle MacLachlan, Debi Mazar. One day on set, they marveled when one of their biggest heroes walked in the door, Frank Vincent. The silver-haired tough guy had been in three of their favorite Scorsese flicks ever: *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino*, as well as *The Sopranos*. Now he was here to do dialogue for a mob boss named Salvatore Leone in their game. He took one look at these scruffy Brits and said in his thick New York accent, “I don't know shit about video games. I don't know what the fuck this is.” Khonsari reassured him, “It's no different than a movie.”

Balancing the nearly eighty missions with the open-ended freedom wasn't an either/or proposition. “I thought people would like to do both,” Dan said, “[have] some time hanging out . . . and sometimes following the game through its path.” There had always been a built-in sort of morality to *GTA*, with a player's wanted level rising according to his crimes. In *GTA III*, players didn't even have to be the bad guys at all. They could drive an ambulance or a cab around town, completing little mini missions that boosted their standing. The choice to pursue good or evil was in the paws of the gamer.

For King, the open world of *GTA III* felt not only freeing but autobiographical. “It was about kind of mirroring what life is for us growing up,” he later said. “You are running around and, whether you like it or not, you are living on the other side of the fence. So instead of rescuing the princess at the end of the dungeon, you're driving

cars and listening to music that's engaging."

Buoyed by the increased fidelity of their cheeky outlaw world, Rockstar turned up the volume on the sex and violence, too. Coders wrote a script that allowed players to snipe limbs off pedestrians, leaving them in puddles of blood. One day, Pope booted up a new build of the game when he noticed a new pedestrian on the side of the street—a hooker in thigh-high fishnet stockings and a bra underneath an open shirt. There had never been anything like this in a game before. When he pulled his car up, she leaned over. He let her climb in his car, then he drove off to a side street and waited. He saw his money go down, representing her taking his cash. Slowly the car began to rock, as his health meter soared.

Yet it didn't take long to make a certain leap of logic. In the game, players could beat up pedestrians and steal their money. So why not steal the cash back from the hookers after they had sex? Soon enough, a player at the office had pulled the hooker back out of the car after their tryst and pummeled her into a bloody heap—as his cash refilled. "Wow," Pope thought, "people will love this."

No matter how edgy *GTA* became, Sam stood by it. "You often can feel like you're doing things nobody is going to appreciate since the games are full of thousands of arcane details," he confided to a game reporter one day. "If you start thinking, 'Is this one really important?' you have to kill that in your head.'"

IT WAS A GRAY day inside Liberty City. Rain poured down on the Callahan Bridge, casting the buildings in a wispy haze. Cars streamed up and down the highway—the buses and the police cars, the sentinels and the patriots. Sam knew just which one he wanted, the blue banshee with the white stripe down the middle. He jogged up beside it, then tapped the triangle button on his controller as he ripped open the door and tossed the driver to the side. "He's taking my car!" the driver cried, as Sam held down the X button, flooring it.

Tapping the rectangular button with his left pointer finger, he flipped through the stations. There were nine of them now, one for every mood. *Click*. The subtitle "Double Clef FM" on top of the screen. The strains of opera. *Click*. Flashback 95.6 with Debbie Harry singing "Rush, Rush." *Click*. Game Radio FM, underground hip-hop. Royce rapping "I'm the King." Sam tapped the X button and accelerated.

He wasn't just playing, he was observing. This was his world and it had to be perfect. His eyes and ears scanned every detail rushing past him in the game. The hum of the accelerator. The squeal of the tires and little black tire tracks when he took a corner. The splat of pedestrians under the wheel. The way the hood flew up off the front, exposing the metallically intestinal engine, followed by a terrible

stream of smoke.

The guys at DMA had coded the physics to let players drive over lampposts, knocking them down to the ground so that nothing would stop their pace. Sam clipped the lampposts like pathetic sprigs, as his wheels jumped a curb for a short-cut through a green, tree-lined park. “I'm an old lady, for Christ's sake!” shouted a ped as Sam raced by.

Once he hit the highway, that's when he did it. Tapped the Select button to change the camera view of the action, which the DMA guys had coded for the first time into *GTA. Click.* First person POV, as if he were strapped on the hood of the car. *Click.* Third person, overhead looking down on the ride. *Click.* His favorite, Cinematic mode. It appeared as if the camera were saddled on the lower left side of the car like a chase from a film. As Sam tore through the town, the camera automatically switched to other cinematic angles, as if some brilliant invisible William Friedkin was directing.

“This is the future of moviemaking,” Sam believed. “Because here's my set, I can go anywhere and put my camera anywhere. I can do anything again and again and again from any angle I want.” The more he played *GTA III*, though, the more he felt something inside him change. He was twenty-eight now. A man living his childhood fantasy. Long after he first saw Michael Caine and his mom zooming down the streets in *Get Carter*, he had been fascinated by action films. Now as a pedestrian flew over the hood of his car, and the sun beamed down in its simulated brilliance, he was the star of his own revolutionarily cinematic game.

He wasn't merely watching a movie, he was inside it—and this realization made him feel as if he'd never be able to watch a movie the same way again. Games weren't about one person's authorial vision. They were stories told by a new generation of creators and players in a language all their own. “To me, as a film nut, there was something about *GTA III* that just drew a line in the sand between games and movies,” Sam recalled, “and it felt like this is us taking over now.”

11

State of Emergency

GETTING AROUND

> Liberty City is full of many different kinds of cars and vehicles, all of which are yours for the taking . . . approach the car and press the triangle button. Be warned, while some drivers will be scared and hand over their vehicle without too much resistance, others may not be too happy about it and will put up a fight.

A car cut past the palms of Miami, Florida. City of vice. The drug dealers in the art deco alleyway. The players in their fancy cars. The rollerblading models, women and men in thongs. The depravity pulsed like neon outside Jack Thompson's window as he made his way home, but the nearness only served to remind him of his fight.

He had come a long way since his crusade began, besting rappers 2 Live Crew and Ice-T and taking his battle against violent video games to court and *60 Minutes.* Every time he walked into his house, he knew why he was on this mission: his son, Johnny. As a stay-at-home dad, Thompson had enjoyed a frontline view of Johnny's childhood. When he looked into the eyes of his boy, he saw a future he desperately wanted to protect. Although most parents shared that feeling, Thompson gave his life over to that fight.

Despite coming from completely different worlds, Thompson had something fundamental in common with Sam Houser. They were both obsessed with the same kind of game. Thompson was as committed to destroying the new generation of violent games as Sam was to creating them, and neither of them would let anyone or anything stand in their way.

While Rockstar brought *GTA III* to life, the controversy over violent video games had reached a new peak. Videos and diaries of the Columbine killers surfaced, including one shot of Eric Harris comparing his rampage to the video game *Doom.* Thompson made the rounds, warning viewers on *NBC News* about the causal link between violent games and school shootings. He was playing to a powerful and vulnerable audience—other moms and dads. No matter what side of the political spectrum, so many of them shared the same concern that a strange new world online was spinning out of control. The Internet and video games had become synonymous with sex and violence, respectively.

Even more daunting was the fact that so many parents didn't know how to gain access to these worlds well or at all. The fact that their kids were seemingly running free behind the wheel only made it seem more out of control. This was not a stereotype of out-of-touch adults. These were decent people with sympathetic desires: to protect their kids, just as Jack wanted to protect his boy. Based on the escalating number of media requests, Thompson knew he had struck a nerve.

He realized this when Tom Brokaw asked the presidential candidates about the Columbine tapes during the 2000 Republican primary. “Do you think that the gun industry, the video game industry, and Hollywood have any role in what happened?” Brokaw said.

“There is a problem with the heart of America,” replied Texas governor George W. Bush. “One of the great frustrations in being governor is I wish I knew of a law that'd make people love one another, because I'd sign it.” Though a fellow Republican, Thompson felt his stomach twist. “If a presidential candidate was not troubled enough by the entertainment industry's role in Columbine to want to do something about it,” he later wrote, “he would also not be troubled by the overall coarsening of our current culture.”

Ironically, he thought, the Democrats had waged a stronger fight against games. President Clinton had called for an FTC investigation into the marketing of violent entertainment to children. The committee on the Judiciary for the U.S. Senate released findings that accused the entertainment industry of marketing harmful products to kids—85 percent of thirteen- to sixteen-year-olds, it determined, had been able to buy M-rated games.

Thompson's blood boiled. What could he do? Lawsuits were still unproved. A federal judge had dismissed the suit filed against a group of entertainment and computer game companies by the families of three girls killed in Paducah—despite Thompson's efforts to link the violent media with Carneal's rampage. “We find that it is simply too far a leap from shooting characters on a video screen (an activity undertaken by millions) to shooting people in a classroom (an activity undertaken by a handful, at most),” the judge wrote. A $5 billion suit filed on behalf of the families of Columbine victims was pending against companies that included Nintendo of America, Sega of America, Sony Computer Entertainment, AOL Time Warner, and *Doom*'s creators, id Software.

Thompson looked to another Democrat, vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman, dubbed “Mr. Clean” by *Entertainment Weekly* magazine, to engage a political response. Lieberman's Twenty-First Century Media Accountability Act would standardize ratings in the software and movie industries so that parents could better protect their kids from what Thompson's ally, former army ranger Lieutenant

Colonel Dave Grossman, called “murder simulators.” Retailers who sold violent games to kids would face $10,000 in fines.

Although the Interactive Digital Software Association reported that the majority of game buyers were older than seventeen, the politicians threatened to legislate. “We're trying to do everything we can to keep those games that are not suitable for kids out of the hands of kids,” said Senator Herbert Kohl, the cosponsor of the Media Accountability Act. Presidential candidate Al Gore, in a page-one story in the *New York Times*, gave the entertainment industry “six months to clean up their act,” he said, or else. “If I'm entrusted with the presidency,” Gore said, “I am going to do something about this.”

Doug Lowenstein, the game association leader, argued that the industry had long been addressing this concern through its voluntary Entertainment Software Ratings Board, which evaluated and rated game content. “The FTC's own data says that in more than 80 percent of cases, parents are involved in the purchase or rental of games,” he said. “Parents are engaged and that's where responsibility has to lie.”

Thompson heard it all and seethed. Slowly but surely, he was building a file on medical research about violent games: a Kansas State University scientist who used functional magnetic resonance imaging to scan the brains of young kids and found that violent images triggered traumatic memories, a cover story in *Contemporary Pediatrics* on “How Violent Games May Violate Children's Health,” and more. He would not sit around and wait for legislation to protect Johnny or wish for a law to make people love one another. He would play this game the only way he knew how: by fighting to the end. “Others in the decency war are tipping windmills,” he said. “I'm out to destroy them.”

DUST SWIRLED as Jeeps tore through the desert. Inside the cars, young men in camouflage clutched their 9-millimeter Glock handguns tightly as they aimed out the windows. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* They fired at their targets into the heat. Yet these weren't soldiers on a mission. They were gamer journalists on a junket. With competition heating up, game publishers were engaged in a meta-war to win the press. All-expense-paid trips like this had become more commonplace and outrageous. Reporters got flown to Disney World, to Alcatraz. Some got to barrel-roll in an F-14.

Today, Rockstar Games had taken them here to the Arizona desert to promote its upcoming racing title, *Smuggler's Run*. The game, which challenged players to smuggle cargo in dune buggies and rally cars, was due as a launch title for the PS2 in October. To pump up the reporters, Rockstar devised this adventurous trip, including

the reporters' very own drive-by target shooting.

While work continued on *GTA III*, the guys at Rockstar were busy mastering their meta-game as bad-boy marketers. It wasn't just for fun; for Rockstar, selling games was all about style. They got their share of associated press, only not in the ways they intended. Word had begun leaking out about another Rockstar title in development called *State of Emergency*. Sam signed up the title at the 1999 E3 show, when a raffish for Rockstar, Scot named Kirk Ewing gave him a one-sheet write-up and a punk rock pitch. “It's called *State of Emergency*,” Ewing said, “the citizens are revolting.”

Ewing figured that'd be enough for Sam. Growing up in the Scottish game industry that emerged out of DMA, Ewing was one of a generation of developers energized by *GTA*'s fuck-it-all attitude and success. Inspired, he and a friend dreamed up a freeform game based on one of his old favorite pastimes, a bar fight. The game had started out as a kind of entertaining physics experiment. Ewing focused on simulating the fluid dynamics of crowd movement, the visceral thrill of autonomous objects hurling around.

Yet in the long months of development under Sam, the game had grown into something more primal, as Ewing put it, “a massive beat 'em up.” Gamers played an urban dude who was unleashed into a mob where every character had to pummel his way to survival. Sam loved it. “This is it!” he told Ewing. “This is the natural evolution of what's going on. It's going to be massive!”

Picking up the ball, the guys at Rockstar began hyping *State of Emergency* to the press as a “social disturbance simulator,” but then a real social disturbance unexpectedly got in the way. One day in May 2001, shortly after receiving a demo of the game, a reporter from the *Tacoma News Tribune* in Washington called a Rockstar publicist and said, “Hey, I just played *State of Emergency*, and it looks like the Seattle riots.” He was referring to the uprising that had occurred during the World Trade Organization convention in November 1999, a violent clash from which the city was still reeling. The Rockstar PR guy, not thinking much of the observation, said, “Yeah, it probably does look like that.”

The next day, Sam and the rest saw the page-one headline: “*Video Gamers* Can *Experience WTO All Over Again—PlayStation 2”* from the Tribune. The story said how “the game borrows heavily from, and adds significantly to, the World Trade Organization riots in downtown Seattle in the fall of 1999.” It quoted appalled politicians. “If you want your child to become a violent anarchist, this is a great training game,” said Representative Mary Lou Dickerson sarcastically. The reporter added, “A spokesman for Rockstar, who asked to remain anonymous, admitted last week the game had strong ties to the WTO riots.”

Back when Max Clifford fed his hamster about *GTA* to the press, this kind of coverage had been a dream—purposely drummed up to fuel controversy and attention. Yet times had changed, in the United States especially. Extreme content in a video game could dramatically lower sales, because high-profile retailers such as Wal-Mart and Best Buy refused to shelve certain games, especially those with Adults Only ratings.

Despite Rockstar's best efforts to deflate the WTO rumors, however, the story spread fast around the world, getting picked up by Reuters, among other media outlets, which said, “Thanks to Rockstar Games . . . would-be hooligans can vent their anti-corporate venom by punching out riot cops and looting storefronts from the comfort of their own sofas.” With the next E3 video game expo in Los Angeles days away,
the guys at Rockstar had bigger concerns: unveiling their outlaw fantasy, *GTA III*, to the world.

HIGH ABOVE THE SUNSET STRIP in Los Angeles, the party raged. It was taking place in the presidential suite of the Château Marmont, the ultra-hip hotel off Sunset Boulevard where John Belushi famously overdosed. The usual celebrities weren't inside, though. This was Rockstar's party now, just one of several suites the guys took over during the E3 convention in May 2001 when *GTA III* would be revealed.

By day, they played ping-pong out by the pool, as models cut through the turquoise blue water. By night, they brought the bash to the top floor. They were Rockstars, with a fleet of blacked-out Mercedes downstairs waiting to whisk them off to any club. Ewing later recalled “going from that party to a tour of L.A. at 120 miles per hour. I felt like the president.”

The pressure was on to stand out. Despite selling more than 4.5 million copies of the *GTA* games, Rockstar had to prove its muster. *GTA* was still considered a cult franchise, and the guys were angling to go mainstream. Moreover, they even had imitators to contend with, as other crime racing titles such as *Driver* and *Crazy Taxi* had watered down the market. Going into the convention, they figured that two acclaimed Japanese games were destined to beat them, no matter how well they showed: *Devil May Cry*, a demon-fighting game, and the stealthy action title, *Metal Gear Solid 2.*

This time, instead of matching tracksuits, they arrived at the show wearing matching Pantone T-shirts with a picture of Don Simpson in T-shirt and jeans on the front, a tiny Rockstar logo, and Simpson's prescription drug bill on the back. They sauntered past giant screens of wizards and warriors, the pro skaters on the full-size

ramps promoting the latest Tony Hawk games, past the light sabers and the Pokemons and the portly guys with digital cameras shooting every scantily clad “booth babe,” as the gamers called them, in dominatrix gear.

The Rockstar booth went for chilled understatement. It looked like a Miami lounge, white curtains and couches and a clipboard-wielding PR lackey keeping out the riff-raff. PlayStation 2 stations had been set up around the lounge, showing *State of Emergency*, *GTA III*, and other Take-Two games. Donovan worried about the difficulty of distilling a pitch on *GTA* to the necessary thirty seconds. “You had to experience the whole thing because it was so personal,” he said.

Donovan stalked the booth like an NBA center, hyping *GTA III* as the necessary alternative to the geeky role-playing games such as *EverQuest* that populated the show. “I think the video game industry was actually crying out for us,” he told a reporter from *Wired*. “We don't make games about Puff-the-fucking-Magic Dragon.” He insisted that *GTA III* was meant for a new generation.

Yet despite all of Rockstar's cockiness, the gamers weren't listening. Sam and the guys watched as players dutifully tried *GTA III* for a few moments—and walked away. Some people recoiled as they watched the scenes of the main character sniping off pedestrians' heads from rooftops. Gamers had seen blood and gore before, but not in such a realistic setting—and they didn't know what to make of it. “Are you kidding me?” one said in disgust to Pope. Even Phil Harrison of Sony left nonplussed. “It looked like a mess,” he later said.

There was one Rockstar game getting plenty of attention, however: *State of Emergency*. Crowds formed around the demo, as they maneuvered the stocky little fat guy in the wife-beater undershirt and the baggy shorts. Gamers hooted and hollered as the guy threw chairs at passersby, while buildings burst into flames from the riot. Maybe the press from the WTO connection had paid off, after all. Pope heard one of *State of Emergency*'s developers snipe, “No one cares about your game. Everyone's talking about our game.”

As Pope noticed by the dour expression on Sam's face, the boss man seemed furious. *State of Emergency* was Sam's game but not his baby. The response only made him more convinced about ensuring *GTA III*'s success. He would work harder than ever before, and he expected everyone on his team to do the same. Pushing boundaries would take all of their energy, together. Their fight was inherently sympathetic, they thought, because they had the cause of every gamer at stake. “Well,” Sam said, “we'd better put the fucking hammer down now.”

GTA III did manage to pique the interest of one very important player at E3, Doug Lowenstein, who came by for a look. Still reeling from the Columbine fallout, the game association president worried about any products that would add more fuel to

the fire. The second he saw cars getting jacked in *GTA III*, he knew he was in for a fight. “This is going to be a problem, this is going to be controversial, this is going to trigger negative attacks on the industry,” he thought. “Oh shit.”

“OKAY,” 8-Ball said, “let's do this thing!”

It was another overcast day in Liberty City, and Sam was playing *GTA III*. He had maneuvered his character to see 8-Ball, an African American bomb expert and buddy inside *GTA III*. Despite his neatly shaved head and natty blue-and-white jacket, 8-Ball didn't look so good. His hands were wrapped in bandages, the result of a fiery ambush by the Colombian Cartel, but now he was coming to Sam's aid.

Sam was running through a mission called Bomb Da Base. The goal, as laid out in a cinematic cut-scene from Salvatore Leone, was to take out the cartel's center of operation: a boat on the docks being used to churn out a drug called SPANK. “I'm asking you to destroy that SPANK factory as a personal favor to me, Salvatore Leone,” the Don explained from a leather chair in his well-appointed home.

Sam had just sped through the streets, taking out a few peds along the way, past the hookers and the ammo shops, just to get to his accomplice who had the fire power he needed. “I can set this baby to detonate,” 8-Ball said, “but I still can't use a piece with these hands.” 8-Ball waved a gun ineffectually in the air. “Here, this rifle should help you pop some heads!”

Ever since playing a game called *Star Fox 64* on the Nintendo 64, a shooter that had him fighting to protect his wingmen, Sam had dreamed of creating in games the kind of sympathetic characters one finds in movies and novels. Such emotions had been largely elusive in the industry.

Yet as he stood on the rooftop later, watching 8-Ball detonate the bombs on the SPANK factory after he clipped the cartel, Sam felt ecstatic. The ship exploded into flames, as 8-Ball fled in safety. A cool wave of relief washed over Sam, knowing his friend was okay. The emotion was real. *GTA III* had successfully brought the feeling to life.

But reality was about to get in the way. At 2 a.m. on September 11, the *GTA* fan site Gouranga.com posted a chat transcript between fans and Dan Houser. “Q: Will we be able to hijack things besides cars?” one gamer asked. “A: Boats . . . tanks . . . ambulances, taxis, buses, ice cream vans,” Dan replied. ”Just not the big stuff—choppers . . . jumbo jets and oil tankers, you are a criminal, not an airline pilot.”

Seven hours later, Sam stood at his apartment window, watching an awful black cloud of smoke choke downtown where two planes had just flown into the World Trade Center. Amid the fear and disgust, he couldn't help feeling as if he were in a

movie. “It was the most real action-movie thing I'd ever seen because it fucking well was real,” he later recalled.

With Rockstar's offices only a mile away from the site, the company reeled. “Everyone had someone who had an uncle or brother” who was impacted by the attack. Eibeler later recalled, “and for a young company it was devastating.” When Pope walked into the office for the first time soon afterward, he had to flash his ID—strangers wouldn't be allowed into Rockstar anymore. As he made his way through the loft to the back, he wondered who the closely shorn guy was sitting at Sam's desk—until he realized it was Sam. Sam told Pope he had shaved his long hair clean because he didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea. “Those fucking terrorists,” Sam muttered. “I don't want to look anything like those terrorists!”

Neither could their games. As the city reeled from the attacks, Sam and Dan wondered whether they should even release *GTA III* at all. Maybe it was too soon. “This beautiful city has been attacked,” Sam thought, “and now we're making a violent crime drama set in a city that's not unlike New York City. My God, I'm terrorized where I live, and on top of that, we've got this fucking crazy game that is not exactly where people's heads are at right now.”

Instead of shelving the game, they, along with Sony, decided to make changes instead. No more sniper rifle shots to the limbs with body parts flying—too gory. No more buildings that looked like the World Trade Center in the game. Sam e-mailed Gouranga.com apologizing for the added delays. “Rest assured the game will be phenomenal,” he told them. “As ever, we really appreciate your continued support.”

As they tried to recover from 9/11, people across America flipped on their TVs looking for escape. Some caught an unusual ad. In the background, a soprano sings the Italian aria “Mio Babbino Caro” from the 1918 opera *Gianni Schicchi*. Lyrical cut-scenes play on top, like an animated trailer for a mafia film the viewers have never seen. A sleek blue-and-white sports car peels around a corner. A foot chase of a guy with a shotgun running after a woman—until she turns and shoots him down. Then the title fades in on red lowercase, “*grand theft auto III*.”

The ad promised something strange and new: less a game and more like a film you could control. Viewers watched the stoic antihero in his black leather jacket, walking through a lavish home as the Don, Salvatore Leone, puts his arm over the antihero's shoulder and makes a pact. This was the cut-scene setting up the “Bomb Da Base” mission, the one that had inspired Sam not long ago. Leone's promise was, in effect, the promise of Rockstar and the new era of gaming they wanted to usher in.

“If you do this for me, you'll be a made man,” Leone says, “anything you want.”

In living rooms around the country, on sofas and chairs, in bedrooms and dorm rooms, a generation of players clutched their Mountain Dew cans tightly, and said,

“Hell yeah.”

Bring it.

12

Crime Pays

WANTED LEVEL

Please welcome Colin Hanks!”

It was January 16, 2002, and Jon Stewart, the host of the *Daily Show*, eagerly greeted his next guest. Hanks, the boyish twenty-four-year-old actor and son of star Tom Hanks, was in town to promote his latest film, *Orange County.* Yet what he really wanted to talk about was a new video game, *Grand Theft Auto III*, the mention of which elicited a burst of applause from one gamer in the crowd. “He knows what I'm talking about!” Hanks deadpanned.

Stewart sank his head in his hands, laughing, as Hanks recounted his adventures with mobsters and hookers. “If you want your money back when she gets out of the car, you run her over,” Hanks continued, “problem solved!”

Stewart replied, “Now I know what to ask for, for the holidays!”

He wasn't the only one. *GTA III* was an immediate sensation. Game reviewers raved. *GameSpy* called it “an insanely well-made and fun game to play. . . . proof of the power behind the PS2's hardware.” *GamePro* magazine said it “makes an offer you can't refuse: Live a life of crime and reap the rewards that come with it.” *Game Informer* said it “shatters the standards set by its predecessors.” *Entertainment Weekly* deemed it “every bad boy's dream (and every parent's nightmare).”

Players swapped tales of their adventures in the game as if they had taken place in real life. “The first few days,” posted one online, “I did nothing but run around the city stealing cars and running over hookers.” Though women played the game, *GTA III* was undeniably the stuff of dudes—raucous, enraged, frenzied. The game gave even the most powerless person a way to unleash his most violent fantasies, but in a world made from pixels where no one real got hurt. The most common reaction to flattening a pedestrian during the game wasn't a gasp, after all, it was laughter. To suggest that the game could cause players to run over people in real life would only make them laugh harder.

A commentator on National Public Radio swooned about driving aimlessly within the game with the radio cranked while the sun set on the horizon. “You become like Emerson's transparent eyeball,” he gushed, “seeing everything, consisting of nothing.” For Dr. Henry Jenkins, the director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *GTA III* marked a new frontier. “Now that we've colonized physical space,” he said, “the need to have new frontiers is deeply in the games. *Grand Theft Auto* expands the universe.”

Fueled by reviews and word-of-mouth buzz, *GTA III* became the fastest-selling, highest-grossing title for PlayStation 2 with more than six million games sold around the world. Take-Two's stock soared from $7 a share in October 2001, three weeks before the launch of *GTA III*, to almost $20 a share in January 2002. At one point, Rockstar held the top spots on the game charts, with *GTA III* number one, followed by its dark thriller, *Max Payne*. Including these two games and *State of Emergency*, Rockstar soon had three titles in the top ten.

GTA III permeated the culture at large, just as Sam had always dreamed. The shout-outs on the *Daily Show.* Mix-tapes in New York with *GTA* sound bites. Even ecstasy pills allegedly floating around clubs with the Rockstar logo, not a company PR campaign but simply an act of love, it seemed, from fans. Rockstar also, got its due from the peers who once mocked them for having the audacity to name themselves Rockstar. When Rockstar producer Jeronimo Barrera, dressed in a zoot suit, accepted the trophy for game of the year from the industry's Game Developer's Choice Award, he said, “This is to show that video games don't have to be about hobgoblins and dwarves!”

GTA III's success helped propel the U.S. game business to a record $9.4 billion in sales for 2001, a 40 percent increase from the previous year—and enough to dwarf the $8.38 billion in film box office sales. Sony, which had signed the *GTA* franchise exclusively to its consoles, rode the success to the top of the industry, outperforming rivals Microsoft and Nintendo, who had just released their new consoles, the Xbox and GameCube, respectively, in November (Xbox, ironically, was riding high on the success of *Halo*, the sci-fi shooter Take-Two had relinquished to Microsoft, after the company bought the game's creators, Bungie). Before long, Sony had shipped almost 30 million PS2 systems.

Sony's Phil Harrison marveled at *GTA III*'s huge reorders and crossover success. Like Sam, he had long wanted to expand the market for gamers, and Rockstar had tapped into something broad. “It demonstrated that Rockstar was thinking quite deeply about culture and the way that people would play the game,” he said. “*GTA* probably defined the zeitgeist better than anything else.”

In Japan, home to Sony's headquarters, *GTA III* represented a seismic shift within

the country's storied game culture and industry. Nintendo's two decades of family-friendly rule seemed quaint compared to the naughty new age of *GTA III*. Yet the changes raised eyebrows at Sony, too. Government ministries began to question Sony's execs. At a dinner party, the wife of Sony's founder was said to have admonished the PlayStation group over *GTA III*. "Oh," she said, "I hear your games are very violent."

Harrison and others in the West did their best to reassure their counterparts in Japan. "Look," Harrison would say, "if we're going to be a full-spectrum entertainment platform, we're supposed to have everything from Mickey Mouse to Mickey Rourke. We have to have a complete spectrum of entertainment on the platform if we're going to be truly mass market." Japan formed its own Computer Entertainment Ratings Organization, similar to the ESRB in the United States, to help monitor the new generation of games.

As outrage spread over *GTA III*—particularly, the hooker cheat—the game became a lightning rod around the world. It exposed the bias and confusion reserved for this young medium. Though similar battles had played out before—over pinball, comic books, rock music, and *Dungeons & Dragons*—this meant little to the public at large. Still viewed as a children's toy, video games were deemed an unacceptable forum for adult content. Although people clearly understood the difference between movies and TV shows meant for children or adults, video games didn't get the same consideration. The fact that *GTA III* was explicitly and voluntarily rated M for Mature (with a mandatory label on its ads and covers) fell flat.

In Australia, the Office of Film and Literature Classification Board, the country's federal body responsible for rating media products, denied it a rating due to its depiction of what it classified as "acts of sexualized violence." *GTA III* was not only illegal to sell, but illegal to view. Retailers faced up to two years in jail and tens of thousands of dollars in fines for even displaying it. Players were told to bring the games back to the stores or face criminal charges if they were to show the game to others.

In England, the director of a child advocacy group called Children Now warned that games threatened to desensitize kids to violence. A psychologist at the University of Northumbria said "newer breeds of increasingly sophisticated games encourage solitary behaviour and tendencies towards rebellion." When the National Institute on Media and the Family, a nonprofit child advocacy group in the United States, released its annual Video and Computer Game Report in December 2001, *GTA III* was picked as the number-one game for parents to avoid. "We have enough violence in the real world," said Senator Kohl. "We don't need to wrap it up in a bow and give it to children as a present."

U.S. representative Joe Baca, a Democrat from Southern California, introduced the Protect Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act of 2002, which would make it illegal to sell an M-rated game to anyone under seventeen without permission from parents. “We saw what happened in Columbine,” Baca warned on CNN. “These are kids that are being programmed. They play the video games, they take the action and the character; they began to play that character, and then they began to commit those particular crimes. It's a shame when we have *Grand Theft Auto III*. We have another one as well—we have the *State of Emergency.* We look at a lot of the gang-by shooting that goes on, the riots that are going on in the immediate area. We have got to stop this.”

Over at the IDSA, Doug Lowenstein tried in vain to counter what he called “the exaggerated claims of ideologically oriented politicians and media critics who favor putting government, not parents, in charge of the entertainment used by our kids.” Yet he refused to jump to the defense of the industry's most controversial publisher. “We shouldn't be spokespersons for the Housers,” Lowenstein later said. “That's their game.”

CHEESE BALL! Cheese ball! Cheese ball!

It was late one cold November night at Radio Mexico, the dive bar and restaurant downtown in New York City. Multicolored balloons with streamers bobbed against the low ceiling. Holiday lights wrapped the windows. Dozens of partying twenty-somethings in hoodies and trucker hats jammed inside, but the door was firmly closed to anyone passing by.

In honor of Sam's twenty-ninth birthday, Rockstar was celebrating its most awesome tradition: the annual cheese ball–eating contest. The object was to devour more gooey, greasy, deep-fried, chili pepper–sauced, baseball-size globes of fat than anyone else. It wasn't easy. In addition to packing down the lard bombs, competitors had to endure chaos around them.

While they ate at a center table, Rockstars waved fistfuls of cash as if they were betting on horses. Wagering was encouraged; screaming, the norm. Dan, the announcer, shouted through a bullhorn so that he could be heard above the wailing sirens. The winning ball guzzler got $2,000, two plane tickets anywhere—and serious bragging rights, especially when the record count hit twenty-four. Some competitors wore yellow headbands scrawled with the words “Eat Strong.” In between cheese balls, they had to eat rounds of jalapeño poppers. Buckets were left around the room for vomiting, and they got used. Casualties rinsed with tequila and lime.

Afterward, they passed out awards—such as “Most Likely to Fuck Someone in the Office,” “Most Likely to Be in the Office at 4 a.m.”—made from medallions with the Rockstar logo. “Despite the industry's reputation as being male-dominated, Rockstar was about an equal mix of guys and girls, all young, and all more than willing to get shitfaced on any night of the week,” Rockstar producer Jeff Williams later recalled.

On the heels of *GTA III*, it was a good time to be a Rockstar. Money and drinks flowed. It was the ultimate private club, where members called one another militaristically by their last names. As a sign of faith, employees each received a pewter ring with the Rockstar logo. They also received real U.S. Army jackets, personalized with the Rockstar logo and their street number, 575, on the back. They wore them with pride, sauntering through game conventions as fans cleared a path.

Few felt more empowered than Fernandez and Pope. “Imagine a company where a hundred people felt like they were in the Beatles,” Fernandez recalled. Pope credited Sam. “It's easy to see his genius in all this,” he went on. “He really understands you really have to have all the style in world, but have to marry that with really hard work and strong technology. He understands you need the whole package.”

Weathering the controversy over *Grand Theft Auto*, however, was proving more difficult. Though they put out perfunctory statements assuring the public that the company “makes every effort to market its games responsibly, targeting advertising and marketing only to adult consumers,” they tried to stay out of the sociopolitical debate. “I didn't think we could win,” Eibeler recalled. Khonsari, GTA's director, got an e-mail telling him to lie low as the press descended on the hooker story. “This is going to blow up,” he was told. “Just keep your head down and don't talk to the press.”

The nuances of the hookers in the game were lost on the general public. GTA didn't require you to kill a prostitute to increase your score or anything like that. Players who robbed and murdered the women were simply doing it of their own accord. It was, as King later put it, “an inadvertent consequence of sandbox gameplay. It was in the user, it was in his mind. What does this say about him?” At the same time, King knew that Rockstar was pressing buttons. “We put ourselves out to be the next poster child of this medium,” he said.

No matter how erudite the founders of Rockstar were about American pop culture, they failed to take something essential into account: how puritanically people would view their games. This extended to their own peers. To their dismay, Jason Rubin, the cofounder of Naughty Dog, makers of the kid-friendly and best-selling Crash Bandicoot

franchise, told the *Los Angeles Times* that selling *GTA III* was “like selling cigarettes to kids.”

Though some on the outside might find it hard to believe, the attacks wounded the inner circle of Rockstar. They knew they were giving millions of people an entertaining outlet but couldn't help but wonder if they were crossing some dangerous line. “Are we doing something that's morally wrong?” King wondered. “We were always questioning ourselves and criticizing ourselves,” he later recalled.

When a reporter for *Rolling Stone* came by the office for a feature on Rockstar, however, the cofounders dismissed any notion of responsibility. Ragged and unshaven as they sat in a back room, Donovan and the Housers took their critics to task. “If you realize PlayStation owners aren't all ten,” Donovan said, “there isn't some kind of social responsibility to have a redeeming social value.”

“Why are we having this conversation?” Dan asked rhetorically.
“It's insane. We get dragged into these stupid conversations about, ‘Are you brainwashing children?' or whatever rubbish it is that month. It's like, ‘How can we as adults be having this conversation when we both know that you're talking crap?' It's just not even complicated.

“If this was a movie or TV show and was the best in its field, you'd give it loads of awards and put those award shows on television,” Dan went on. “I genuinely don't aspire to that, but I do aspire to not being called an asshole for doing the same thing in a video game. So what you're really saying is, ‘It's not the content, it's the medium.' You've proven that by your actions in other areas. So what is it about the medium you don't like? Because maybe we should challenge those ideas. It's not what you think it is to a lot of people. To us, it's way of experimenting with nonlinear interactive storylines.”

When asked about the violence, Sam threw his weight behind the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). “We adhere very strictly to the ratings system and take the ESRB guidelines on marketing mature-rated product very seriously,” he said. “What are the alternatives? Censorship? I sincerely hope not.”

To ask games to be socially redeeming was missing the point. “What's socially redeeming about a fantasy world in which someone pats you on the back when you've done something well?” Dan asked. “That's just patronizing.” Sam shifted in his seat, as if trying to contain his outrage. They were not shallow shock jocks, they were hard-working artists and producers, they felt, and what was wrong with that?

“I tend to try avoid talking too much about the violence because that's what it all gets boiled down to at the end of the day,” Sam said. “But when you do something wrong in the game, the police come and get you. . . . You don't just run around on a rampage and just carry on, carry on, carry on. You do commit crimes, and the police

are on you. You commit more, and they're on you more, and you commit more, the FBI will turn up, the SWAT will turn up, and then the army turns up. If that doesn't reinforce a moral code in a game, I don't know what does."

"HAVE YOU seen the *New York Times*?"

One day at Rockstar, Jamie King got this message from his dad. King had a good relationship with his father, who took pride in his son's accomplishments in the game industry. Yet his dad had phoned to warn him that maybe something seriously outlaw was taking place behind the scenes.

The headline of the *Times*'s page-one business section story read, "Hit Video Games Overshadow Company's Woes." King read on. "Can looting, drive-by-shootings, random beatings, prostitution and drug dealing compensate for accounting irregularities? Maybe—if the mayhem has really great graphics. . . . Take-Two, which has emerged as a leader in the game software market, admitted early this year…to having misstated seven quarters of financial returns. The Securities and Exchange Commission forced a three-week halt in the trading of its shares and is continuing to investigate. And at least five shareholder lawsuits are under way against Take-Two."

Reports found that Take-Two had overstated revenues by $23 million in 2000. According to one analyst, this resulted in a sizable increase in reported profits for the year—a figure of $24.6 million, instead of the now-revised figure of $6.4 million. Another analyst said that the actions constituted fraud. Given Take-Two's extraordinary success since Brant entered the game industry, the financial community found the SEC investigation especially foreboding.

"With all this stuff about Enron and corporate responsibility, there's a wrong message here," said one hedge fund manager who lost money on Take-Two stock. "It says, 'Who cares about the past, now that we have a good game.' It says, 'Crime does pay.'"

Eibeler and the other execs tried to keep Rockstar as separate as they could from the problems, but it wasn't easy. "Keep your head down," Eibeler told them, "business is great, look at the success." Yet privately, he felt the strain. "While the company was performing extremely well, financially we were under a real cloud," he later said.

Though Sam kept his team insulated from Take-Two, the underlings weren't entirely surprised by the investigations. There had been a revolving door of Take-Two executives, after all. The problems hit especially hard on the two Rockstar cofounders in the shadows, King and Foreman. Since launching the company with

Donovan, the Housers, and King, Foreman felt a split forming between the founders. It had started with the press and the positioning of Donovan and Sam as the faces of Rockstar. Foreman, shy by nature, had been happy to let them have the spotlight, but cracks were starting to show that he could no longer ignore.

Foreman would later recall the day when Sam came up to him enthusiastically and said, “Within a couple years, we can all be millionaires! It will be amazing!” Then Sam amended his comment. “You know,” he added, “I'm not going to stop until I get a billion.”

As Foreman watched him walk away. he thought about Sam's incessant passion for pushing boundaries, for pushing games, for getting the most out of whatever he could. “Knowing him,” he thought, “a billion won't be enough.”

13

Vice City

TONY: You be happy. I want what's comin' to me when I'm alive, not when I'm dead.

MANNY: Yeah, what's comin' to you, Tony?

TONY: The world, man, and everything in it.

As Sam watched Tony Montana drive down the neon streets of Miami, he couldn't get enough of *Scarface*. The film still blew him away—Al Pacino's incredible portrayal of this Cuban refugee's ascent, and descent, into becoming the king of the coke trade. The drugs. The violence. The cojones. The way Montana didn't take shit from anyone and always stuck to whatever he thought was right. Just as Sam had to keep his head down and work on his games, despite the mounting pressures around him. "*Scarface* is the ultimate, right?" Sam once said,
"Montana is the ultimate."

So, he thought, was Miami in the eighties. He considered it to be "hands-down the grooviest era of crime because it didn't even feel like it was crime. You had Cuban hit men coming across and gunning people down in the street, but it was still celebrated in a sort of haze of cocaine and excess and Ferraris and Testarossas, and it was a totally topsy-turvy, back-to-front period of time. It was everything that was crazy about the eighties, and it was in America so it was crazier." What better time and place to set a game?

With *GTA III* racking up awards, sales, and controversy, Sam could feel the anticipation growing for the next game. The one thing he knew he didn't want to do was a listless sequel, as the other publishers did. At the same time, however, Rockstar was a subsidiary of a public company, and Sam had the added pressure—and tension—of pleasing his corporate parents at Take-Two. But could he top himself? "You gotta repeat the impact of *GTA III*," he said. "That's scary."

Although they had already mapped out the idea of having the next game set in *Vice City*, the Miami-themed locale from the first *GTA*, they still had to figure out the era. In New York at the time, the eighties were making a comeback. At clubs, INXS and New Order thumped from the speakers, and cocaine was making a comeback, too. For Dan, the time period "glorified values we felt the game could satirize very effectively—greed, the love of money, bad clothes . . . and the music was something

we were all interested in, as it was a time when we were growing up and first getting interested in such things." Bolstered by the success of *GTA III*, he was finding his voice as a writer—not a novelist, not a screenwriter, but a writer of games. Someone who could carry a narrative over cut-scenes, picking the right moments to unleash the player into the fictional world.

When Sam went around the Rockstar loft effusing about setting *GTA: Vice City* in the eighties, however, some people didn't get it. "What are you on about?" he recalled one employee asking.

"No, no, no," Sam insisted, "it's so slick!"

"The eighties, man?" another said. "That's a rough one, isn't it?"

"Yeah, of course it is!" Sam replied. "But that's all the more reason to do it!"

Sam had one key believer on his side: Co-founder Jamie King. With his ready enthusiasm and charm, King had assumed a key role within the company, acting as a buffer between Sam's full-throttle passion and the team's pressure to deliver. When he heard team members questioning *Vice City*'s direction, he'd say, "It should be fucking Flock of Seagulls!" and that they needed to trust Sam. So they set about winning over the skeptics instead. Sam rented out a movie theater nearby and took the team to a private showing of *Scarface*. They watched *Apocalypse Now Redux*. *Miami Vice* episodes were not on DVD, so Sam surfed eBay and snatched up every VHS copy of the show he could find between the seasons of 1984 and 1989.

At lunch, he'd rush home to pop in another cassette and watch an episode or two. He reveled in how perfect the series was for a game—from its action scenes to its missionlike structure. *Vice City* wasn't just a game about the eighties, Sam insisted, it was specifically 1986—the peak of the decade, as far as he was concerned. Sam and Dan had Fernandez build a web system and populate it with all of the cultural research he could find: photos of parachute pants, DeLoreans, pink-lensed aviator shades. Sam was exacting in his details. He didn't want just any Ferrari in the game, he wanted the Ferrari Spider GTB from 1986 with one side-view mirror, not two.

Ewing, the scruffy producer of *State of Emergency*, walked into the Rockstar loft one day to find Sam sketching on a white board like some inspired mad scientist. Ewing saw all kinds of seemingly random but hilarious eighties terms scrawled on the board: *Flock of Seagulls*, *Miami Vice*, *cocaine*. Lines and arrows pointed from these words to the center of the board, where Sam had drawn the word *Arnold*, referring to Gary Coleman's character from the hit eighties sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*. "It was as if Arnold had become a fulcrum of understanding," Ewing recalled. "It was just a little window into Sam's mind and how he was pulling cultural threads into a product."

Sam's gospel took hold. Employees started walking around the loft in Members

Only jackets. Rockstar flew the DMA developers, now renamed Rockstar North, from Edinburgh to Miami and checked everyone into snazzy hotel on Ocean Drive. They stood out front, thirty pale Scots with cameras around their necks. “Live and breathe this place,” Sam told them, “learn this place, this is what we're going to put on the screen!” Oh, and one more thing. “Get me neon!” he said. “I've got to have neon!”

The weather at first was stormy and gray, just the kind to send the Scots into a pub. When the clouds parted, the guys took to the streets, snapping photos of the buildings, the palms, the sunsets. By the end of the week, they had hundreds of photos—and thirty really bad sunburns. Since leaping into 3D with *GTA III*, they could simply focus on refining the technology—rather than reinventing it—for *Vice City*. The goal was to use the tech to make the world teem even more actively with life. They'd stream scenes faster to immediately immerse gamers. They'd tweak code so that pedestrians moved more believably. A refined physics engine let them expand the choice of vehicles, such as mopeds that drove with just the right feel and degree of nimbleness.

Perhaps most important, the game's new lighting system gave them a broad and expressive palette to render *Vice City* in all of its sunny, neon glory. Most action games came in depressing shades of grays and browns, but *Vice City* would burst with color. They populated the palm-lined streets with exaggerated characters like those out of R. Crumb or Felix the Cat. Curvy women in bikinis on skates. Greasy dudes in ball-hugging briefs. Hustlers in baby-blue Don Johnson leisure suits. “Ours is kind of the look Walt Disney might have gone for if he was more of a psychotic substance abuser with authority issues,” said Aaron Garbut, the art director at Rockstar North.

Rendering this detail took countless all-nighters. The introduction of planes and helicopters meant the scenes had to be viewable from the sky, as well as from the street. They weren't merely giving players a richer, more vibrant world than in *GTA III*, they were creating a stronger sense of place. In *Vice City*, the player was cast as Tommy Vercetti, a small-time hood who would complete missions for the warlords and the drug kings in town. This time, the player would get his own apartment on a virtual Ocean Drive. He'd walk inside the shiny Miami lobby and up to his room. These kinds of tropes were usually the domain of role-playing games, the idea of living in a simulated home, but it all fit in with Sam's mission to bring games to life. “It's giving the people a sense of owning something,” he said, “. . . it's there and it's real.”

Nothing would be more real than *Vice City*'s radio stations. This time they had nine, from the metal of V-Rock to the Latin sounds of Espantoso. Dan, who also

wrote the satirical radio commercials, sat for hours listening to FM radio ads from the 1980s—the goofy voice-overs, the jingle singers—culled from ad agencies. They spoofed slasher flicks and donut dealers, self-help gurus and hairstyling products (“May cause dry mouth, dilated pupils, paranoia, heart palpitations and nose bleeds, plus your hair will be great!”). They also poked fun at the low-resolution eighties games they had grown up playing (“*Defender of the Faith* . . .” save the green dots with your fantastic flying red square!”).

One morning, Fernandez's phone rang in his apartment on Spring and Elizabeth, just a couple blocks from the Rockstar loft. “Hello?” he said.

“Fernandez!” It was Sam. “Meet me downstairs!”

Fernandez was happy to be at his boss's beck and call. He considered Sam a true genius, a producer on the scale of Bruckheimer or Geffen. He loved how Sam promised Take-Two he'd sell ten million copies of the game. Sam had the nerve to stand up to the corporation and maintain their leverage over their “parents.”

Fernandez also appreciated how much Sam valued him and Pope. Not long before this, Sam had come over to Pope's East Village apartment to check out his new surround sound system. They had drinks and watched *Lord of the Rings*, as Sam effused, “Your standard of living is better than mine!” In fact, Sam treated himself to a new Porsche and gave Dan a Rolex. He was buying a house in the West Village and wanted Pope to help him set up his home theater. They were friends.

When Sam's call came to Fernandez that day, Fernandez quickly brushed his hair, no time for coffee. Outside, he found Sam at the ready. In his hand he held a chunky white device with a screen and a sleek dial. “What's that?” Fernandez asked.

“An iPod!” Sam said, referring to the new device from Apple. Sam began to walk up briskly toward West Fourth Street, and Fernandez trailed after him. “Fernandez!” Sam told him, “let's drive around the city and listen to the songs I'm thinking about for *Vice City*.”

At the garage, the driver pulled out Sam's Porsche. Sam shot straight for the FDR Drive, the long stretch of highway on Manhattan's East Side. He reached for the iPod, which he had hooked up to his car stereo. “Let's see which one of these songs feels the best when you're driving fast,” Sam said and hit the gas. He pressed a button, triggering “Crockett's Theme,” the theme of *Miami Vice.* The pulsing synthesizer. The drums coming in. Then the weird sort of coke come-down chords, the strange almost Japanese plucking of a simulated harp. “This is the vibe of the game,” Sam said.

Fernandez leaned back as the golden city and more songs blurred. Teena Marie. Slayer. Phil Collins. As each played, he scribbled down the name, and they assigned it a rating for how well they thought it would fit. When one song in particular came

on, Sam turned it up, and something came over his face. This was a song from his childhood, one that Dan and he had listened to back in the day. “More than this,” Bryan Ferry crooned, “you know there's nothing more than this.”

IT WAS EARLY one Sunday morning when Fernandez heard his phone ring again. He rolled over, pressed it to his ear. “Hello?”

“The build is here!” Sam said. “Come check it out.”

Fernandez and Pope followed Sam inside the loft and booted up the first build of the game. With a scheduled release date of October 2002, the guys had only had a total of ten months to make *Vice City*—with seven left to go. As the simulation based on Ocean Drive spread onscreen, Fernandez hopped into a Ferrari GTB and hit the road, watching the beach roll by. “Wow,” he said, “this is it.”

Pope climbed to a rooftop in the game and just sat there. Sat there looking out over the water, as the sun set in crimson and orange over the copper-blue waves. The palm trees swayed, and seagulls fluttered by. My God, he thought, it's beautiful.

Sam loved to just drive, cruising around the maps to get the vibe of the game, the perfect little world the team had created in a box. He jacked a motorcycle and hit the road, popping wheelies as he drove by the neon storefronts. Over the roar of the engine, as he heard “99 Luftballons” play, he felt something strange begin to shift. The screen on his computer monitor rippled in waves, like glass turning to jelly until there was no glass anymore. There was just him, inside the game, not in a crazy way but real. He thought it felt “like crossing a line between the reality and the fiction.”

Yet he also felt gripped with anxiety. What if this didn't sell? With a budget of $5 million, *Vice City* was their biggest title yet. The script alone dwarfed the average game or movie: 82 cut-scenes, 200 pages, and another 600 pages of pedestrian dialogue, and 300 pages of radio scripts. They were squeezing every last bit of possible content onto the DVD. Sam and Dan wanted to push the celebrity voice-overs as no game had before. “We thought what's cool about TV shows are all the guest stars showing up,” Dan said, “like sports stars in an episode of *Magnum, PI*.”

“Like a fallen sports star and now doing other things, things like in *Miami Vice*, always guest starring Phil Collins or Frank Zappa,” Sam concurred. As King said, they just wanted an excuse to meet these stars. They started with Vercetti, who, unlike the star of *GTA III*, would now have a voice. To inject personality into such a big world, they needed just the right actor—Ray Liotta, whom they'd been obsessed with since *Goodfellas*.

King hit the phones, hustling with his usual determination and style. It wasn't easy.

King kept getting told that Liotta was looking to change his reputation and do a family film. Finally, he got through to a sympathetic young Hollywood agent. Next thing he knew, they were sitting at Peter Luger's Steakhouse in Brooklyn with Liotta himself, drinking and laughing and effusing about how much they loved his films. Then suddenly Liotta went cold for no reason, staring them down. “Why the fuck are you laughing?” he snapped.

The guys gulped. Liotta cracked up. “I'm fucking with you!” he said.

“He totally *Goodfella*ed us!” King said.

Liotta signed on, but the *Goodfellas* shtick wasn't entirely an act, as Khonsari later recalled after taping the voice-over session. Liotta limped in, bitterly sore from a basketball game. “The last fucking video game I played was Pong,” he said wearily.

What the hell? Khonsari thought. Khonsari's dad was a doctor, and here was this Hollywood tough guy—who was getting paid half what his dad made in a year? And he was copping an attitude? “Look,” Khonsari said, “I don't really give a shit what you do outside this, I mean, I loved you in *Goodfellas*, but this is a job, and you gotta do this.” Khonsari got him a big cup of Starbucks, and he calmed down and got into the part.

Before long, a parade of their favorite celebs began pouring in to tape parts in the game: Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper. Starring in *GTA* was a badge of honor for the actors, a sign of hipness. The Rockstars couldn't contain their glee. “I'm sitting next to the Six Million Dollar Man!” King said, as Lee Majors arrived for his part.

For *Vice City*'s porn star Candy Suxxx, Khonsari suggested adult star Jenna Jameson and offered her $5,000 for the part. It'd be an easy gig for her, something she could do when she was in town for the Howard Stern radio show. Turned out, her boyfriend was a huge *GTA III* fan—done deal. For *Vice City*, Khonsari motion-captured a scene of Candy on her back, having implied sex with a fisherman who joked about his twelve-inch fish. “Yeah,” he said, “it's regulation, baby!”

Still, the guys tittered nervously like school kids when Jameson came to the studio to read her part. Dan took one look at her in her tight blue jeans and black shirt, and began to “feel very English,” as he said, and embarrassed. It didn't help that she showed up at the session with her father. “Look, I have no problem with her father,” Khonsari whispered to Dan, “but I do not feel comfortable making her moan and groan as if she's getting banged.”

With Jameson's father glowering, the time for the orgasm came in more ways than one. “Oh, hello, Jenna,” Dan said, awkwardly. “So could you sound like you're excited?”

She eyed him dubiously. “What do you mean?”

“Sound like you're happy! Like you're having a great time!” He snapped his fingers. “Sound like you're eating a chocolate bar!”

“So it's supposed to be kind of like sex?” she deadpanned, “or like I'm eating a chocolate bar?”

“Yes, like you're having sex,” Dan said, “that would be perfect!”

She obliged.

Nothing prepared them for their visit with Burt Reynolds, who played Avery Carrington, a real estate mogul in the game. Since the guys had grown up on the actor's campy and macho classics—*Smokey and the Bandit*, *Deliverance*—they were psyched to work with him. Reynolds showed up ready to work and be treated like a star. Khonsari could see the disdain in his eyes, the attitude so many other actors copped about the medium. “They look at you like ‘Who the fuck are you?'” he recalled, “‘You're game guys.'” Khonsari had no qualms about putting actors in their place. “If you want me to break it down to you,” he'd say, “these games gross over half a billion dollars, more than all of your movies put together!”

Yet with Reynolds, he lost his nerve. Khonsari recalled how, after Reynolds cut his scene, Dan asked politely for another take. “Hey,” Dan said, “can you say that line again?”

Reynolds stared him down and muttered, “Say that again?”

“Can you do the line again?” Dan repeated.

“You know, you need to give people an ‘atta boy.'”

“An ‘atta boy'?”

“Yeah, people do something good, you gotta give them an ‘atta boy.'”

Khonsari and Dan shifted uncomfortably, having no clue what Reynolds was talking about at first—then realized he wanted a bit of acclaim before he did anything again. He wanted a “that a boy.” They redid the line, but Khonsari thought that Reynolds's attitude only got worse. The studio grew hot, so hot he was sweating through his clothes. Unbeknownst to Reynolds, his manager had gone out to buy him a dry shirt. When the shirt arrived, Dan innocently approached Reynolds. “Oh, your shirt's here,” he said.

Reynolds didn't know the shirt was coming and must have thought Dan was insulting him for being sopping wet. “There's going to be two hits here,” Reynolds told him, “me hitting you and you hitting the floor!”

Dan flipped, ready to cut Reynolds out of the game entirely. Khonsari intervened. “We got the performance,” he told Dan. “He's a total cock, but let's move on.”

“GO GET ME COVERS!” Sam shouted. “I want covers!”

It was closing in on the release date of *Vice City*, and Sam wanted his public relations team to deliver not just rave reviews, but magazine covers. It was a song-and-dance that began months before a game's release, because the magazines had to go to press in time to run with the launch. “There'd be lot of pressure on the PR guys to deliver good reviews,” Rockstar senior product marketing manager Corey Wade recalled. This would consist, he said, of “massaging those relationships and doing whatever you have to do to beef up a review.”

Dan “Shoe” Hsu, the editor of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, a top gaming magazine, described the relationship with Rockstar as “a constant fight” because the company would jockey for sympathetic reviewers. Hsu was still smarting from the Rockstar backlash over the magazine's *GTA III* review, which, despite raving about the game, suggested it would be highly controversial. He then fielded an angry call from Rockstar. “They were really upset,” Hsu recalled, “and wanted to control the message and control the heat.”

Press got flown down to Miami to check out *Vice City* at the Delano Hotel. Rockstar rented a mansion by the water and showed what the guys called a “vibe reel” of eighties TV shows and films. In addition to the usual plans for ads and trailers, Rockstar rolled out a series of fake eighties websites online. No expense was too great. Recently, to promote *Midnight Club 2*, Rockstar had taken media members drag racing in San Diego.

As word spread among gamers, demand began to reach a fever pitch. At Multimedia 1.0, a video-game store on St. Mark's Place in the East Village of New York, gamers were calling nonstop for *Vice City.* People were coming in and buying anything with a Rockstar logo—games, shirts, stickers. There was a police precinct near the shop, and officers kept coming in and asking for the title. They told the owner they loved to shoot the cops. When he saw a police van outside with the Rockstar logo, he didn't know if a cop had put it on there or someone from Rockstar had.

Yet the hype and the marketing also jacked up the pressure around the office. Random outbursts became commonplace. One day, Foreman read on some online gamer discussion board how they said the trees in *GTA III* looked terrible. He saw Sam's face redden in anger and went over to console him. “Look at these people,” Foreman said, “if they're sitting around looking at the trees, think about how much they're actually missing. It's just not relevant. It's easy to take something in isolation and get beaten up about it. But the reality is that *GTA* is not about the trees. It's everything in there. Not one thing in there is that great. You have to take it as a

whole.”

Little garnered as much attention as the screenshots. Unlike the film or TV industry, which can rely fairly heavily on trailers and buzz, game makers rely hugely on still images sent out in advance of a game. Magazines would jockey just to be the first to feature new images from a game. One screenshot could become the basis of a marketing campaign. They'd pore over a good five hundred stills simply to choose one to send out to the press. “We have to do it better or have to do it different,” Donovan insisted.

The closer the launch of *Vice City* loomed, the more obsessed the team in New York became. Hours shifted from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., to
11 a.m. to 3 a.m. The developers in Edinburgh shared the intensity and the stress. “Luckily, we have a healthy supply of *Grand Theft Auto III* promotional baseball bats that we can use to hit things when the going gets tough,” joked Rockstar North art director Aaron Garbut. Pope recalled the time one executive take a whack at another's desk. “It's led to quite a few embarrassing and possibly worrying incidents with our cleaners,” Garbut said. Employees reported seeing others roaming the loft with (unloaded) rifles and shotguns, weapons used for art in the game—but good props when they wanted to storm into someone's office and make a point. “It was comedy,” Foreman recalled, “it was rock and roll.”

Perhaps no one at Rockstar had to let off as much steam as the game testers. The dozen or so players occupied a front part of the loft. A foosball machine and a vintage *Asteroids Deluxe* arcade game awaited play. Packages of Throat Coat and other cold and flu remedies lined the shelves. Bikini centerfolds smiled seductively from the walls. The testers needed all the encouragement they could get.

For a typical game, they spent about thirty thousand cumulative hours playing through the action and checking for bugs. The process could start months before a game's release. The game testers took out their stress by inventing demonic ways to test the PS2 hardware. Once, they chucked the console out their third-floor window. Another time, they blasted it for hours with a hair dryer. Then they hurled it into a freezer ,where it iced over for a weekend. Such lengths were necessary, given the increased demands—and creativity—of players. “The gamers today are highly intelligent and are absolutely going to take your game apart,” King told a reporter one day, “and they will savage you. That makes our job harder.”

Around the office, the violence, or threats of violence, had become a running joke. When asked to describe his ultimate video game, Sam quipped, “It'd be a fully networked online world, so that I could drive over to Terry's house and smash the shit out of it and get out of there!”

Even celebrities would not be spared Rockstar's wrath. After word circulated that

Liotta was bitching about being underpaid for the game, Sam bristled. “It's like, be cool,” he later told a reporter from *Edge* magazine. “You know? I hate that—it's so cheesy. Like he's saying, ‘Next time I'm really going to pin it to them.' Well, how about we just killed off your character? So he doesn't exist—there is no next time. That's how we handle that.”

14

Rampages

RAMPAGE #28

DISTRICT:	Little Havana
LOCATION:	On top of the lower rooftop of the West Haven Community Healthcare Center
RAMPAGE:	Gun down 20 gang members in 2 minutes
WEAPON:	Sniper Rifle

Palm trees, blue skies, golf courses. Jack Thompson had every reason to feel sunny as he drove his son to school one morning in October 2002. Yet as he pulled up to his boy's school and watched him run into the building, he felt his stomach twist. Images flashed through his mind. Kids with guns. Blood. Tiny bodies. Paducah. Columbine. And now the Beltway sniper.

During the last few weeks, an unknown sniper had randomly shot ten people dead in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. The country roiled in fear and horror as reports played out on national TV and the Internet. Everyone was looking for a reason behind this most unreasonable act of violence. Once again, Thompson had his reason ready to serve: video games.

Stern and narrow-eyed, he had grown more and more adept at evangelizing the gospel against violent games. While the snipers rampaged, Thompson made the rounds of the biggest shows on TV. On October 11, he appeared again with Matt Lauer on the *Today Show*, positing his theory that the sniper had been trained on video games. “The one-shot methodology is indicative of a video game,” he said. Three days later he was on CNN, arguing that investigators who had been seeking leads in the military community should instead be looking at gamers. “The haystack that this twisted needle might be in may indeed be the video game community,” he warned.

On October 22, he found a captive audience in Phil Donahue. “So you've really

become an expert on video games, haven't you?" Donahue asked.

"Well, I'm afraid I have," Thompson replied stoically. "And I'm a father of a ten-year-old. Every day I drop him off, I know there's a possibility that there might be some sociopath who has trained on these games."

After the snipers were caught, news broke that the fifteen-year-old shooter, Lee Boyd Malvo, had in fact, according to one witness, trained on video games such as *Halo.* "Malvo liked playing in the sniper mode, and John Muhammad would coach Malvo on how to shoot in the sniper mode," the witness said. He added, "Malvo was really into the game and would often get angry while playing it."

Back at his home, Thompson quickly fired off a press release. "It is time for this greedy industry to pay for its mayhem," he wrote. Thompson's battle was all the easier to wage because he lacked one obvious opponent: the game makers. Back in Washington, Doug Lowenstein of the Interactive Digital Software Association watched Thompson's campaign in horror but rarely went on the air to respond. "I got criticism for not going on every show Jack Thompson was on," Lowenstein later said. Secretly, however, he was playing a meta-game against Thompson on his own. "I was always managing a calculus," he recalled.

The stakes of this culture war, he knew, were rising, despite the dismissal of Thompson's Paducah suit and the death of Senator Baca's "Protect Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act." In St. Louis, an ordinance to ban the sale of violent games to anyone under eighteen succeeded in withstanding the industry's argument that it defied the First Amendment. Senior U.S. district judge Stephen Limbaugh ruled that games did not constitute speech and therefore didn't deserve such protection.

Lowenstein feared that engaging Thompson would only make things worse and would give him the ammo he was seeking for future legal actions. "I knew what he wanted me to do was be in a forum where he could have me say something and slap a lawsuit," Lowenstein said. So Lowenstein chose to sit back and watch. He wasn't the only game executive who remained silent. "No one in the industry wanted to be a point person or target," Lowenstein said.

As a result, Thompson was left to speak out, unopposed, and had a profound impact on shaping popular opinion about video games. Elevated by the press and bolstered by his predictions, Thompson quickly found a new target of his own: *Grand Theft Auto.* It happened during a packed press conference in Washington. David Walsh, the head of the National Institute on Media and the Family, was joined by senators Lieberman and Kohl to present the annual Video Game Report Card. This had not been a good year for the industry, they said—and cut to a tape. On the screen, footage of a game appeared: a car bobbing up and down. A prostitute walking

out of the vehicle, only to get beaten to death with a bat and left in a bloody pile. *Vice City.*

"Women are the new target of choice in the most violent video games," Lieberman said. "This relatively small but highly popular minority [of games] is not pushing the envelope, they are shooting, torturing and napalming it beyond all recognition and beyond all decency."

"These games are phenomenally popular with kids," added Walsh. "Anyone who says that the only people playing these kinds of games are adults are not talking with kids. By and large, parents are very uninformed. . . . What do we think *Grand Theft Auto*: *Vice City* teaches our fourteen-year-olds?"

GTA enraged Thompson. The sex. The violence. And being set in a fictional Miami, his hometown, no less. How dare they peddle this filth to children? He knew just how he would fire back with the help of his own son. One day, he went up to his son, Johnny, and asked him for a favor. He had a suspicion that the Best Buy chain, among others, was selling this game to kids despite the M-rating, and he wanted to prove it. "It would be useful at this point, Johnny," he said, "to be able to say whether or not Best Buy, which claims to be the most reasonable on this issue, is selling it."

Thompson drove to the Best Buy parking lot and handed Johnny $60 to buy the game. He gripped his video camera and told his son he'd be waiting outside. Thompson watched Johnny head into the store as he positioned himself outside the glass door. He palmed his camera and stared through the viewfinder, thumb hovering over the record button. He waited, watching the people come and go by the registers, checking out in the lines to head back into the Miami heat. Waited until he saw his little boy walk up to the clerk with the black plastic case in hand.

Thompson hit record, zoomed in, and could see it: the lower case *Grand Theft Auto* logo and the pink neon subtitle, *Vice City.* He crouched lower, just at the right angle to film the transaction. He could feel his throat constrict and heart race as his son handed over the game. The clerk eyed the boy. Then he took his money and sold him the game. Busted! "Everyone knows what's in this game, and it's the sexual content that gets them in trouble," Thompson told Johnny.

Using this evidence, he could go after the retailers for illegally selling sexual content to minors. He could use the tape to prove their negligence. Thompson examined the video game box in his hand. The cover was broken into frames like a comic book—flaming cars, a girl in a pink bikini, a black guy with a big gold chain and a gun. He eyed the tiny little logo in the bottom-right corner, the yellow square with the letter R and the star. Rockstar Games? Get ready to be Jacked.

CHEESE BALL! Cheese ball! Cheese ball!

Another year, another cheese ball–eating contest at Radio Mexico for the players at Rockstar Games. Tequila poured. Bets flew. Vomit buckets spilled. In what was also now an annual tradition, valued employees received a new company jacket. This time it was a military green bomber jacket, stitched with the word *Rockstar* on the front and the company's crest (including the logo and a set of brass knuckles) on the back. Surrounding the crest was the phrase, in Latin, “to pulverize our enemies.”

The company's faithful crew had more reasons than ever to celebrate. *Vice City* was on its way to becoming the best-selling video game of all time. The success came out of the gate, when it moved an astonishing 1.4 million copies in its first two days (more than most developers sold in a lifetime), making it the fastest-selling game ever.

At the same time, *GTA III* continued to break records. Costing less to make than many indie films, the game has sold more than 8 million copies, generating roughly $400 million in its first year and eclipsing even that year's blockbuster film *The Matrix*. The *GTA* juggernaut bolstered Take-Two, still under an SEC investigation, and the game industry, which hit a record $10.1 billion in revenues for 2002, up 10 percent from the previous year.

Vice City wasn't only a commercial hit, but a critical phenomenon, too. The game received raves from the most influential magazines and websites. “The depth and gameplay variety is through the roof,” gushed *PlayStation* magazine. *Entertainment Weekly* voted it game of the year, saying, “the reason *Vice City* blows every other game away isn't that it's a driving, shooting, action, or simulation game, but that it's all four combined into a criminally stylish package.” *Vice City* racked up the industry's top awards. “Hopefully, this time around, both parties will begin to ignore the controversy and recognize *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* for what it really is,” wrote *Game Informer*, “a brilliant video game.”

In the wake, the industry recently ruled by Mario and *Tomb Raider* desperately rushed to emulate Rockstar's new ruling style. As one game analyst put it, “They're not afraid to release titles like *Grand Theft Auto*, which is something that not many people would release before. Now everybody's moving to copy it.” Plumbers and Indiana Janes were out. Sex and violence were in. A new game called *The Getaway* grabbed headlines for its car-chasing violence. And another, *BMX XXX*, boasted lap dances—allegedly shot using motion capture of real strippers.

“You wouldn't expect your average child's Christmas list to include a lap dancer, a series of savage murders or an armed hold-up,” warned the *Daily Record* in

Glasgow. “But that's what most teenagers are wishing for this year—in the shape of some of the best-selling computer games of all time.”

With its success growing, the Rockstar brand was cooler than ever. Emulating the DIY marketing of the recording artists they grew up admiring, the guys at Rockstar promoted its games by plastering stickers all over the city. It had become a badge of hipness to wear a T-shirt with the company's logo or to blast *Vice City*'s nine-CD box set soundtrack (a packaging coup unheard of in the game business) in your car. *GTA* was parodied on *Chappelle's Show* and name-checked on a hip-hop track by rapper Cam'ron. New York disc jockeys Opie and Anthony began to effuse about *Vice City* on the air each day.

When asked by *Rolling Stone* whether he planned to go even further with the content of future games, Sam said, “The answer to that is yes. At the end of the day, there's enough people in this country that would like to see us sort of thrown out or locked up than doing what we do, but my answer is, we're on it, one step at a time kind of a thing. Look at the trouble we got into for the prostitute thing. You'd be amazed at how conservative people are.”

Rockstar had not only achieved the cultural cachet that Def Jam had in the 1980s, it had surpassed it in a new medium for a burgeoning generation. In fact, even Def Jam itself had come calling. After reading the *Rolling Stone* profile of Rockstar, in which they discussed their admiration of the label, Def Jam president Kevin Liles got Donovan on the phone. “You want to be like us?” he asked, dubiously. “I gotta know who the fuck you are.” The two met, and Liles said, “Let's figure out some shit to do together.”

For the Brits who grew up dreaming of New York in their bedrooms in London, the fame felt mind-blowing. Gamers who found out their identities would stumble up to them and fawn, “Oh my God! You're the coolest people in the world!” When SoHo House, an exclusive new club, was recruiting members for its opening in mid-2003, the club's representative made a beeline for King, whom she met through a mutual acquaintance. “Oh, you're Jamie King! And you work at Rockstar Games!” she cooed. “And you're at the helm of something which is an extraordinarily exciting new venture.” King didn't merely join, he became an investor.

As Take-Two's revenue topped $1 billion, there was plenty of cash to go around. As one Rockstar recalled, “Once stock options came in, people were making money and buying houses.” The company gobbled up more game development houses to complement its satellite studios in Vienna, San Diego, and Vancouver. While dozens of fresh employees milled about the loft, veteran Rockstars—the “575 crew,” as King proudly called them—such as Pope and Fernandez felt that a new era had begun. Yet it wasn't entirely the one they expected.

Maybe it was just the hangover of the seventy-hour work weeks of *Vice City* finally setting in, but when Pope looked up wearily from his new desk one day, he thought they weren't the same happy family anymore. As if in slow motion, he watched the Brits parading around the loft in cashmere sweaters with tiny R* logos sewn fashionably over the breast.

Sam had always made such a big deal out of the Rockstar gear, doling out army jackets and rings to everyone as a sign that they were all part of their gang. But in the eyes of Pope, the fancy sweaters seemed to be reserved for the Rockstars at the top. The cashmere gamers were a gang of their own.

BANG! BANG! BANG! POW! Foreman looked up at the horrific smashing sounds coming from Sam's office and waited for the inevitable words to follow. “I need a new phone!” Sam shouted to him. Foreman pulled out an equipment purchase order and filled out yet another request for one of Sam's broken phones.

As Rockstar's reputation grew, such rampages were becoming more routine. Foreman later recalled. “He'd flip out if someone told him something he didn't want to hear. We replaced his phone an awful lot of times.” Foreman hated the favoritism shown in the cashmere sweaters. Though he, as a cofounder, received one, he felt ashamed to wear it. “It was a ‘fuck you' to everybody,” he said.

Even the military jackets and the rings didn't seem so glamorous anymore. One day Pope looked at the Rockstar ring on his finger and felt like a chump. “We've been manipulated so a five-dollar ring means everything to you,” he realized. “There was rivalry, but it was never articulated. It was a dividing line.”

But what some saw as runaway egos could also been seen as merely more determined image control. So what if a boss wore different swag, or got pissed off when something didn't go right? If games were the new rock and roll, then such antics went with the territory. Rockstar also understood that part of their allure was their enigma, and they were dead-set on preserving it—by any means necessary. Though the game industry was big on sharing knowledge at conferences and events, Rockstar limited the exposure. Foreman found this out firsthand when he told Donovan he'd been asked to speak on a panel about game development. “No, you can't do it,” Donovan told him.

“Why?”

“We don't do that.”

“I won't even mention Rockstar, aside from my intro, that I'm CTO of Rockstar. It will be a generic talk.”

“We don't do that.”‘

Foreman thought he knew why they had kiboshed it. Because of “the fear that you may talk about something that was outside of their control,” he later said. “They never wanted the world to know the secrets.” Yet for him, the secret was obvious and nothing to hide. Rockstar's success was built on hard work and dedication, more than anything else. “The secret is to be really, really passionate about what you do and put in a lot of effort to realize it,” Foreman said. “That's it.” All of the broken phones and the tantrums fed these amazing games. “No matter how messed up it might be,” Foreman recalled, “it worked.”

The cashmere gang wanted to control real life the same way they controlled their games. They would sit at their computers, anxiously waiting for the reviews of their newest games to be posted online. They wanted everyone to see the games to be the masterpieces they imagined. “The magic that I see in this game in particular, I don't think has been captured in words on a piece of paper,” Sam once griped.

The guys who once considered calling their company Grudge Games proved they could still live up to that moniker. Negative press drew a backlash from Rockstar, in which ego trumped economics. Not only would writers get their access to the company cut off, but Rockstar would boycott ads in the offending publication. “They were crazy about the media in general,” Dan's assistant, Gillian Telling, later said. “They'd get a 9 out of 10 score and call them up and threaten to pull ads forever.”

Pope and Fernandez needed a break, and bad. One night, with *Vice City* done, they and some others went to celebrate at a nearby restaurant. After going straight from *GTA III* into *Vice City* without a stop, they relished the chance to unwind. Yet no sooner did their drinks arrive than Pope's phone rang. “Come back to the office!” Sam exclaimed enthusiastically on the other end of the line. “Let's talk about San Andreas!”

15

Cashmere Games

PERSONAL SAFETY

There isn't a neighborhood in the entire state of San Andreas that we would categorize as “safe,” so we recommend carrying a weapon at all times. Actually, 2 is better. Visit the local Ammu-Nation superstore (see map for details) soon after arrival for firearm supplies.

Grim city. First-person point of view. Gazing out a car window. Dead palms. Broken doors. Graffitied storefronts. Dudes in bandannas and baggy jeans. Random snippets of pedestrian dialogue:

“Never gonna get it, never gonna get it, beyatch!”

“These clothes? Yeah, they're tight!”

“Hey, homie, you've been hitting the weights?”

“Where the fuck am I?” wondered Fernandez, as he made his way through a dangerous part of East Los Angeles. He was here as part of his cultural research for *GTA: San Andreas*, soaking up details they might use in the game. Stout and dark-haired, he was sitting in the passenger seat of a slow-moving car driven by a bald Mexican American with ripped, tattooed arms. Fernandez pointed a microphone out his window as he rolled, recording passersby whom he heard over his headphones:

“Now, when I slap you, don't trip!”

“You smell like *pasulo*!”

Though a Latino from Miami himself, Fernandez felt nervous and out of place here in this 'hood. He could pass for the guys in the street, but he was a geek at heart. At least he had someone who knew this area behind the wheel, Estevan Oriol, the former bouncer and hip-hop tour manager who now ran one of the hippest clothing lines in the area, Joker Brand. Who better to show him around?

With *Vice City* topping the charts, the pressure had immediately set in on Rockstar to raise the bar once again in *San Andreas.* “Man, how the hell are we going to follow this one up?” Sam asked. “What's after Miami in the eighties? Well, of course, the Bloods and the Crips and the L.A. early-nineties gang-banger culture!”

San Andreas had been established in the first *GTA* as a San Francisco–like town, one of the three cities that included Liberty and Vice. For the stand-alone version of

San Andreas, Rockstar knew exactly where and when to set it: in the era of hip-hop West Coast culture they had grown up admiring. The game would cast the player as a young gang member trying to find his way back through the hood. It would be biggest *GTA* so far: more than two hundred hours of gameplay in a virtual world almost five times the size of *Vice City*. It wouldn't be only one town; it would cover an entire state.

Over inspired late nights in New York and Edinburgh, they mapped out their vision. They would have three cities in one game—a mock Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas. With vast distances to travel through hills and forests, over bridges and mountains, San Andreas would feel epic. Sam didn't merely want it set in the early 1990s, he wanted it to render 1992, the era of Rodney King and films such as *Colors*, *Boyz in the Hood*, and *Menace II Society*.

Gangs had always been central to the evolution of *GTA*—from Dundee to *The Warriors* and the real-life gang that Rockstar had become. For the guys, rendering the gangs of San Andreas fulfilled their ultimate dream. “We aren't just a bunch of marketing guys who think we can make a buck,” King said. “It was more about ‘That's fucking cool! Look at the way they're dressed! Look at their cars and look at what they go through every fucking day! Amazing!' That's us living out our fantasy of being able to engage in it with a video game. . . . We were all wannabes.” He went on, “But then, we were from England. What do we know?”

To boost their credibility and realism, they hired the best consultants they could find—Oriol and his Joker brand partner, the famed tattoo artist Mr. Cartoon. After recording pedestrian dialogue for the game, Fernandez was going with Oriol to talk with a friend who had been shot. They made their way through the neighborhood, down a narrow street, when suddenly a car came toward them from the other direction. There was nowhere for them to go. Fernandez's heart pounded. Then the car stopped, and a gangbanger got out and headed toward them. “Lower the window!” Oriol shouted to another guy in the car with them. “Lower the window!”

Fernandez panicked, imagining a gun fight. “Don't lower the window!” he said.

“Lower the window!” Oriol repeated.

“Don't lower the window!” Fernandez shouted back. As Fernandez feared for his life, the window came down, but this passerby wasn't looking for a fight. He was just a friend of Oriol's and wanted to say hi. Fernandez felt like an asshole. “What the fuck am I doing?” he thought. “I'm making a video game. I can look at movies and see this shit!”

“HEY! HEY! Get a grip! Calm down!” James Earl Cash pounded against the door of

the execution chamber, ignoring the disembodied voice that came from the speakers overheard. A young con sentenced to death, the last thing he remembered was being pinned down to a gurney and injected with a lethal cocktail. Now he was desperately trying to escape. Suddenly, the door cracked open with a blade of light. “You've had an unexpected reprieve,” the voice said. “Do exactly as I say, and I promise this will be over before the night is out.”

This was the opening scene of *Manhunt*, another Rockstar game in production in early 2003. *Manhunt* cast the player as Cash, a pawn in a sick game of his own. A twisted movie director had hired gangs to hunt and kill Cash, chronicling the chase with surveillance cameras for the ultimate snuff film. Now Cash had to use any means necessary—wires for strangling, glass shards for throat-slitting, bats for pummeling—to survive.

Unlike *GTA*, which was, at its core, a driving and action game, this fell under the genre of survival horror, popularized by the zombie franchise *Resident Evil*. Survival horror games thrived on suspense, the chilling feeling of being stalked down alleyways by murderous beasts. Yet once again, Rockstar had flipped the script, bringing games into a contemporary reality. The player wasn't only being hunted, he was hunting, too, sneaking around corners with a plastic bag to pull over an unsuspecting gang member's head.

There would be no zombie fantasy to relieve the tension of the violence. These victims were vividly human. The brutal ways in which they could be killed—the spray of the arteries when cut with a sickle, the bone-crunching snap of a twisted neck—were unheard of in the industry. If the politicians freaked out about the cartoonish spine-ripping move from *Mortal Kombat*, what would they make of this?

For Pope and some others at Rockstar, the grimness of the game evoked a starker reality of their own. Life around the loft was changing. A darkness drifted in the air. A sense of being like Cash, trapped with some all-powerful director calling the shots as they struggled to survive. Sam's joke of wearing EA Sports shirts to mock the corporate game machines didn't seem so funny anymore. “In a way, we were becoming that,” Pope later said, “a big nameless faceless machine that turns out these titles. You're just one cog in a huge corporation. . . . We were churning out *GTA*s as fast as we could.”

The tensions mounted the day they went from completing *Vice City* to starting *San Andreas* with no break. Promises of a party to celebrate *Vice City* came and went. Foreman worried that the company had descended into “constant crunch mode,” with days going into seventeen hours. He felt that they were working so hard, they never had time to enjoy their success. Pope began working so long, dreams blended with reality. He'd go back to have nightmares about blowing off people's limbs while

staring down a rifle scope.

One producer who had been there since 1999 thought the company was taking on "shades of Miramax," the legendary but volatile film company *Manhunt* became especially divisive. "There was almost a mutiny at the company over that game," as Rockstar producer Jeff Williams later blogged, "…there was no way to rationalize it. We were crossing a line." And the powers-that-be didn't take kindly to being told otherwise. "Every day, someone would say something they didn't like about a game," Pope recalled, "and they'd tell them, 'You're a fucking idiot.'"

It wasn't just only the underlings getting pawned, it seemed to Pope, it was one of the founders himself: King. As the person in charge of juggling the games and overseeing the day-to-day production, King carried a great deal of weight. Pope watched in dismay as King appeared to buckle from the constant stress.

Pope felt a chill. "If that could happen to Jamie," he thought, "it could happen to me." In confidence, he approached Fernandez, his best friend at the company and, like him, one of the closest guys to Sam. Fernandez had been entrenched in researching *San Andreas*. He had traveled from L.A. to Vegas, where he stealthily recorded the dialogue of players at gambling tables. As Pope poured out his frustrations to Fernandez, however, his friend didn't entirely see eye-to-eye.

For Fernandez, Sam was more bark without bite. He told Pope how much Sam's passion inspired him, how Sam gave him this feeling he could do anything. To Fernandez, the rampages were part of Sam's
overarching obsession with quality. "That's the only reason the games are so good," he once said. Anyone who got on Sam's case for his outbursts was missing the point. "Make great games, forget about the bullshit, and we'll triumph, that's his philosophy," Fernandez said. "It's the ideal way any company should be run."

Pope wouldn't listen. "When the novelty of working for a cool company in SoHo in a loft wears off, then it's all downhill from there," he said. "And then they keep you around with money or little trinkets." What was happening? he wondered. To their games? To Sam? Massively multiplayer games such as *World of Warcraft* were all the rage, and Pope was among those at the office who wanted Rockstar to take a shot at the genre. Yet whenever Pope brought it up, he just heard Sam mutter derisively about orcs and elves.

Pope had had enough. One day he stormed into Sam's office. His boss had taken up yoga, and Pope had sometimes seen him doing handstands in the back. Maybe Pope was overreacting. "I'm not happy here," Pope said.

"Why?" he recalled Sam replying.

"There's too much being asked of us. We were never given a break. It was one thing to go right into *Vice City*, but then we went straight into *San Andreas*."

“It's hard. We have to keep grinding. We're going to lose our edge if we don't keep this up.”

“You've kind of already lost touch.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You're not playing games anymore. You're off in your office making decisions.”

“I'm still involved! Who are you to tell me?”

“I'm not the only one who feels this way.”

SAM SAW a rubber band on the floor. Alone. Discarded. Coiled. And he just had to stop everything to pick it up. Shove it in his pocket like Mario collecting brightly colored coins. It was a habit that Fernandez had been observing for a while: Sam randomly picking up rubber bands. When Fernandez asked him about this, Sam told him it was just a good luck superstition. Fernandez took it as something else, an example of how granularly aware Sam was of the details around him—even if that obsession with detail had sometimes been lost on others.

But the passion was clearly paying off. Now thirty-two, he was living his Rockstar dreams. His games were bringing pleasure to millions of people around the world. Take-Two had $1 billion in revenues after *Vice City*, and they were only set for more.

He was proving the old skeptics wrong. “You go out here, and people were like ‘What are you talking about? How can you say games are cool?'” Sam recalled. “That whole sort of teenager in the bedroom with the bottle-top specs, that hung around the game industry neck like a fucking albatross.” Yet now, thanks in large part to Rockstar, games were growing up, along with their fans. “People now accept it is a new medium,” he said. “It's something that can be appreciated. It's not just something reserved for weirdos.”

It was all the more reason, then, that he seemed shocked to hear a rumor that Pope was quitting. Sam approached him and said, “I'm hearing you're going to leave.”

“Yeah, I'm really unhappy,” Pope said. But Pope wasn't going alone. He and Fernandez had decided to start their own company, along with some other employees on staff. They even had their own idea for a title, inspired by their time at Rockstar. Players would have to battle a cult leader similar to David Koresh. “Instead of carjacking,” Pope said, “it'll be mind jacking!” Their working title, *Whacko*. And the name of their start-up would be the biggest fuck-you of all to Rockstar: Cashmere Games.

Despite Fernandez's deep admiration for Sam, he felt bullish enough to think he

and Pope could replicate Rockstar's success on their own. Leaving the mentor and friend who inspired him so much wouldn't be easy. As Pope said, “They don't take you leaving kindly, they treat it like the mob, like you abandoned the family.” Fernandez felt his heart sink, his stomach twist, knowing there was no turning back. “My biggest regret is that Sam's such an influential guy,” Fernandez later said. “It's the worst part of leaving Rockstar. Maybe that's the decision you have to make.”

Sam seemed devastated by the news, so much so that he went to Fernandez's apartment to plead with him to stay. “I'm asking you one more time,” Sam told him, “are you leaving or staying?”

“I'm leaving,” Fernandez said.

Sam took one last look at him, then turned and walked away.

This game was over.

16

Grand Death Auto

WANTED LEVEL

The bullets came from nowhere, and there was plenty of nowhere in Newport, Tennessee. An hour east of Knoxville, the country town of 7,200 was little more than a pit stop on the way to nearby attractions such as Dolly Parton's Dollywood theme park and the Life of Christ Experience in 3-D. Like most people who make it to these parts, Aaron Hamel and his cousin Denise “Dee Dee” Deneau were just passing through. Quickly.

It was around 8 p.m. on June 25, 2003, and the sun was still shining at the end of what Hamel called “a perfect day.” The two were driving back to Knoxville in his red Toyota truck after hiking in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Hamel, a forty-five-year-old registered nurse and nature lover, had recently relocated from Ontario, dreaming of buying a log cabin in the woods. The previous day, he had gotten a callback from a juvenile detention facility where he hoped to work. “I think I could make a difference and help these kids,” he told his cousin during their hike.

Driving among the semis on Interstate 40, Hamel admired the rolling hillside. “Oh, Dee Dee,” he said, “look at the beautiful flowers—” As Deneau would later recall, Hamel didn't have time to finish the word before the window shattered. Blood and broken glass sprayed Deneau's lap. With blood pouring from Hamel's head, their truck sped out of control over the median into oncoming traffic and smashed into a guardrail.

Coming up behind them in a white Mazda west on I-40, a tourist from Roanoke, Virginia, nineteen-year-old Kim Bede, and her boyfriend Marc Hickman heard the crash. They assumed someone had blown out a tire. Another bullet proved them wrong. It pierced the passenger side of their car, shattering Bede's hip. Then the shots stopped, and Newport fell quiet again.

When the cops arrived, Hamel was dead. Bede was gushing blood, fragments of bullets in her spine. The woods under the faded billboards along the highway were shrouded in darkness. As word spread around the small town, investigators scoured

the brush with spotlights and heat-seeking equipment, looking for a trace of what they feared might be a replay of the Beltway snipers. “We don't know if it was road rage, a sniper, or what,” a deputy told reporters that night.

It didn't take long to find the answer. Lurking anxiously in the bushes was a lanky, quiet fifteen-year-old named William Buckner, with his short, hyperactive thirteen-year-old stepbrother, Josh. The two had been stepbrothers for only a brief while but had instantly bonded after growing up in unstable families. They had no prior records, had clean slates at school, and seemingly had no reason to have fired the deadly shots. Yet after breaking down in tears and confessing to the crime, the boys volunteered a reason of their own: *Grand Theft Auto III*.

During Will's deposition, he revealed that he had been playing the game at home. When asked whether he thought the game “had some impact on you related to this shooting,” Will said, “in some way, yes.”

“How so?”

“I think it gave us the idea in a way.”

After word of the *GTA* connection hit the press, the phone in the Buckner home rang. Donna, Will's mother, answered. “My name's Jack Thompson,” the caller said, “and there might be an explanation for why your boys did this.”

NEWS OF THE Buckner shootings had come at a busy time for Thompson. After filming his son on a sting buying *Vice City*, his obsession with *GTA* rivaled Sam's. Since launching his campaign against the game industry, Thompson had made more than fifty television appearances on all of the biggest shows, including seven visits to the *Today Show* alone.

As well as Sam played to the gamers, Thompson played to the emotions of the general public. No matter how much people believed in protecting the First Amendment, something inside them couldn't rule out the possibility that violent games might be harming their kids. Despite scientists and researchers debating what, if any, impact games had on aggression, Thompson cited studies that effectively stoked fears. “There has been a wealth of research to show that children's brains process these video games in a different way from adults',” he said. “They cannot differentiate between fantasy and reality, so they play these games and then think if they do the same thing in reality, it's okay, there will be no consequences.”

His campaign was working. Across the world, *GTA* was being linked with more crimes. In Oakland, a gang called the Nut Cases made waves for allegedly emulating the game. According to a story in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “They got high and played video games during the day, the young men later told police. Their favorite

was one called *Grand Theft Auto III*, in which players win points for committing violent crimes. When darkness fell, they told investigators, they did it for real on the streets of Oakland."

Thompson cited the recent case of Dustin Lynch, a fifteen-year-old boy from his home state of Ohio who had stabbed and bludgeoned a girl to death just weeks after *Vice City*'s release. Thompson learned that Lynch had been playing *GTA* prior to the killings, and he convinced the girl's father to sue Rockstar. "We're not arguing the game was the sole cause of [the] murder," Thompson said. "The game had something to do with it."

Though the threat of a lawsuit fizzled, Thompson spread his gospel from newspapers to an appearance on *Good Morning America.* It was an effective strategy: filing a suit was enough to get him press—perhaps his most effective weapon at shaping the public's perception of video games. Whether he won or lost a case or saw it dismissed didn't matter. With Rockstar and the game industry all but silent, he waged his war virtually unopposed.

"I'm a father and a Christian and a lawyer, and I love the kind of world I grew up in during the fifties, where we shot baskets, not people," Thompson told *Philadelphia Weekly.* "But I'm not trying to take away the constitutional right of adults to view or consume this material no matter how objectionable I might find it personally. I'm trying to stop them from marketing this filth to minors."

The more Thompson battled, the more difficult the struggle became for Lowenstein, the game industry's spokesperson. Despite *GTA*'s "M For Mature" rating, a recent survey by the Gallup Organization of 517 teens, ages thirteen to seventeen, found that 60 percent had played a *GTA* game. Still reeling from the debate over Columbine and the threat of federal legislation over the marketing of violent games, Lowenstein tried to steer away from Thompson's rhetoric. "I have no doubt that Mr. Thompson is quite passionate and committed to his cause," he said. "We're just as committed to ours."

In addition to standing by the industry's rating system, he cited a recent FTC study that found that parents were the ones purchasing games, including M-rated ones, for kids more than 80 percent of the time. Lowenstein urged parents to pay more attention to what they were giving their kids. "If a twelve-year-old has *Grand Theft Auto*," he said, "chances are he got it from Mom and Dad."

Lowenstein felt bolstered by a recent ruling by the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled against St. Louis County's attempt to ban violent game sales to kids. "If the First Amendment is versatile enough to shield [the] painting of Jackson Pollock, music of Arnold Schoenberg, or Jabberwocky verse of Lewis Carroll," the court ruled, ". . . we see no reason why the pictures, graphic design, concept art,

sounds, music, stories and narrative present in video games are not entitled to similar protection."

Yet this wasn't swaying the skeptics. In April 2003, the governor of Washington proposed to ban the sale of violent games to minors. Lowenstein felt increasingly frustrated with his meetings on the Hill and how routinely politicians would sacrifice the First Amendment in the name of protecting children. "I know this is a bad bill," he recalled being told by one governor, "but I have to sign it."

Where were the game developers to fight back? "Rockstar and all the other ones had their heads in the sand," Lowenstein said. The developers suffered from a "victim mentality for being singled out," he went on. "The problem was the industry wasn't willing to understand the fundamental instincts of parents to care about their children."

While many gamers shrugged Thompson off as a clown, they failed to realize the extent to which he was influencing the public conversation on video games. "He used media effectively, locally and nationally, and inspired politicians to take up his cause and push legislative remedies that we're fighting," Lowenstein later said. "To give the devil his due, if there was no Jack Thompson, there would have been far fewer bills we'd be dealing with."

Thompson had just begun. On October 20, 2003, he filed a $246 million lawsuit on behalf of the Buckners' victims against Sony Computer Entertainment America, for marketing *GTA III*; Wal-Mart, for selling it; and Rockstar, for creating and publishing it. "If they're going to continue to market adult-rated games to children with these horrific consequences," Thompson told the press, "then we're going to take their blood money from them and send a message to their boards that they have to stop this practice or there will be other suits on behalf of other people killed by these games."

"I DIDN'T REALIZE the highway was this close," said Wayne Buckner, Josh's father and Will's stepfather, as he walked to the spot on the hill where his boys had shot at the cars that night. He was surrounded by trees and tall brush as the cars and the trucks sped by on I-40 below. Wayne was a tall, gray-haired fifty-six-year-old in a golf-course vest, blue jeans, and a baseball cap. "I saw this area in the police diagram," he said, making his way tentatively around the brush, "but this is the first time I've come here. My wife doesn't want to know where this spot is."

In his mind's eye, Wayne had pictured the boys standing much farther away from the road, so far that their bullets would not have easily hit the cars. As we looked down at the highway, though, we were close enough to make out the passengers

behind the windows. Wayne's eyes welled up. “It's pretty sad,” he said. The path in the weeds that Will and Josh cut with machetes was still discernible. A deflated inner tube they once used to ride down the nearby creek rested against a tree. Pigeons roosted in a rickety liquor billboard a dozen feet away.

It was the birds that first took the blame after the boys were caught that night. Josh told Wayne that they had been shooting at the pigeons and must have accidentally hit the cars in the process. “He said the birds always fly off this billboard toward the interstate,” recalled Wayne. When the birds suddenly abandoned their roost above us, however, not a single one flew toward the road. “I really wanted to believe him,” Wayne said.

The Buckners lived in a split-level brick house on the side of a golf course. The golf cart Will and Josh used to ride sat near the garage, where a basketball net hung. In the backyard, the yapping dogs now had free rein in the impressive treehouse Wayne had built for the kids. Inside the living room, Wayne's wife, Donna, lit a cigarette. A petite and pretty thirty-seven-year-old in a powder-blue sweater, she had dropped to a painfully thin eighty-five pounds since the incident. “I just can't get my appetite back,” she said. Wayne excused himself to hit the greens. “He plays too much golf,” Donna grumbled quietly.

Since the shooting, Wayne and Donna had struggled to survive and make sense of this most senseless of acts. Though their sons were found to be reckless, not murderous, that hadn't made their soul-searching any easier. Ultimately, that search led them to one answer: *Grand Theft Auto III*. “Will and Josh wouldn't have done this if they hadn't been playing that game,” Donna said, as she showed a visitor family photos. “They aren't serial killers. They're good boys.”

Though taken during better times, the shots didn't exactly convey adolescent bliss. In one, Josh and Will sat expressionlessly on either end of a black futon facing a giant television screen. Josh, a small, wiry kid with uneven sandy blond bangs and a spotty complexion, leaned against an 8-ball pillow in a yellow Fort Lauderdale Surf Sport T-shirt. The stoic look on Will—who was wearing baggy tan shorts, a yellow Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned over a black Nike tee, a dog-tag necklace, and a half-dozen bracelets on his arm—revealed, if anything, a desire for his mother to hurry up and shoot already.

In a picture taken on a family trip to the beach, Will stood awkwardly in a blue T-shirt and long blue shorts, bony white arms crossed around his chest, next to Josh in a bright red shirt, arms stiffly down, staring forward; Wayne and Donna were clear across the frame. No one was touching. “I don't see how we could ever be a family again after this,” Donna said, as she sparked another cigarette. When asked how much they felt like a family before the shooting, she exhaled and said, “Somewhat.”

Will and Josh had both had unstable lives from the start. Born to Donna several weeks premature, Will suffered a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of one month, leaving him slightly brain damaged. Though able to function normally, he was slower than average, with an IQ of 91. His dad, a factory worker, had little patience for the boy, said Donna, and even less after she divorced him, when Will was three years old, for fooling around with her friend. “He never wanted anything to do with him,” she recalled. “Will begged him to come over and visit, but he just wrote him off.” Years later, when she took Will to see his father on his deathbed, he wouldn't acknowledge his son. “Will always thought his father hated him,” she said.

Donna's second marriage was equally difficult for Will. When Will got up at night to pee, her husband would berate the boy for waking him. Will began to wet the bed. Donna soon divorced again. Though Will loved the outdoors, he became more shy and reclusive at school. “He was something of a loner,” Donna said. Yet he rarely acted out. The worst thing he ever did was to write the word *Fuck* on the kitchen floor with a felt-tip marker. When Donna met Wayne and his young son, Joshua, in 2002, while working as a bookkeeper at the club where Wayne golfed, Will was ready for a friend.

So was Josh. Though outgoing and energetic, Josh had had his share of trauma. He was born to a mother, Sandy, who suffered from congestive heart failure. Often sick, she was unable to provide readily for Josh, retreating to her books and her soap operas while her son fended for himself. She died when he was eleven.

As the hospital bigwig and an active officer of the chamber of commerce, his father, Wayne, kept busy and had little time for Josh, who was literally bouncing off the walls. In the first grade, Josh was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and began a lifetime of medication. The drugs made him sluggish but seemed to help to some degree. Josh was warm with friends and family, giving big and frequent hugs. Popular with the girls, he was the only boy invited to his friend's slumber party. “He was like a little puppy dog,” his friend's mother recalled.

Still, Wayne had the impression that Josh was suffering. “After his mother died,” Wayne said, “he was on the run all time.” Josh never let on how he was feeling, as he stayed up late playing video games or listening to his Eminem CDs. “He keeps it all inside,” Wayne said. “Anything bad happens, he laughs it off.”

Late one night when Josh was around eleven, Wayne heard a strange sound coming from his son's room. He walked down the hall and opened the door. The room was painted bold yellow and plastered with posters of sports cars. A Lava Lite sat near a small desk, a student Bible, an enormous boom box. A big black sign read Go Away. Wayne half-expected to find that Josh had pulled the blankets from his bed and was sleeping on the floor, a habit his son had taken to without explanation. Tonight, Josh

wasn't there. He was curled up in his closet, crying. He said he wanted his mommy.

When Donna and Wayne married, it seemed as if Will's and Josh's hard times might finally be behind them. The boys hit it off so well that bringing the two families together was easy. They both dug 50 Cent and Tony Hawk and the PlayStation 2. After the wedding, Will and Donna moved to Newport to live in Wayne's house. Buoyed by the prospect of good times, the parents transformed the basement into the kids' ultimate playpen: a giant screen TV, a foosball table, posters and pennants of race cars, their very own microwave. Will slept here on a futon under a blanket with the words *Hot Hot Hot* written in flames.

Video games were among their favorite distractions. Paul Buckner, Josh's nineteen-year-old stepbrother from Wayne's previous marriage, gave Josh *GTA III* for his birthday. “When I came downstairs, I'd just see them crashing in their cars,” said Donna. “I didn't know you could kill prostitutes and stuff like that.” The violence she witnessed, though, was enough to give her pause. “You realize this is virtual reality, not reality,” she told the boys. They nodded and returned to their game.

Though they had a great time together, things were more difficult, particularly for Will, when they were apart. Because Will was older, he had to go to a different school than Josh and manage on his own. After classes, Will's guidance counselor, Karen Smith, often saw him outside her window, wandering the parking lot. “He'd be off by himself,” she said. “He was a bit of a loner,” said his driver's education teacher. “He only had a couple of friends. I told him to watch out, because there were other kids here who were taking advantage of him.” Girls would ask Will for money, and wanting to be liked, he'd hand over the cash, never to be repaid.

After school and on weekends, Will fell eagerly under Josh's wing. Although Josh was younger and smaller, he was the town veteran and eagerly assumed the role of Batman to Will's older and taller Robin. And Will, somewhat slow by nature, needed all the help he could get. “Will is a little more down-the-stream relaxed,” said one friend, “and Josh is the hard-core whitewater rafter.”

To prove his loyalty, Josh steered Will into the arms of his ex-girlfriend, Amanda Hetherington—a smart and iconoclastic thirteen-year-old with long dark hair and blue paw prints painted on her fingernails. Amanda wrote moody poetry, listened to Marilyn Manson, and was known as one of Newport's only female skaters. She was a cheerleader but the sort that would be portrayed by Christina Ricci. She hated it. “It's just something to do,” she said.

On weekend nights while watching horror movies, Will and Amanda bonded over their disdain of Newport. “There's nothing to do here but stare at the dots in the ceiling,” Amanda said. Although different, they shared a feeling of being outcasts

among the ruling kids of Cocke County. “The rednecks have power over everyone here,” Amanda lamented. She thought it was cute that Will refused to wear a jacket emblazoned with the name of the school's embarrassing mascots, the fighting cocks.

Back at home, it began to seem that Josh was leading Will into more than just a new relationship. He was leading him into trouble. One day, out by the creek behind their house, the two went out shooting with their pellet rifles. Wayne, in one of his father-son bonding excursions, had taken the boys out target shooting with his .22 rifle. They spent the day shooting at cans floating down the water. This time, Josh struggled to aim at his target. When he fired, a pellet flew at a rock, bounced back, and lodged in Will's neck.

Yet it didn't deter them. One day later, about six months before the fatal shootings, Wayne caught the boys sitting in his bedroom, cleaning his .22 rifles that they had taken from his closet. “You do not ever, ever do that,” admonished Wayne, who seldom raised his voice with the boys. He grounded them for a week and dead-bolted his bedroom door whenever he left the house. When he was home, it would remain unlocked.

WHEN YOU'RE A teenager without a driver's license, it doesn't take long to get bored. In Newport, you get bored hanging out in the parking lot at Wal-Mart, waiting for the cops to tell you to beat it. You get bored cheering the Fighting Cocks, watching *American Idol*, and swilling soda at the tiny movie theater. You even get bored playing *GTA III*, which is what happened to Will and Josh that night in June.

The summer of 2003 had started on a bad note. Josh failed seventh grade. It turned out that he had not been turning in his homework during the school year. Wayne and Donna went in for a meeting with the teachers and Josh, but he offered no explanation. As Wayne recalled, “He just said he didn't feel like turning it in.” While Amanda, Will, Sarah, and his friends would be moving on, he would be staying behind. Despite the recent breakdown over his mother, Josh was back to his ways of denial. “He just laughed everything off again,” Wayne said.

Will, on the other hand, had every reason to look up. After months of biding his time, he was one month from turning sixteen and getting his driver's license. He and his mother, Donna, had even made plans to get him his own car, a used Mustang that he couldn't wait to get his hands on. With his own wheels, the invisible walls of Newport would finally come down. He could pick up Amanda himself, take her to the skateboard park, maybe even cruise up to Dollywood to soak in the Big Bear Plunge rafting ride—but he would never get the chance.

After a few rounds of *GTA III* that night, Josh felt the boredom set in. “Hey,” he

said to Will, “let's go shoot at the sides of trailer rigs for real.” It was doable. Wayne and Donna were home, which meant their bedroom door would be unlocked. They went upstairs. Their parents were watching TV. They asked if they could go ride the four-wheeler. Donna looked outside. The sun was still out. “OK,” she said, “but you gotta be in before dark.”

The four-wheeler didn't go anywhere that night. Will and Josh sneaked the .22 rifles from their parents' bedroom closet and hit the trail across the street. It's a steep incline down to the creek. They passed the rickety pump house, making their way down the path they'd cut with Wayne long before. Up the trail, they could hear the semis speeding down the highway. Pigeons fluttered from behind a faded billboard. The boys took a few shots at the birds but, despite the short distance, missed. The trailer rigs would be easier to hit.

They crossed a rickety wooden fence that separated the path from the hill overlooking I-40. Will faced west down the road. Josh ran a short distance along the hill and faced east. They didn't say anything to each other. They just started firing. Will thought that if he actually hit a rig, the bullets would simply bounce off the side. After more than twenty shots, though, they hadn't hit anything. Yet Will had a few bullets remaining, and he fired them away. Then they heard the rubber squeal.

After they saw the red truck careen over the median, they ran, assuming they had accidentally shot out a tire. Wayne and Donna were still watching TV when they came back home, and the boys quickly put the guns back in the closet. Their minds and hearts were racing. From the house, Will and Josh could hear the police sirens. When they asked whether they could go back outside and hit golf balls, Wayne and Donna didn't think anything of it.

An hour later, Will and Josh were nowhere to be found. Calls to the walkie-talkies they carried went unanswered. Wayne got in the truck and drove up the road. Donna grabbed a flashlight and hit the trail, fearing they had some kind of accident. Desperate, she called 911 and reported the boys missing. The cops called her back. “We have your boys right here,” she was told.

While investigating the scene of the shooting, a cop saw Will and Josh standing up on the hillside. “It's not a place you expect to find kids around,” said the district attorney who would prosecute the case. “The officer began talking to them and getting unusual answers.”

When the boys were released to their parents, they said they had been out shooting pigeons with their pellet guns, and when the pigeons flew over the highway, they might have accidentally shot the cars. But their parents knew enough to realize that a pellet couldn't do that kind of damage. Two days later, during questioning in a polygraph test, Will and Josh broke down and confessed. “They said they'd gotten

the idea from playing the game," the district attorney said. The Buckners were ordered to turn over to the police their guns and their copy of *GTA III*.

As the sensational news of the video-game killers hit, the national media descended on the small town. Josh would be the youngest person tried for homicide in Newport history. In written statements, the boys expressed remorse. "I will always hate myself for what happened," Will wrote. "If I could give my life to bring him back, I gladly would. I know what I did was stupid. I didn't think anyone would get hurt. . . . I am so so sorry, and no matter how long the judge gives me, it won't be long enough because I will still hate myself." Josh wrote, "I am sorry. . . . I hate that it happened. . . . I know what it is like to lose someone because I lost my mother when I was eleven. And it has been hard without her."

On the day that the boys were being led into the courthouse, Amanda rushed down to get a glimpse. Will saw her long dark hair in the crowd and blew her a kiss as the cameras rolled. She knew they would never want to hurt anyone, but rejected the idea that the game was to blame. "I don't think it would persuade them to do this," she said. "I mean, my aunt plays that game."

Amanda has been writing poems for Will. "Hold my hand," one read, "make me stop crying. By myself I feel like dying. I can be strong if you stay. We can be together, we'll be okay. So here we are, together at last. We'll be okay, forget the past." Yet she hadn't brought herself to ask Will and Josh why they fired the shots that night. "I don't want to know the reasons," she said, picking at her food. "It freaks me out."

THE SUN WAS coming down over the barbed-wire fence surrounding Will and Josh's gloomy new home, a juvenile detention center outside Newport. Behind the two-story chain-link fence that encircles the brick buildings, a stocky guard slowly led a group of prisoners across the pavement. Two rows of tough kids—murderers, sex offenders, drug dealers—walked single-file behind him.

Outside the fence in the parking lot, Wayne and Donna were finishing their last cigarettes before walking inside to see their sons. In Tennessee, kids under the age of sixteen cannot be tried as adults, and they must be tried before a judge, not a jury—which meant that a determination in the Buckner case came quickly. After listening to the evidence and evaluating a psychological assessment of the boys, the judge determined that the boys had done something extraordinarily stupid but without murderous intent.

Will and Josh pleaded guilty to reckless homicide, reckless endangerment, and aggravated assault and were sentenced to a nearby juvenile detention center.

According to state law, they could be detained only until the age of nineteen. With good behavior, however, they could get out much sooner—as soon as one year. Deneau called the sentence a “slap on the wrist.”

Despite many attempts, lawsuits against the makers of violent games seldom get very far, and the Buckner case proved no different. After Thompson filed his suit in a Tennessee state court, the defendants moved it to federal court. The victims' attorneys responded by dismissing the suit altogether. Buoyed by the press and the attention, however, Thompson felt even more resolved in his mission. “The goal is to destroy the video game industry,” he said. The damage had been done. After a dozen unexplained shootings later took place on an interstate highway in Columbus, Ohio, a suburban Wal-Mart pulled *Vice City* from the shelves—just in case.

For the Buckners, however, it was too late. Donna and Wayne had been coming promptly for each allotted visit—one hour every day except weekends and Fridays. Over on the basketball court behind the fence, we could see Josh braving the cold to squeeze out a few more minutes of hoops. Despite the chill, he was wearing only a green short-sleeved T-shirt and long baggy black shorts. As a couple of taller kids hogged the ball, he lagged behind them, quickly rubbing some heat along his arms with his hands before they turned around. “I worry about him in there,” said Donna. “He's a lot smaller than the other kids.”

Life inside the juvenile center was hard for the boys from the start. Will and Josh were assigned to separate 6-by-8-foot cells. They spent the days taking classes. Lights out by 6:30 p.m. Their parents couldn't get them anything to help them fill the time. When they requested Bibles for the boys, they were told no; kids use pages of the Bibles to roll smokes.

Josh soon stopped taking his ADHD medication because the other kids were stealing it from him. Josh, however, had been known to willfully decline the medication in the past. With his hyperactivity unleashed, he started getting into trouble, talking out of place, and showing up at visitors meetings without wearing his requisite uniform. One day he was caught piercing the tongues of a bunch of other kids with a thumbtack.

Will soon stopped playing follower to Josh's leader. Unlike Josh, Will had few infractions. He began to do well in school and was on the fast track to getting out. Will was transferred to a much less punitive group home facility. Josh soon began shaping up his act and was transferred to a separate group home. With good behavior, the two could eventually take the next step and be released for good. If and when that happens, however, the stepbrothers would not be sharing a house again.

According to Donna, “The judge doesn't want the boys back together.” When Will walks out the door, she said, she plans to move with him out of state, leaving Wayne

and Josh behind. It doesn't seem as though there will be love lost between the boys. “Josh is going to pay for some of the things he's done in here,” Will told his mother without elaboration.

That was not all that had changed in Will's mind, Wayne and Donna learned after they passed through the metal detectors to see him that cold February night. With guards standing watch, Will sat at the table in his uniform, exchanging greetings with his parents. After a bit of small talk, Donna looked him in the eye. “You've had a lot of time to think about what you've done,” she said. “Do you still think it was a video game that made you do this?”

Will sat up and became emphatic. “It wasn't the game that made us think to go out and do this,” he said bitterly. “We wanted to do this. The idea was to act out the game. But the game didn't reprogram our minds.” When asked to elaborate, he just repeated that phrase: “The game didn't reprogram our minds.” He said he wished the lawsuit against the game's makers had never happened in the first place. With Will's time up, the guards came and took him away.

As Donna lit a cigarette outside, she said she was surprised that Will was backpedaling from blaming the game. Yet she also wondered whether he wasn't backing off for another reason: “Because the kids inside there are fans of *Grand Theft Auto*, and they told him if he gets the game pulled from the shelf, they're going to beat him up.”

17

Boyz in the Hood

WANTED LEVEL

Jamie King felt the AK-47 burning in his hand with every shot he fired. Tall and lanky with longish brown hair, he crouched in a gun range in Las Vegas, firing off weapons during a research trip he'd organized for *GTA*: *San Andreas*. The idea of this one, ostensibly, was to take artists and programmers from Rockstar North to Vegas—which would be simulated and satirized as the city of Las Venturas in the game. Scots had roamed the neon streets with digital cameras and audio recorders, chronicling the garish steakhouses and the gaudy nightclubs for inspiration.

Coming to Vegas was also an excuse to shoot some really big guns. Rows of pasty coders stood beside King, nervously handling their weapons. Most hadn't handled guns before. In fact, some even refused to come inside—for fear of getting Dick Cheneyed in the glasses. King told the guys to listen closely to every shot, feel the recoil of the weapons in their hands. This was the level of authenticity he and the other cofounders of Rockstar demanded.

As King unloaded the gun, he needed to blow off steam. Despite clawing their way to the top of the $10 billion video game industry, Rockstar, privately and publicly, was under fire. Behind closed doors, the company was still reeling from the shocking departure—or betrayal, as Sam might have it—of Sam's key men, Pope and Fernandez, who, even worse, took a handful of other Rockstars with them. When word came that Pope and Fernandez were calling their new start-up Cashmere Games, it only mocked Rockstar more.

The pressure grew on King. The company now had five Rockstar-branded studios around the world churning out games. As production coordinator, King was constantly traveling between them, trying to keep the process going. Yet everywhere he landed, he'd hear complaints and moans. Then he'd be dealing with pressure in New York, racing to complete games at the eleventh hour or hopping into Brant's Porsche to run urgent missions for the team.

In a way, King thrived on the drama, but the work was whittling away at his soul.

Still, he had plenty of other problems to manage. While internal strife grew, the fallout of the media frenzy over *GTA* continued to grow. On any given day, the Rockstars would open an e-mail that read something like, “You should be taken out into the streets and stoned to death.”

The Rockstars knew who was chiefly responsible for stirring up the storm: Thompson. His name echoed down the halls like exclamation points in a comic book word balloon. Every day it seemed as if a new crime was being blamed on the game. Eibeler fumed. “You realized it made no sense at all, and it was a pretty tough stretch,” he recalled, “but if you were sued, you had to deal with it.”

Any time Thompson spoke out, it seemed, dozens of in-bound calls came to the Rockstar publicist's phone. The company's PR consultant, put out the flames as best he could. “Be responsible, don't engage,” was his mantra. On the calls, he stuck to his script. “We're rated,” he told the press, “we don't support selling the game to anyone under eighteen.”

Eibeler worked the political lobby behind the scenes. Take-Two sponsored a baseball game between Republicans and Democrats in Washington, D.C. Eibeler made the rounds on the Hill and encountered the same pattern. Whenever he walked into a congressman's office to meet with the chief of staff, there would be a young guy at the door. “Take-Two! You guys are rock stars! *Grand Theft Auto* is the greatest game ever made!” Then he'd get back to the chief, who would say, “We gotta be careful about the effect on children.”

“The average age of a gamer is twenty years old,” Eibeler always replied, to no avail. He went back to NYC, only to see the same politicians grandstanding against video games on TV. “They'd all be receptive” at first, he said, “but in reality all politicians love a sound bite.”

As Eibeler fought on the frontlines, Rockstar's founders privately reeled over Thompson's campaign against them. Here they were in a country teeming with protests over the war in Iraq, and people were getting up in arms about a video game? “It's weird that every day someone was speaking out against you,” King later said of Thompson. “Thankfully, a lot of what he said was ridiculous.”

King believed that their games were cathartic. “We're human beings,” he said. “We're the only species on the planet that commits genocide on our own race. We are barbaric. We are warring nations.” Rather than “suppress it and then have outbursts that are catastrophic, put it in the living room, and allow you to engage in it . . . in a video game exercise, those feelings of frustration and anger. See it for what it is, laugh about it, smile and have fun. Versus ‘I don't have an outlet I don't have a video game I don't have a book, I don't have a film I don't have anyone to talk to, I'm feeling alone, I'm getting trapped, and I'm building up, building up so I

express them through some extreme fashion.' For whatever reason we often as human beings don't like to confront things that are uncomfortable."

Yet they also wondered, What if Thompson was right? What if the games were having some kind of effect? They had made a game casting players as bad guys, and now they were being painted as bad guys themselves. "Are we bad people?" King once asked the others. "Are we wrong?" Then, after a beat, he said, "Fuck that. This is our lives!"

DAYCARE CENTER pedophiles. Travel club scam artists. Shady tow truck companies. Newscaster Arnold Diaz had exposed them all in his running "Shame on You" feature on the local CBS-2 news show in New York. On November 6, 2003, he inducted his first video game maker into the hall of shame: Sam Houser. "While much of *Vice City*'s violence is random and indiscriminate," Diaz said, "'Shame on You' found as you get deeper into the game, it takes an ugly, racist twist. Players are instructed to exterminate an entire ethnic group!" With that, he cut to a *GTA* gamer, who said that "My mission in the game is to kill the Haitians."

"That's right, 'kill the Haitians,'" Diaz said. Though *Vice City* had been out for more than a year, the media was still looking for new ways to exploit the controversy, and Diaz had seemingly happened on a fresh new shocker. "Just read the game's dialogue," he said, quoting from the game script. "'I hate these Haitians. We'll take them out, we'll take these Haitians down."

It was true, sort of. The words were spoken by Umberto Robina, the Cuban kingpin in *Vice City*, in a cut-scene preceding the twentieth mission in the game, "Cannon Fodder." As in every *GTA* game since *GTA* 2, *Vice City* depicted wars between rival —and stereotypical—gangs: rednecks, metalheads, bikers, and, yes, ethnic groups such as Cubans and Haitians and Italians, too. Robina was sending the player, Tommy Vercetti, on a mission to take a crew of armed Cubans into the Haitian gang's enclave—and attack. But when Umberto said, "Take my boys over there, and then we'll take these Haitians down!" he wasn't talking about taking *all* Haitians down, he meant only the drug-dealing gang.

Yet what was clear to Rockstar and its fans was lost in the ratings war of the evening news. "Why is Rockstar Games, the maker of '*Grand Theft Auto*: *Vice City*,' using the killing of Haitians as entertainment?" Diaz asked his viewers. "The company is based right here in New York City. Its president, Sam Houser, is ranked as one of the entertainment industry's most powerful people. But he's hiding, refusing to speak with us at all, refusing to even acknowledge the community's concerns about the game. . . . So into the CBS 2 'Hall of Shame' we induct Rockstar

Games and its president, Sam Houser, for cashing in on racism and violence."

Within days, the Haitian Centers Council and Haitian Americans for Human Rights put out a press release saying that Rockstar and Take-Two "advocate the killing of Haitians as entertainment. . . . Players are instructed to kill all Haitians, who, in the video game, are stereotyped as thugs, thieves and drug dealers." Politicians warned of people emulating the game's violence in real life. On November 25, 2003, Haitian American protesters stormed City Hall. "We believe that it was the purposeful intent of Rockstar Games Inc. to create a product that was controversial in order to increase sales," said the group's leader, who called for an international boycott of the game.

Powerful people were listening. Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was reported to have been talking with U.S. authorities about the matter because, as his government spokesperson said, "This racist game is psychologically extremely dangerous and is an incitement to genocide."

Once again, this game that had intended to satirize America instead struck a nerve. It didn't matter what was or wasn't in the game because the controversies weren't really about the game at all. They were about the fears—first violence and now racism—that the games unleashed, and Rockstar had no choice but to respond.

"We empathize with the concerns of the Haitian community, and we are giving serious consideration to them," a Take-Two spokesperson said in a statement. "There was no intention to offend any ethnic group." He compared the rivalries in *Vice City* to *West Side Story*, but the press wasn't buying it. As the Haitian storm grew, it only swept more of Rockstar's battles into the public eye, including Thompson's $246 million suit from the Tennessee shootings. U.S. senator Carl Andrews, a New York Democrat, proposed a bill banning the game. From Boston to Florida, more rallies waged.

During a December visit to a Haitian church in East Flatbush, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg told the crowd that he'd sent a letter to Rockstar condemning the game. "It's disgraceful, it's vulgar, it's offensive," Bloomberg said of *Vice City.* He promised "to do everything we possibly can" to have the "kill the Haitians" line removed. "This type of hate has no place in our city, and as a mayor I will not tolerate it."

Bloomberg delivered. Two days later, Rockstar put out an apology to the Haitian groups. "It was not our intention to target or offend any group or persons or to incite hatred or violence against such groups or persons," the statement read. For a secretive company that rarely, if ever, spoke out about its own controversies, the statement was revealing and significant. In rather patronizing tones, it showed how desperately the cofounders wanted to school the haters. It also demonstrated their

fondness for blaming the media for their problems.

“Contrary to what some may believe,” the statement read, “it must be recognized that videogames have evolved as an adult medium, not unlike literature, movies and music. The fact that the game is popular does not mean that it will encourage players to act out hatred or violence against any group or persons in the ‘real world.'. . . We believe that recent media coverage has taken certain statements made in the game out of context, and has blown it out of proportion by mischaracterizing the nature of the game play, as well as the actual portrayal of persons and groups in the game.

“As with literature, movies, music and other forms of entertainment, we have strived to create a videogame experience with a certain degree of realism, which we believe is our right. Nevertheless, we are aware of the hurt and anger in the Haitian community and have listened to the community's objections to certain statements made in the game.”

Rockstar promised to remove the controversial kill-the-Haitians line from all future versions of the game, but protesters said they wouldn't rest until all 10.5 million copies of the game had been pulled from the shelves. To show their resolve, they rallied outside Blockbuster and Wal-Mart stores around the country. On December 15 at 10 a.m., a hundred of them gathered outside the offices of Rockstar Games, chanting, “They say kill us! We say fight back. Rockstar, racist!” When a reporter asked a protester why she would come here on such a wintry day, she said, “I'm outraged against Rockstar for stepping over Haitians to make money. I don't feel the cold.”

WHILE THE HAITIAN controversy raged, little did the outside world know that Rockstar was already probing deeper into America's racial tensions with the next *GTA*, *San Andreas*. The plan had been hatched late one night early in the brainstorming sessions as Sam and King talked in the game-testing area. They were making a game about California in the nineties, about gangs, so casting the main character seemed like a no-brainer. “We should have a black lead,” King said. “That would be cool.”

In the game industry, however, this wasn't cool yet at all. Other than sports titles, games were still like music videos in the early eighties, bereft of African American leads. Sam saw the chance to innovate once again by breaking down the color barrier, too. “It was something of a risk,” Sam later recalled. “It was certainly left field for the industry at that time, but, you know, I'm proud to do things like that, and anyone who has a problem with that, we don't want you buying the game anyway, mate, quite frankly.”

San Andreas would follow the story of Carl “CJ” Johnson, a gang kid who fled Los Santos, their fictional Los Angeles, after the drugs and the shootings became too much for him. Yet as with the other *GTA*s, fate would draw him back. When CJ learns that his beloved mother has died as an innocent victim of gang warfare, he comes back to his old neighborhood for her funeral and for vengeance. CJ's odyssey will ultimately lead him around the state of San Andreas, taking on the gangs.

Compared to the more raucous thrills of the earlier *GTA*s, CJ's conflicts and struggles would bring a new depth and complexity to the franchise and the game industry. *San Andreas* would still be satiric, but Sam, Dan, and the rest were dead serious about the awful world of gang consequences they were portraying. For added authenticity, they continued the street research that Fernandez had begun in L.A. before he quit. Khonsari flew out to L.A. to hook back up with Mr. Cartoon and Esteban and start casting the game. He cruised South Central, snapping photos of barbershops, houses, and hangouts to use in-game.

One day, he set himself in the Second Hand studio owned by Dr. Dre to begin casting the game. Because of their success, Rockstar was more interested in discovering new talent than on relying on celebrity voice-overs. Gang members and amateur rappers streamed in, begging to be in *GTA.* “Anything you can do to get me a role,” one told Khonsari. “I don't care if it's a big role, I just want to be in it!” As one of the applicants brazenly puffed on a joint, a grin spread across Khonsari's face. *GTA* had always been about authenticity, but it had never felt as real as this.

Despite their efforts, though, the fact that *San Andreas* represented a white British take on L.A. gang culture seeped through. Khonsari sat at his desk in L.A., as a gang member got stuck on a word in Dan's script. “‘Rubbish?'” The extra said, “What the fuck is this? I'd never say ‘rubbish!'” To de-Brit the script, Rockstar hired DJ Pooh, the screenwriter of the Ice Cube film *Friday*, as cowriter.

As work proceeded, however, one Rockstar wasn't taking too kindly to the game. He'd been at the company since 1999, an original 575er, and had seen the changes and stresses bearing down on the team. Compared to the humor of *GTA2*, *GTA III*, and *Vice City*, he thought Rockstar had entered a gloomer era. He'd grown tired of what he felt were Rockstar's “exploitative” games—none more so than *Manhunt.* “There's a difference between violence and gratuitous violence,” he said.

He also had an objection that was even more personal: the African American protagonist and tone of *San Andreas.* He had grown up a white guy listening to rap, as Sam had. Yet now he had a black wife and was living in a black part of New York where people were shooting one another in the streets. “I have a problem with the portrayal of African Americans in the game,” he later said. So he quit.

He wasn't the only one at the company with such concerns. Though Eibeler was

impressed by the scope of the game, he worried that the black lead could be problematic, and he didn't want a repeat of the *Vice City* furor over the Haitians. To avoid problems, he suggested that they bring Lowenstein up to get an early peek at the game.

It wasn't common for the head of the Entertainment Software Association (renamed recently from the IDSA) to check up on every new video game, but with the controversy surrounding the franchise, he wasn't taking any chances on the new *GTA.* On one hand, the games had brought in money and acclaim for the industry, but at the cost of fueling the culture war over the medium. Lately, Lowenstein felt that he was making progress on the strength of the ESRB, the industry's voluntary rating board. He had met with Hillary Clinton, who seemed open to self-regulation. He didn't want the next *GTA* to put that to waste.

Despite all of the public and private jockeying over Rockstar's games, however, Lowenstein had virtually no relationship with the Housers. Instead, he dealt with Eibeler at Take-Two. Rockstar, even for him, remained an enigma. As he saw it, their attitude was “We are on our own and do what we want and everyone has to suck it up.”

Rockstar had its own floor in the Take-Two building, and getting there was a game unto itself. Lowenstein watched as a Take-Two executive called someone at the desk for permission to visit. “We'd like to come down,” the executive asked. Then he and Lowenstein had to wait, humiliatingly, for Rockstar security to escort them. “I couldn't believe this,” Lowenstein recalled. “Literally, the head of Take-Two couldn't wander down there.” As Lowenstein sat in a conference room watching *San Andreas*, he sensed tension between Rockstar and Take-Two—Sam's parent in the most literal sense.

Lowenstein greeted the demo of *San Andreas* with a certain detachment. This was never his cup of tea, as he put it, but it didn't matter. He knew the guys were pushing the medium and deserved his protection and defense. Onscreen, he watched as the nimble young black man in jeans pulled a helpless driver from a car and hurled her to the ground. As CJ sped off past the dilapidated crack houses and bodegas of this fictional Los Angeles, Lowenstein didn't think there was anything unique or newly concerning about the violence. Yet he had a whole new worry in mind.

He feared the potential impact of *San Andreas*, especially after the protest over the Haitians in *Vice City.* Rockstar, he thought, might be opening up new lines of political attacks by, as he put it, “profiling minorities in the worst possible light by focusing on gang warfare in Los Angeles.” He felt particularly concerned about the possible response of the Congressional Black Caucus, whose members he had watched take a strong First Amendment defense when white politicians were

attacking gangster rap. “This is the last thing we need,” he thought.

Lowenstein resented what he thought was Rockstar's tendency to cut and run whenever the shit hit the fan—and then leave him there to clean it up for the industry. This time, they owed him, he figured. “I like to think that after I took a lot of hits and bullets on *GTA III*, they saw I wasn't throwing them overboard,” Lowenstein later said. “I hoped they felt I was on their side and felt I was not trying to do anything to compromise their artistic freedom.”

He told them his opinion. “Listen, you guys gotta get out in front of this,” he said. “This is going to be very controversial, and it makes our job that much more difficult if we don't have the company making the game trying to defuse the controversy.” Lowenstein suggested that before the game's release, they take the time to prepare key leaders in the Congressional Black Caucus.

To his relief, Rockstar and Take-Two were receptive. They brought in consultants to, as a Rockstar publicist later put it, “mature our understanding of the controversy issue,” so that they would “know how to respond when the heat came.” As Sam returned to the production of *San Andreas*, he had something hotter than ever in mind for the world's most notorious video game: sex.

18

Sex in San Andreas

THE DATE

> On a good date, you earn 5% Girlfriend Progress. Add Flowers and a kiss to bump that figure up two percentage points. You can kiss and give gifts as much as you like on a single date, but they won't help beyond the first attempt. Girlfriend Progress (displayed in percentages) can be viewed in the “Achievements” option under “stats” in the Pause Menu.

It's always weird going back to the old neighborhood, but it sure feels strange the morning of Carl Johnson's return.

Under a blue sky, he pedals his yellow BMX bike down the familiar city streets, past the Ideal Homies Store with its guns and jeans, past the yellow cabs and the vintage vans, past the brothers on the corner in their baggy pants, over the narrow bridge and around the bend by the tall chick in the thigh-high stockings and the halter top, down Grove Street along the small rundown houses behind chain-link fences, garbage outside and muscle cars in the driveway, until he comes to a stop outside a brown dilapidated home with palmettos shooting through the broken slats of a wooden fence outside. “Home,” CJ says to himself, “or at least it was before I fucked everything up.”

The moment he opens the paint-chipped front door and steps inside, he feels off-balance. He eyes the empty living room with fading blue wallpaper. The stairs leading up to his old bedroom. Worse, the home has been vandalized. Precious mementos scattered. He staggers dizzily, mouth agape, as he reaches for the framed photo of his dead mother on the floor. He props the photo gently up on a table, then pulls up a chair and stares at her face, head in hands.

This is the opening mission of *GTA*: *San Andreas*, and the gamers at Rockstar were watching CJ arrive at his home in Los Santos. With the staff growing, they had moved to a bigger office at 622 Broadway with foosball tables and arcade machines, but there was little time to play. By the middle of 2004, they were busy testing *San Andreas*, scouring for bugs in the software, then fixing the art and the code. As the cinematic sequence played, they found something new in the pixilated world—emotion. It was a feeling, something real and strange and evocative of the films they'd loved, something few would associate with *GTA* or video games at all: tenderness.

As Khonsari, the director of this and other cut-scenes in the game, watched CJ mourn, he felt particularly moved. For years, he had been making films in which he tried to evoke emotions from viewers, and now they were bringing this power to video games. He realized that video games might go even further than films, because of how they cast and immersed the player in the action firsthand.

Sam couldn't agree more. For *San Andreas*, he wanted to immerse players in their characters more than ever before. Rockstar achieved this in a most unexpected way—by transforming *GTA* into a kind of role-playing game, the genre Sam had disparaged for so long. RPGs, which dated back to *Dungeons & Dragons* pen-and-paper games, were built on personalization. Players chose their own characters at the onset—say, wizards or warriors—and assigned levels of intelligence and strength that could be augmented throughout the game experience. Although most common in fantasy RPGs, customization had become more fashionable in the industry, with even sports titles hyping their ability to let players create their own likenesses in the game.

Once again, Rockstar's innovation was to bring such features into an open and contemporarily realistic world. In *San Andreas*, players could buy a choice of tattoos and haircuts (afros and Jheri curls). They could change their bodies, eating pizza and burgers to get fat or salads to stay lean. They could go to the gym and pump iron to get ripped. The more they drove their vehicles, the higher their stats and skills would soar. *San Andreas* even included dating, letting the player win the hearts of girlfriends with flowers and kisses. Sam thought the leisure time activities were a way to further connect a player with the game and personalize the experience, but he worried that the role-playing
elements might prove too geeky for *GTA*'s hardcore fans. “What are we doing here?” he wondered. “We've made *GTA* uber-nerdy in a way with this stuff—will people get it?”

Gamers had better. With more than 32 million *GTA*s already sold, the shareholders of Take-Two wanted another hit. As Sam said in the press release announcing the game in March 2004, “We have put an enormous amount of pressure on ourselves to ensure we do everything possible to exceed people's expectations.”

They decided on one more powerful way to blow gamers away: with sex. Although violence had long been an acceptable, if not controversial, part of games, sex remained taboo. Early computer games such as *Custer's Revenge* and *Leisure Suit Larry* toyed with bawdy (and dumb) soft porn, like bad jokes from episodes of *Benny Hill*. Later, hits such as the cheeky shooter *Duke Nukem* and even Rockstar's own *Vice City* put strippers in the action.

Because games were still thought of as a children's toy, however, M-rated games

couldn't get away with the kind of content one would see in an R-rated film. Nudity would likely earn a game the Adults Only rating, banning it from mainstream retail—and costing millions in losses. This infuriated Rockstar, but Sam wasn't going to sit idle anymore.

Early Wednesday morning, July 14, 2004, he fired off an e-mail to Jennifer Kolbe, the director of operations for Rockstar, copying Donovan and Dan:

> [J]ennifer, how are we going to handle the approval of certain bits of content in sa [*San Andreas*], we are keen to include new functionality and interaction in line with the 'vibe' of the game. to this end, in addition to the violence and bad language, we want to include sexual content, which I understand is questionable to certain people, but pretty natural (more than violence), when you think about it and consider the fact that the game is intended for adults. Here are some examples of content that will be displayed graphically:
>
> - blowjobs
> - full sex (multiple positions)
> - dildo sex (including being able to kills [*sic*] someone with a dildo)
> - whipping (being whipped)
> - masturbation (one of the characters is compulsive; this MUST be kept)
>
> all of these items are displayed both through cutsecnes [*sic*] and in-game. I know this is a tricky area but I want to find a way for this work; the concept of a glorified shop (walmart) telling us what we can/can't put in our game is just unacceptable on so many levels. All of this material is perfectly reasonable for an adult (of course it is!), so we need to push to continue to have our medium accepted and respected as a mainstream entertainment platform, we have always been about pushing the boundaries; we cannot stop here. . . . how do we proceed with this? we really don't want to cut these areas. please advise.

Kolbe wasn't encouraging. "There are clearly two issues I need to deal with," she replied. "1. The ESRB and how far we can push the content envelope before the game turns from a Mature to an AO, which would traditionally eliminate us from about 80% of our distribution channels (in all likelihood, the fact that we are talking *San Andreas* would probably reduce the number to about 60%). What I know for certain is that any type of sexualized violence immediately brings a game over from a M to an AO and based on this, out of all the content you have listed below the only one that would seem likely to fall into this category would be killing someone with a dildo, as ridiculous as that sounds. I will do some checking and find out how this

line has been drawn historically and where we can push it."

That wasn't all. "Second issue," she wrote, "is with retail and how to raise the level of content and still stay within the boundaries, both vague and clear, that have been set by the more conservative retailers, within the m category, there is a line we can cross that will preclude us from being carried in places like wal-mart and best buy; both have gone on the record to say that a game featuring full frontal nudity is a no-go but as we with *Vice City* and the candy suxxx scenes, there is a level of content that is allowable depending on its context and depiction within the game. as with everything in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, we have always argued that everything is done within the context of the storyline and I think the same has to be said here.

"In short order, I need to do A LOT of research on the games that currently exist in the AO category so that I can put together a cohesive list of boundary crossing content as a reference for the existing content in *San Andreas.* If the AO games are as hardcore and gratuitous as I have heard they are, then a strong case can be made for the fact that we are still within Mature territory because while the sexual content in *San Andreas* is part of the storyline, it certainly isn't the whole game."

Sam's eyes ran over her last sentence, the requisite throwing of the bone. Yes, she heard him. "The directive here is very clear," she had written, "we need to push the boundaries as hard as we can so that the integrity of the game is not compromised but still maintain our level of distribution so that sales are not affected." Sometimes the hypocrisy of Sam's adopted homeland was mind-numbing. Sam would marvel at states such as Utah and the reign of the Mormons. Had the game industry come to this? Were they living in a virtual Utah?

"We need to move VERY fast," Sam replied to Kolbe. "There is nothing planned than an adult (M-rated) can't handle. Even if it is an AO (which it shouldn't be), why should this reduce our distribution so much. We have to have retail tell us what games to make? That's nonsense. Sim-Moorman (sp?) is our new idea. Freedom of speech? Isn't that how the country is justifying the invasion of Iraq and other places? We must expose such flagrant hypocrisy. Boundaries need to be stretched. This is key. Ultimately it looks nothing like the real world, so if movies do it, which are obviously more realistic, it just doesn't make sense if we can't."

Donovan spent weeks researching Sam's requests, going over the sex scenes in the game, and scouring the rules around the world for just what could and couldn't make it in. Sam tried his best to reassure the developers in Scotland. "As you know, sex is more of an issue than murder [in the United States]," he wrote in an e-mail to Rockstar North, ". . . so we're going to have to be as smart as possible. We're definitely going to have to do a separate version for Wal-Mart. Therefore whatever content we do agree on needs to be easily removable. . . . We'll do whatever we can

to keep this stuff in. It's going to be tough but we love a good battle."

PHIL HARRISON cut through London one summer morning on his way to work. Now senior vice president of product development at Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, he had become one of the most iconic stars on the PlayStation team. Tall, bald, and incisive, he was the kind of game executive whom gamers readily called one of their own. Like Sam, he shared the passion to make games mass market. With the success of *GTA*, he was now on a new mission—to make games not only for adults, but for the entire family, too.

The answer was the EyeToy, a motion-sensing camera that would let players interact with games without the use of a controller. All they had to do was wave their hands. In one game, bubbles appeared to line the TV screen, and kids competed to wipe them off simply by waving their hands in the air. "It was something the whole family could play," Harrison said. "We got quickly into the idea of removing the game controller from the equation. It was a huge boost to people. If you hand a controller to a nongamer, it's like you've handed them a live grenade."

Released a year earlier, in the summer of 2003, the EyeToy sold more than 2.5 million copies by year's end. Other family-friendly games such as SingStar (a karaoke game) helped expand the market even more. For Harrison, it represented a triumph—proof that between *GTA* and the EyeToy, there would be games for everyone. When his sister phoned him on the way to work, she could have been doing it to congratulate him, but she wasn't. "Have you read the *Daily Mail* this morning?" she asked.

"I don't read the fucking *Daily Mail*," he quipped.

"I think you ought to read it. Go buy a copy."

Harrison saw the headline: "Murder By PlayStation." Oh shit, he thought. The story concerned a seventeen-year-old boy, Warren Leblanc, who had recently confessed to murdering his fourteen-year-old friend, Stefan Pakeerah, with a claw hammer and a knife. Now Pakeerah's mother was speaking out. She had heard through the boys' friends that the two were obsessed with playing a video game, *Manhunt*, and now she blamed it for the crime. "This game should be banned," she told the *Daily Mail*. "It promotes violence for violence's sake and corrupts young minds. . . . We owe it to Stefan's memory to take on those people who have succeeded in getting this game marketed."

Since its release in November 2003, *Manhunt* had already created a storm in the game press over its chilling but impeccably rendered violence. A barbed-wire garrote was sent out to reviewers of the game. Yet reading this story made Harrison

stop in his tracks. He had seen the hamster of video game violence run through the press for years, but this story marked a new era in England. This wasn't a Max Clifford ploy. This was a real mother of a real dead boy. Harrison felt terrible for the family but furious that games were blamed. “There was a segment of the potential audience for games who would believe this headline,” he later said.

The *Manhunt* controversy only exploded from there, as the story spread around the world. The game—already banned in New Zealand—got pulled from stores of the United Kingdom's largest retailer, Dixons. Before long, the United Kingdom's own answer to Jack Thompson, Leicester East member of Parliament Keith Vaz, took action. During a question session with Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Vaz called for protective measures—despite the fact that *Manhunt* had been already rated for eighteen-year-olds and over. “This is not about adult censorship,” he said, “it is the protection of young children and young people.”

Amid all the debate, however, there was one group conspicuously missing—Rockstar. Instead of speaking out, Donovan worked behind the scenes with Simon Harvey, a spokesperson for the British game industry, to provide any response. Harvey said in his statement, “Simply being in someone's possession does not and should not lead to the conclusion that a game is responsible for these tragic events.”

Harrison struggled to move forward with his plan to bring games to families in the face of this controversy. Like Lowenstein in the United States, he couldn't help feeling that when the shit hit the fan, the bad boys of gaming lacked the courage to take a stand. “I was frustrated that nobody from Rockstar ever went on the record,” he recalled. “They just went radio silent.”

WHILE THE CONTROVERSY over *Manhunt* grew back in their home country, Sam and the guys at Rockstar were more concerned with *San Andreas*—and the results of Donovan's research into how far they could push the sexual content in the game. The findings weren't encouraging.

“Unfortunately, here is the situation,” Donovan wrote in an e-mail to Sam on August 16, 2004, and proceeded to list the necessary changes.

“Hooker in car blow job—we need to show much less of the critical mouth to penis area.

“Hooker Stand Up Blow Job—this needs to be removed or implied.

“Sex with girlfriend—essentially this is all beyond the bounds of M and 18 ratings, and needs to be removed or implied.

“Sex shop workers need to have slightly more nipple coverage particularly for the

States.

“Key to her heart spanking date scene needs to be removed, as it constitutes sexualized violence which is a huge problem.

“Blow job in back room of dealer's house is cool however.

“I wish we could include all this incredible stuff, but it just isn't feasible to get it out there at the moment. As discussed we are working on a couple different scenarios for a release of a version with this content included.”

Sam clicked the attachment—four excruciating pages of explication, details, country by country, over just what kind of sexual activity could and could not be shown, given their target rating. All of Sam's ranting about Iraq and hypocrisy splintered into pixels as he read the rules in black and white. This was someone else's game. The list under each country's regulations was beautifully absurd, hilarious and horrific, and inescapably real. It started with the United Kingdom, where the target age rating was eighteen.

“Male nudity—Full frontal nudity is acceptable as long as the penis is not erect,” Donovan explained.

“An erect penis should be avoided entirely or we would need it to be pixillated.

“Female nudity—Full front nudity is acceptable but only at a distance if the full body is to be shown and showing the breasts only is preferable.

“Masturbation—Can be implied but the penis should not be visible. We would be safer to show a man from the back view doing this, not with the camera angle straight on.

“Oral sex—Similar to masturbation, the act can be implied but cannot be graphic. Any close-ups would require pixilation and the BBFC might ask us to remove this in order to achieve an 18 rating. Your character should not be able to kill the girlfriend or the hooker after you have sex.” And so on.

As Sam read the guidelines, he saw how each country had its own seemingly arbitrary definitions of what would nudge a game into the realm of unacceptability. Spain and Italy were fine with nudity (including erections) and “lax,” as Donovan put it, with regard to sexualized violence. France was okay with male nudity (no erections) and female nudity (though, as Donovan explained, “as long as it can be considered ‘erotic' and not pornographic”). While Australia didn't permit male nudity, female breasts and buttocks were fine. Spanking, across the world, was pretty much a no-no, with the exception of Spain and Italy, where it was okay if it was part of the story. Every country was cool with jacking off, as long as no penis appeared. No mentions, though, of female masturbation. Implied oral sex, no problem anywhere.

Of all of the territories, the United States was by far most restrictive—any male nudity had to be covered in shadows, and although female breasts could be shown, vaginas were off limits, and nipples had to be covered with pasties. And an inexplicit scene of CJ having sex with his girlfriend? Though acceptable across the world, it would surely garner the deathly Adults Only rating in the U.S. Then Donovan dropped the bomb. “The sex scenes that are in *San Andreas* currently are going to be considered too graphic,” he wrote. They had to go.

Sam sat at his computer, watching the cursor blink as the hot flush of anger crashed in. “This is WAY, WAY more than I expected,” he wrote to Donovan, pounding his keys. “Not only is it insane to edit comedy like this—look at movies and everything else—to do so is going to be a lot of work and will screw with things (eg: changing the spanking mission, which could not be more harmless/silly). Is this really as far as we can push it? I just cannot believe it.”

Donovan's reply came seventeen minutes later. “That's not good,” he wrote, with an audible thud. “I thought we were pretty much on the same page.” What was all this, anyway—a game or something else? Some big middle finger to the world? They weren't rebellious kids in prep school anymore. They were high-paid employees of a public company. They couldn't play and control life as if it were a game. They had always fought for the right for games to grow up; maybe it was time for them to grow up instead. Why not just dial back the sex in *San Andreas*?

“Spanking is pretty much the worst thing in there,” Donovan explained. “You can see her vagina and asshole or at least where they would be, and the combination with the violence is what gets people most hot under the collar. Every country bar Spain came back to us and stated sexualized violence is a no-go. It is just too easy for people to take that scene out of context and claim the game requires violence to women to complete gameplay objectives.”

Sam was having none of it. He came to America to find freedom, not give it up. “Wow,” he wrote back to Donovan. “We have too many sales people. We need people to fight for ‘freedom.'” He fired off an e-mail to Les Benzies, producer at Rockstar North, breaking the news.

“This is a shame,” Benzies wrote back.

“I know,” Sam replied, “it's a disaster. we should review all our options. it feels wrong to edit our game. we need to PUSH.”

And so he did, throwing off a Hail Mary appeal to Take-Two's founder, Brant. Brant, however, was desperately fighting battles of his own. Despite having grown his company to more than $1 billion in revenues, with more than $100 million in earnings, Take-Two had been overtaken by scandal. The SEC investigation into

Take-Two's accounting practices was still proceeding, and, furthermore, the commission suggested that it would take civil action against Brant and two former Take-Two executives for their involvement. On March 17, 2004, Brant resigned as chair and director of Take-Two. “I believe this is the right time to make a management transition to position Take-Two for the future,” he said in a statement.

There had always been explicit and implicit tension between Take-Two and Rockstar, with the latter being like the unruly kid who was trying to call the shots. Yet the fact was, Sam, despite his shaggy appearance, was always a dogged leader at heart, running his ship like a CEO. Because Brant remained as vice president of publishing, Sam didn't hesitate to reach out to him.

“Hi, Can we confirm that these are the content changes that need to be made?” Sam wrote. “As I mentioned to Terry, I was pretty much shocked by the list. The cuts are everywhere. It doesn't feel like we are pushing any boundaries now. Why bother? I really, really do not want to change this stuff. It feels SO wrong at the behest of psychotic, mormon, capitalist retailers. This is a GAME. It's COMIC. Airplane (the movie) was more offensive. Please can we not forget the edgy-ness that got us here.”

Poring over Benzies's menu of possible changes—moving the camera on the blowjob scene, removing other scenes entirely, and masking others, such as sex with the girlfriend, with blocky filters—felt bad enough to Sam. Even worse was Benzies's implication that they had given up their fight. “This stuff was so cool,” Benzies wrote to Sam, “we're not really pushing boundaries without it.”

For Sam, pushing boundaries was his life's mission, from his rebelliousness at St. Paul's through his early days at BMG. He built his career by Captain Kirk-ing beyond where others had gone before. How many people could claim they had really done that—not just in video games, but in anything? How could they stop now?

Sam had a choice to make: fight or flight. “If you and the crew feel strongly, let's make a stand,” he replied to Benzies. “Let's keep what we want in the game—OUR game. It will half our retail distribution, but who cares? The game will still sell, people will have to go and find it, but it will be the game we want. We may probably sell less this route (who knows—maybe more, in the long run?), but at least we won't have been told what to do by a load of fucking bureaucrats and shop-keepers.”

Not everyone agreed. Cofounder Gary Foreman characterized the sex in *San Andreas* as “funny, schoolboy, puerile humor” but thought it had its limits. “There's no way the game's going to be approved with that in it,” he said, “so take it out.” Plus, he thought, what's the loss? “For me, sorry I'm not twelve anymore, it was unnecessary,” he later said. “There were conversations about pushing the barriers of what we could do, but I felt personally it was, at that point, gratuitous.”

When King walked up to Sam one day at Rockstar, however, he could tell that his cofounder wasn't pleased at losing this battle. Though the two had had their skirmishes, he still supported his old friend and thought the sex in the game was funny.

Rockstar had built an empire on simulated fantasies, but this time reality bore down. The struggle dripped with irony. Sam wanted to make games for adults, but an Adults Only rating would be retail suicide. He personified the awkward and interminable adolescence of his entire industry and, moreover, a generation of players. It wasn't that he didn't want to grow up; he simply wasn't allowed to. He was infantilized. No matter how mature he had become, he still had to answer to his parents at Take-Two.

There was nothing that he, Brant, or anyone could do. The bureaucrats and the shopkeepers had won. Rockstar would cut back the sex from *San Andreas.* Some moderate content could remain, such as the two-ended purple dildo hidden in a police bathroom as a weapon, but little more. Instead of seeing CJ have sex with his girlfriend inside her house, players would only make it as far as the front door.

With the game's deadline just weeks away, the sex scenes had to be removed, and fast. Sometimes instead of deleting code, which can be problematic, game developers essentially hide the content from players so that it won't be seen. It's a common and acceptable process known as “wrapping,” sort of like wrapping an unwanted package in camouflage and burying it in the woods. There was nothing sneaky about it.

So one quiet day at Rockstar, a programmer tapped a series of buttons on a keyboard and took care of the job. The *San Andreas* sex scene was wrapped and tucked away into the forest of code. Because the industry didn't require game developers to disclose wrapped content, Rockstar had no reason to mention the sex scene when it submitted the new *GTA* for its rating.

This game was done.

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2004, the mailman delivered the submission package for *Grand Theft Auto*: *San Andreas* to the Entertainment Software Ratings Board on Madison Avenue in New York. The nondescript cluster of cubicles was protected like Area 51. “Sorry, you can't go back there,” Patricia Vance, the steely president of the ESRB, would tell a visiting reporter, as he made his way past posters of Tiger Woods and brochures of happy kids, tongues wagging as they played their video games.

Every day, game publishers sent in their products for voluntary ratings, which

included E for Everyone, T for Teen, and M for Mature. Lately, however, they were under fire. Harvard University had issued a study on “Content and Teen-Rated Video Games,” which found that almost half of the games included content that was not listed on the video game box. In Washington State, legislators were trying to ban the sale of M-rated games to anyone under the age of seventeen. The game industry was fighting this on the grounds that such a law would be a violation of free speech.

Despite *GTA*'s past controversies, the ESRB had no reason to scrutinize it differently from any other title. The process started with the raters: a pool of fifty Americans from all walks of life—teachers, doctors, single moms, ranging in age from twenty-one to sixty-five years old. The ESRB placed ads in parenting magazines and received about a thousand applications per year. Game-playing experience was not required.

This was why: when a game company sent in a game to be rated, it was not actually sending in playable demos; the company only sent in video footage. Publishers were required to send in what Vance called “the most extreme footage” of a game, usually two or three months prior to a game's release. The footage could last anywhere from twenty minutes to a few hours. As each of the two or three raters watched the footage, a frame count rattled off onscreen. The raters had a guide to determine which content should be flagged: from gambling and sexuality to violence and destruction. Still, gore was in the eye of the beholder. “There's no formula,” Vance said. “We want raters to use their own judgment.”

Once a game was reviewed by the raters, the team looked to see whether there was consensus on the evaluation—Vance said there almost always was—and the game got rated accordingly. For games sold in 2003, 54 percent were rated Everyone (E); 30.5 percent were rated Teen (T); and only 11.9 percent were rated Mature (M). Despite the debate over violent games, 70 percent of the top twenty best-selling console games were rated E or T. Vance said the ultimate responsibility resided with consumers. “If a rating doesn't give you pause, at a certain point, that's not our problem,” said Vance. “We can't dictate morals or ethics. People make up their own minds.”

Vance thought Rockstar had always been good about disclosing the content of its games and had no reason to think otherwise with *San Andreas*. Each rater sat in a cubicle watching footage of CJ joyriding and fighting his or her way through *San Andreas* as the hip-hop music pulsed. The raters scribbled in their notepads, forbidden from talking to one another about their points of view. Finally, they convened to discuss their ratings, with a foreman presiding, but there wouldn't be any debate. *GTA*: *San Andreas* was rated M for Mature. Its future would be in the gamers' hands now.

19

Unlock the Darkness

RANDOM CHARACTER UNLOCKED: PATRICK WILDENBORG

Follow the **“P”** icon to Deventer, Holland. Approach while Patrick's family is sleeping. Patrick will be on the couch, laptop open.

Patrick Wildenborg took his coffee black and plenty of it. As a diehard programmer in Deventer, a small town in eastern Netherlands, Wildenborg needed all the fuel he could get.

By day, he did computer consulting, making real-time embedded systems for traffic management and military applications. Later he'd come home to his wife and two kids, a six-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl. A burly six-foot-two-inch thirty-five-year-old with small glasses and receding brown hair, Wildenborg would stoop down to the floor to play with his kids. After dinner and when the children were asleep, he'd pour himself a hot coffee, slip out his laptop on the couch, and get his game on while his wife channel-surfed the TV.

Wildenborg's favorite way to unwind was with *Grand Theft Auto*: *Vice City.* An avid gamer since he'd played on the Commodore 64 computer as a kid, he had fallen hard for Rockstar's epic. He loved the kitschy eighties American atmosphere, the synth pop, the *Miami Vice* vibe that reminded him wistfully of his own awkward youth. But mainly he liked the freedom. “The freedom,” as he put it, “to do whatever you have to do.” He considered the elusive creators at Rockstar to be heroes.

Like a lot of avid players, Wildenborg quickly tore through the entire *Vice City* game, finishing it up during late nights after work in a little more than a month. Yet the moment he completed the game, he felt the sad sick itch of loss, like the afterglow of the most awesome vacation ever. He didn't want it to end. Then he found a way to make the game live on—by hacking it.

Computer game hacking wasn't new. Players had been altering the code of their favorite titles for decades. The resulting modifications, or mods, ranged from the simple and goofy (such as putting Barney in the first-person shooter *Wolfenstein 3-D*) to the wildly complex (such as transforming the sci-fi title *Half-Life* into a team-based counterterrorist game, *Counter-Strike*).

Mod makers collaborated online, often without ever meeting in person, and freely distributed their programs across the Net. They did it for love and ego but seldom for money. A few mods, including *Counter-Strike*, garnered such a cult following that game companies struck deals to publish the titles themselves. As John Carmack, the programmer of mod-friendly franchises such as *Doom* and *Quake*, once put it, mods became the default résumés for aspiring game developers.

Although allowing consumers to alter a product seemed like an anathema to many, forward-thinking game makers embraced the mod community for one smart reason: mods sold games. In order to play a mod, gamers still needed to own the original CD, which meant a longer shelf life. Plus, mod makers served as the best source of viral marketing around. As a franchise's most early-adopting, impassioned fans, mod makers played a crucial role in spreading the word about new games online.

For this reason, the savviest companies not only embraced mod makers, they cultivated them—seeding, essentially, their own hardcore fans. As Wildenborg swiftly discovered online, few were as mod-friendly as Rockstar. The strategy fit perfectly with Rockstar's DIY style. Despite the fact that creating mods violated the end user license agreement of Take-Two's games, Rockstar had been building relationships with the mod makers since its earliest titles.

Fan sites such as Gouranga.com were among the first to receive regular visits and updates directly from the Housers. By the time *GTA III* came out, Rockstar had cherry-picked its own coterie of fan sites, which the company promoted on its own page. For *Vice City*, Rockstar created a homepage for what the company described online as its "international friends." As Rockstar's welcome paragraph on the site read, these were the places "to go for all those unofficial mods."

Modders knew the relationship was mutually beneficial. As one *GTA* modder put it, "The modding scene for the *GTA* franchise has generated revenue at little to no cost for the producers or publishers. We know for a fact that there is a significant percentage of *GTA* fans who only buy the game for the PC because of the open-ended modification possibilities."

As a coder and a gamer, Wildenborg threw himself into the mod scene. He knew exactly what he wanted to create for *Vice City*. In the game, players could store only four cars in a garage—hardly enough room for the dozens of sweet rides Wildenborg amassed. After a month of caffeine-fueled nights, he created Marina Carpark—a mod that, when downloaded and installed for free—let players store up to forty cars in a sprawling lot. The feat earned Wildenborg the *GTA* mod community's respect when he released it in January 2004. "People said it was impossible, but I somehow managed," he explained, with his mixture of modesty and pride.

Wildenborg spent long hours on GTAforums.com, a popular site for mod makers

of the game. The visitors were often anonymous, logging on under assumed names and rarely, if ever, meeting in person or talking on the phone. Theirs was a collaborative, obsessive group of fans. One person might come up with an idea for a mod, then another would chime in—working together to reverse-engineer the game and get at the code. “The modding community felt like a bunch of friends trying to solve a mystery,” Wildenborg said.

In October 2004, the players finally got their hands on *Grand Theft Auto*: *San Andreas*, Rockstar's hotly anticipated new game. Wildenborg and the others delighted over having “new worlds to explore,” he said. He marveled at the sheer expanse of the game, cruising through the forests in his Banshee sports car, flying in his airplane, and jumping over hills on his motorcycle. He tagged storefronts with graffiti in Los Santos, hit the casinos in Las Venturas. The story of CJ's rise through West Coast gang violence brimmed with the kind of uncanny details and encyclopedic pop culture references that made Rockstar famous. Wildenborg, like the other modders, couldn't wait to play around with the code.

With only the PS2 version of the game released, however, there was only so much they could do. Mods were primarily a computer game phenomenon because consoles were harder to crack. Until the PC version of the game came out, along with the Xbox version, next summer, Wildenborg could do little more than poke around the PS2 code.

Yet poking around was half the fun and created a sublime beauty all its own. When you went deep enough into the code, you felt as if you had left your Mountain Dew–stained desk chair for the abstract world behind the computer screen. After hours of hacking *San Andreas*, Wildenborg found himself there. It was like standing in an electric forest of trees with long glowing limbs of ones and zeroes. The ground shimmered in peppery static. Wildenborg reached down into the pixilated thicket and picked up a camouflaged package wrapped and buried out of sight. He held it in his hand as it sizzled and sparked.

What, he wondered, was this?

BY THE TIME Sam's thirty-fourth birthday (and Rockstar's annual cheese ball–eating contest) rolled around, he had reason to be elated. *San Andreas* was a hit. In its first two months, *San Andreas* sold 5 million copies at $50 a pop. The game was on its way to eventually selling an astonishing 21.5 million copies, making it the most successful PS2 title ever. When the fiscal year ended on October 31, 2004—just days after the launch—*San Andreas* accounted for 20.9 percent of Take-Two's revenues.

Fans and reviewers hailed it the company's crowning achievement. *Game Critics* called it “a stunning milestone in every aspect that matters... . a monumental game that has now redefined the standard against which all future games like it will be measured.” *Game Informer* deemed it “extraordinary—something that I believe will define a generation and will forever change the way that we look at video games.” *>IGN* considered it “a terrific unending masterpiece of a game.” In New York, an artist friend of Rockstar's created a so-called Delinquency Chamber inspired by the game—a free-standing installation with a built-in bong, a beer-filled fridge, and a wide-screen TV for playing *San Andreas.*

Yet not everyone dug the new *GTA.* The *New York Times* found the game “just as disturbing and annoying” as the others in the franchise. Another swipe came from Dave Jones, the ex-DMA chief who was busy working on his own upcoming action game, *Crackdown.* A few days after *San Andreas*'s release, Jones dissed the game in a lengthy profile in the *Sunday Times.* “Some of it does make you grimace,” he said. “It is like watching *Goodfellas.* There are some scenes when you ask yourself, Did they really have to do that? How far will this go?”

As Lowenstein had feared, others took umbrage over what was perceived as the stereotypical black lead in the game. The *Chicago Tribune* quoted an academic who said that “even though there's a lead black character, which is in some sense progress, that lead character is in a violent, urban environment ... engaging in gang activity, drug activity, running from police.”

In an article called “The Color of Mayhem,” the *New York Times* said that “*Grand Theft Auto*: *San Andreas*, underscores what some critics consider a disturbing trend: popular video games that play on racial stereotypes, including images of black youths committing and reveling in violent street crime.” King couldn't believe it when he read comments on online forums from gamers who simply didn't want to play a game with a black lead.

Yet privately, Sam had other matters in mind. Although he was publicly elated over *San Andreas*'s success, he seemed to be still reeling from cutting the sex scenes out of the game. Then came an idea for how to win in the end—by putting a sex scene into the PC version of *San Andreas* that would be getting published in June 2005. On November 25, 2004, Sam e-mailed Benzies, urging him to “explore any additional content ideas” to determine “how hard we can push the sex stuff ... to make it bonkers.” Benzies promised, “We will get the sex stuff back to the way it was.”

Two weeks later, the Rockstar designer handling the production process e-mailed a colleague about the decision to bring the sexy back to the game. Animators were instructed to dig up the old animations and make sure they were up to par. “And may

I say how happy I am that they are going back in," the colleague replied.

If need be, Sam later explained in another internal e-mail, the company might put out two versions of the game, "we will do AO and M versions (as discussed)." Releasing an AO version of *San Andreas* would be more of an artistic statement than a way to cash in. Rockstar would be sending a message, as Sam wrote, that "yes we will go to places that you other f*cks wouldn't even consider."

Over at the ESRB, however, the Xbox and PC versions of *San Andreas* were no reason for concern. On January 7, 2005, the submission package from Rockstar arrived at the ESRB office without fanfare. Because the game was identical to the PS2 version, Rockstar was not required to send a new disc with the package. The reviewers simply rubber-stamped the Xbox and PC versions of the game with the same M-rating as before.

Back at Rockstar, Donovan told Sam that fear was spreading among the sales force over the sex scene plan. "They are concerned we will get a really intense backlash if we push the pc version too far," Sam wrote to Benzies on January 18.

In the computer game ecosystem, games sometimes need updates after they're released. This could be for a variety of reasons, maybe to fix a bug or tweak new content. To remedy this, game makers put out small software programs called patches, which gamers can download for free online. As part of a possible new AO-rated version of San Andreas, Rockstar could release the PC version of the game with the sex-scene wrapped away, as in the PS2 game. Then later, they could put out a patch which, when installed, would open the sex scene and, as Sam put it in an email, "unlock the darkness." There would be nothing illegal or misleading about it.

On February 7, 2005, a Rockstar designer e-mailed a colleague the possibility that "sex is going to be released as a patch, so we can fudge as much as you like." The next week, another email made sure that the "full on sex works" in the "patched version" in the PC edition of *San Andreas.*

It was time for the darkness to set in.

"YOU ARE DOING GOD'S work in battling these forces of darkness. Satan is behind them, and God is behind you." Jack Thompson would never forget these words of encouragement that a fellow culture warrior had once shared with him. He felt more blessed than ever when he found himself on *60 Minutes* taking on what for him was the darkest force of all, *GTA.*

"*Grand Theft Auto* is a world governed by the laws of depravity," correspondent Ed Bradley said by way of introduction. "See a car you like? Steal it. Someone you don't like? Stomp her. A cop in your way? Blow him away. There are police at every

turn, and endless opportunities to take them down. It is 360 degrees of murder and mayhem: slickly produced, technologically brilliant, and exceedingly violent."

It was March 5, 2005, and the world's most notorious video game was in the crosshairs for a shocking series of murders in a small American town. "But for the video-game training," Thompson, graying hair neatly combed, told Bradley, "he would not have done what he did."

Thompson was referring to what happened on June 7, 2003, in the small coal-mining town of Fayette, Alabama. At 3 a.m., police officer Arnold Strickland found a young black man, eighteen-year-old Devin Moore, sleeping in a car that came up as stolen. Strickland cuffed Moore and took him back to the station for questioning. While Moore was being booked, he suddenly grabbed the Glock handgun from officer Arnold Strickland's holster and shot him dead.

Moore fled, as another cop came after him, but Moore was fast in his reflexes and unloaded three shots at the cop, killing him, too. As the boy passed the office of an emergency dispatcher, he squeezed off five more rounds, including another head shot. With the three men left bloodied and dead, Moore spotted a set of keys and took them outside, where he sped off in a squad car just before sunrise.

Three and a half hours later, police chased the dark-blue stolen police car just over the Mississippi state line. On Moore's arrest, news of the shooting spree traveled the country, and people wondered what would cause this young guy, with no prior criminal record, to snap as he did. During a court hearing in December 2004, an officer testified that as Moore was being led into the county jail, Moore said, "Life is like a video game. You've got to die sometime." And the game he liked to play was *GTA.*

When Thompson heard this news, he snapped into action. While Rockstar had become the biggest player in the game industry, Thompson had become the most notorious player hater around. He felt more confident than ever. In the previous year, he had successfully battled the most controversial radio shock-jock in America: Howard Stern. After badgering the Federal Communications Commission about Stern, Thompson managed to get Stern suspended from air time in Miami and, ultimately, fined nearly $500,000. Even Stern gave him props by calling him the "lunatic lawyer in Miami who got me off the air down there."

Now he was ready to set his sights back on Rockstar. "What we're saying is that Devin Moore was, in effect, trained to do what he did," Thompson told Bradley, who listened intently. "He was given a murder simulator. He bought it as a minor. He played it hundreds of hours, which is primarily a cop-killing game. It's our theory, which we think we can prove to a jury in Alabama, that but for the video-game training, he would not have done what he did." Thompson promised that a lawsuit

would follow.

As the players of the game industry watched the segment, they reeled and fumed.

Lowenstein felt more exasperated than ever. Prior to the segment's airing, he tried to interest the producers in other angles—the demographics of games, the health benefits—but for naught. Lowenstein later recalled, “People would apologize and say, ‘Listen, I'm really sorry, but the editors are telling me I have to do this story, I know it's bullshit. I know Jack Thompson is a joke. But we gotta do the story, and we're going to quote Jack.' It became increasingly appalling and irresponsible for supposedly honorable, serious journalists to knowingly feature someone they would privately admit lacked credibility only because he was good on TV.”

Back in New York, Pat Vance, the businesslike president of the ESRB, and her lead publicist, Elliot Mizrahi, watched Thompson on *60 Minutes* in awe. “What's incredible is when he's on with Ed Bradley, he's measured and composed,” Mizrahi later said, “but his press releases are like the ranting of a maniac.”

“We don't serve Jack Thompson,” Vance snapped, “we serve the public.” Yet she knew she was helpless to his message. Thompson simply played the media game better than they did. “It's not a great story to say the industry has its act together,” she said. Her strategy: “Stay focused, and try not to listen.”

Still, the guys back in New York couldn't help but watch—and fume. “We were low-hanging fruit for the sensationalists and the extremists,” King recalled. “And there was value in the IP of *Grand Theft Auto*, to the extent that someone like Jack Thompson could make it his platform. We ultimately thought it would end in tears for someone like Jack Thompson.”

Yet with his phone ringing off the hook from reporters, Thompson felt more powerful than ever. Nothing could stop him, not the people who called him crazy or even the ones who had been calling him at home, threatening to kill him. He was on a mission from God. “I was enjoying this,” he later wrote in his memoir, “all the while trying to remember whose victory it really was.”

His son, Johnny, however, now in the sixth grade, seemed to have doubts. As a younger boy, he had dutifully joined his dad's crusade, even buying *GTA*: *Vice City* while his dad videotaped him stealthily outside. Yet now he was in middle school, surrounded by game players who knew he was the son of the biggest player hater around. After his dad had been invited to speak about violent games at his school, he approached his father.

“Dad,” Johnny said, “I think it's great that you're on this national show, but the kids are giving me grief about it. Kids I don't even know are coming up to me and bothering me, saying things like ‘Tell your dad that I'm not going to Columbine.'” He begged his dad not to deliver the speech. Thompson's heart sank as he looked

down into his son's eyes. Yet after telling the school he was declining the speech, the school counselor convinced Thompson that the best thing to do for his boy was to share this message with everyone before it was too late. Thompson agreed.

On the day of his lecture, he stood before the kids, Thompson stoked their fears as deftly as he did the viewers of *60 Minutes*. He quoted passages from the bible, along with brain-scan studies on players of violent games, and he invoked the palpable horror of school shootings. "The *Grand Theft Auto* games turn the world on its head," he preached. "Bad guys are good guys. Cops are the enemy. Women are to be used and discarded... . If you are convinced that violent video games cannot possibly affect you, then how sure are you that they will not affect a classmate?"

Still a stay-at-home dad, Thompson had to pick up his son at the end of school that day. As he waited, he had no idea how his son had reacted to his speech. Would Johnny hate him? Was this crusade really worth it, after all? "Dad," Johnny told him, "I was proud of you." Then he drove his boy safely through Vice City, home.

ACROSS THE OCEAN, two weeks after Thompson's appearance on *60 Minutes*, Patrick Wildenborg and the *GTA* modders were feeling proud, too. Since finding the secret code hidden in *San Andreas*, they were on a mission to see what it revealed. They created a secret forum in an online chat room, where a couple of dozen modders met every day as they pursued their quest.

These weren't any ordinary files, they realized. They referred to animations left out of the game for some reason. The problem was, without the right software, the modders couldn't see what the images contained. One modder with a particularly awesome nickname, Barton Waterduck, got to work on cracking the code. Wildenborg knew as much about Waterduck as anyone else on the forums—pretty much nothing. But Waterduck had skills. He ran the code through a crude program that converted the files into stick figure animations—not the fully realized scenes, alas, but at least a sketch of what possibly was there.

When Wildenborg downloaded the video that Waterduck had posted online, he struggled to make out the abstract images. He saw a white stick figure person. Lines for legs. The body. Arms. A head. The person appeared to be on all fours. Wildenborg lowered his laptop screen in case his kids wandered by. "It was puzzling," he later recalled. "It was pretty clear the animations were sexual."

He was right. The hidden files had suggestive names—"SEX," "KISSING," "SNM," and "BLOWJOBZ." Soon they had more proof. On March 18, 2005, at 5:05 p.m., after two months of tinkering, Waterduck posted a note to the group titled "Real SEX animations—really." He explained how he had run the animation code

through a special program with astonishing results. “There he was, CJ on the pavement,” Waterduck wrote, “fucking like a rabbit.” He punctuated the line with a wide-mouthed, wide-eyed emoticon. “I never EVER thought they actually created real sex animations like that in a ps2 game,” he wrote, “and if they took it out, well, they didn't.”

Waterduck shared his code so that others could achieve the same results. The forums lit up. Finding hidden files was one allure of modding, but finding hidden sex files in the biggest video game around—that was too killer for words. “Wow,” wrote one modder, “I really didn't expect Rockstar to leave that in there.” He joked, “Now they are training children to kill prostitutes as well as teaching them sex moves.”

Still, Waterduck had not unearthed an entire coherent scene, only random, disorganized pieces. By the next day, Waterduck had found more, he wrote, “a video of CJ with afro and a goatie and with a almost naked (?) girlfriend model, suck, fucking, slapping, slapping too hard (!), lying, sitting, standing, on knees... . Only different from a real porn video is that CJ has clothes on.”

It was like seeing the separate elements of a cartoon but not the whole cartoon itself. With each animation, though, a bigger picture began to take shape. “The diversity and types of animations lead me to believe that it was planned to be a mini game,” posted one modder, who suggested they work now to piece it together. “But we better keep that whole thing private for now,” he added, “or R* will definitely take the anims and models out of the PC version, and that's not what we want, right?”

The modders knew enough about the real-life battles of Rockstar to realize they were playing with more than laughs. By making this public, who knew what kind of Thompsonian backlash might hit their favorite pastime? “Maybe we should keep quiet about it?” suggested one concerned modder. “If we release this video, all the bitch-mom's in all the world are gonna freak and jump on the anti-*GTA* bandwagon and give R* grief. Maybe R* will decide to remove it for the PC version. Then again, maybe not. Maybe it'll create a sensation for the PC release.”

What had Rockstar wrought? Wildenborg wondered. Why had they buried these files? “It was just a sort of treasure hunt,” he later said. “I felt like a detective figuring out how stuff works.” Late at night on his couch with his coffee, he obsessively pored over the files until he found something stunning—a series of commands that enabled the player to control the action firsthand. Because he was just reading code, he couldn't see the action, but the clues seemed sure enough: this wasn't some kind of sexual cinematic, it was a mini-game!

“There are two variations,” he posted. “A spanking game and a shagging game.” In

the spanking game, he explained, players had to smack a girlfriend's booty by tapping a button on the PS2 controller to get her as stimulated as possible. A bar labeled “EXCITEMENT” measured the player's progress. “A wrongly time spank or a missed one lowers the exitement [*sic*],” Wildenborg noted. “In the shagging game, you need to move the analog stick in rhythm with the movement of the bodies to increment the exitement,” he continued in broken English. He also thought he found scenes showing CJ getting a BJ while driving his car and while taking his girlfriend for a walk.

Despite all of their detective work, however, they didn't have the files they needed to bring the complete mini-games to life. “We had no proof,” Wildenborg later recalled. They had to wait for the PC version of *San Andreas*, which would give them the full ability to hack completely into the code they needed. There was just one catch: although Rockstar had left the mini-game code in the PS2 game, for all the modders knew the company had removed it from the PC game. “Lets pray they left the animations in,” Wildenborg posted.

A few days later, on June 8, Wildenborg eagerly flipped open his laptop on his couch. It was nearing midnight. The PC version of *San Andreas* had just come out in the States. Now, once and for all, his code could be tested to see whether the full mini-game could finally be made to work. At 11:37 p.m., a modder posted the results. “It looks like this is working Pat,” he wrote. “Although I failed to satisfy her on my first attempt. But I got her on my second try!”

Wildenborg leaned forward as he finally saw the full video of the scene unfold. It started familiarly enough. CJ pulled up in his car with his date to her house as she said, “How about a little coffee?” A subtitle appeared on the bottom of the screen, “This is it, she's inviting you in for coffee! Gird your loins for love.” At this point in the official version of the game, CJ and the girl would go into the house as the camera remained outside—suggestively shaking. And that would be that.

Yet with Wildenborg's code running now, the mission cut to the hidden scene of CJ and the girl inside. Her bedroom was small and messy, with a *GTA: Vice City* poster and a poster for the fictional film *Badfellas* on the wall. CJ, in his jeans and white undershirt, leaned back on her bed as she stood before him with her back to the camera. She wore nothing but a thong and a Rockstar Games baby T-shirt, just as the company sold in real life.

Then she knelt down.

The ensuing scene was more comical than pornographic, mainly because CJ remained fully clothed throughout the tryst. As the girl's head bobbed between his legs, CJ reached for the back of her head and pressed it deeper into his blue-jeaned crotch. She then lay back on the bed, as he mounted her missionary style, still

completely dressed. An instructional graphic in the upper left-hand corner explained to “push the left analog stick up and down in rhythm.” An “Excitement” bar graph, just as Wildenborg had found, measured CJ's progress as he thrust. There were no genitals or money shots, but the scene, in such a prudish industry, was outrageous enough. “You're a real professional, baby!” CJ gushed, over her moans. “Go on, tell me I'm the best!”

After all of that work, all of the collaboration, the modders had done it, unearthed the sex mini-game that Wildenborg dubbed “Hot Coffee”—both for the drink that the girl euphemistically invited CJ to share and for Wildenborg's own love of the stuff.

“*Zege*,” he said in Dutch.

Victory.

20

Hot Coffee

WANTED LEVEL

Milky white clouds rolled against a bright blue sky over a jagged mountain range. A glowing sun bathed the earth in honey-colored hues of amber. You felt as if you were flying over the Rockies in a smooth, silent glider. Yet this scene wasn't real. It was a simulation.

The video played on a giant screen in Los Angeles, as a sea of slack-jawed gamers gaped from their seats. It was May 2005 at the annual E3 convention, and more than seventy thousand people had come for the biggest show yet. The game industry was posting record numbers, approaching $30 billion worldwide and more than $10 billion in the United States alone. Even better, three new video game consoles were being announced this week: Nintendo's new machine, code-named Revolution; Microsoft's Xbox 360; and Sony's PlayStation 3.

At the packed Sony press conference, the company's iconic exec Phil Harrison towered onstage in a blue suit and an open-collared shirt, evangelizing the PS3's awesome processing chip, called the Cell. Technical specifications elicited fetishistic oohs and aahs from the crowd. “Even the clouds are generated procedurally,” Harrison effused, as the gamers pressed their digital cameras against their eyes. The heavenly scene was, Harrison added, a “stunning example of where immersion in games will go from here on in.”

If the players wouldn't take Sony's word for it, they would believe the deified game king whose face then filled the enormous screen onstage: Sam Houser. The pretaped video seemed like a dispatch from deep in Rockstar's elusive bat cave. Sam sat in a darkened room, blinds cracked ever so slightly on the window beside him. He wore a loose gray T-shirt and an unkempt beard. Dark circles puffed under his eyes, as if he'd just been pulled from an all-nighter.

“I think what we're most looking forward to creating in a PlayStation 3 game is a truly realized, truly immersive living, breathing world,” he said, gesturing emphatically and evoking the old tagline from DMA. “This is what we live for,” he

said. “You know, every five or six years, these amazing companies like Sony come along and give you this wonderful new piece of equipment that allows you to start unlocking your vision and unlocking the dream that you've been having for however long.

“With Cell and with PlayStation 3, we feel very excited and very confident that we're going to be able to absolutely push the limits of what can be created and the experiences that we can immerse our audience in. We really know that we're going to be able to go to the next level in terms of realistic simulations and realistic immersion, combined with incredible narrative, incredible storytelling, and those two elements combined are what are going to create the experiences of the future.”

Then, as quickly as he had materialized, he was gone. Gamers weren't used to hearing much, if anything, from Sam anymore. Since his early days of preening on magazine pages, he'd withdrawn so much that any interview with him was preceded by adjectives such as *reclusive* and *Pynchonesque*. At E3, Rockstar maintained the enigma, parking a fleet of jet-black tour buses with blackened windows inside the convention hall. Only conventioneers with elite invites were allowed inside to check out the company's latest games.

Despite the stealthy pretense, Sam seemed busier and happier than ever. Now married, he and his wife had recently welcomed a baby boy. Sam's days became even sunnier this month when he went to San Diego to oversee the making of a new game, *Red Dead Redemption.* The Old West adventure was a follow-up to the previous year's *Red Dead Revolver*, also developed by the team at Rockstar's San Diego studio. Though *Revolver* earned mixed reviews, Sam, an erudite fan of spaghetti Westerns and Sam Peckinpah, felt convinced that the sequel could be a brilliant way to bring the open world design of *GTA* to a fresh, but no less outlaw, American dream.

In the meantime, business was booming. Sony had recently launched its new PlayStation Portable handheld game system, and Rockstar's title *Midnight Club 3* had been the top launch title. *San Andreas* was still selling out around the world. Privately, Sam was eagerly awaiting the launch of the PC port of the game. Rockstar had still been talking about distributing a patch following the PC release, which would let gamers unlock the sex mini-game, once and for all. As an added concession to the modders, Rockstar changed the end user license agreement for the PC *San Andreas* to permit players “to construct new game levels and other related game materials.” Game on.

Yet when Sam arrived at work in San Diego on June 9, 2005, two days after the PC game's release, it seemed more like game over. That morning, the SEC revealed the findings of its two-year investigation into Take-Two Interactive. The commission

announced a settlement agreement under which Take-Two would pay $7.5 million in penalties (including $6.4 million in combined penalties paid by Brant, the vice president of sales and two former Take-Two executives)—but would admit no wrongdoing.

The allegations suggested an elaborate game behind the scenes. The SEC alleged that on Halloween Day 2000, executives at Take-Two recorded a single shipment of 230,000 video games for $5.4 million, its biggest sale to date, but the games were soon sent back to headquarters. To hide their return, Take-Two had disguised it as a purchase of “assorted products.” As a result, the company improperly recognized $60 million in revenue from 180 different parking transactions in 2000 and 2001. To “consistently meet or exceed” revenue ensured that Take-Two, according to the SEC, met or surpassed financial forecasts and delivered “substantial bonuses” to execs, including Brant—who sold $20 million in stock along the way.

Yet the blow of the SEC news that morning was only the first punch. When Sam went online, he found another story about Rockstar blowing up on the message boards. Some dude named Patrick W had just uploaded a new mod for *GTA: San Andreas* to his homepage in the Netherlands. He called it Hot Coffee. “With this mod,” Patrick W posted, “you will be able to unlock the uncensored interactive sex-games with your girlfriends in *San Andreas*. Rockstar build [*sic*] all this stuff in the game, but decided to disable it in their final release for unknown reasons. And now this mod enables these sex-games again, so now you can enjoy the full experience.”

Sam grabbed his phone and stabbed the numbers for Rockstar's office in New York. Because Rockstar hadn't yet put its patch online for the sex scene, this meant that the intrepid modders had somehow reconstituted the mini-game on their own. Back in the loft on Broadway, the phones were ringing off the hook. Rockstar's harried team of publicists looked up to find a boss looming over them.

“Don't answer the phones,” he said. “This is going to get ugly.”

DOUG LOWENSTEIN walked into his office of the Entertainment Software Association in Washington, D.C., on June 9 to find his assistant looking forlorn. “Oh, shit,” he was told, “we have a problem.”

A video of the Hot Coffee mini-game was already going viral online. As Lowenstein watched the girlfriend go down on CJ, he thought it was a joke—cartoonish, like something from a PG-13 movie. Yet he knew that while the world had long decried violence in video games, this was pushing into a new territory: sex. As the industry's chief lobbyist, Lowenstein knew the stakes better than anyone.

Since the industry developed the ESRB in 1994 in the wake of threatened

government regulation, he had labored every day to win the trust of politicians. It had been costly, with hundreds of thousands of dollars wasted on related legal fees. The battles hadn't been easy, and he had put himself on the line when Take-Two and Rockstar refused to get involved in the public debate. Hot Coffee was no laughing matter. “If this undermined the political support we had, from Joe Lieberman to David Walsh and Hillary Clinton,” he later recalled, “we would be in a very compromised position. This endangered the credibility of the most important shield our industry had to excessive regulatory force.”

After seeing the clip, Lowenstein phoned Pat Vance, the head of the ESRB, who was also reeling from the news. Vance felt the same pressure that Lowenstein did to defend the industry's ratings from government regulation, but, she wondered, maybe this mod wasn't a problem after all. The ESRB rated games, not user-generated content, and if this was just something programmed in some basement in Holland, then it seemed beyond their purview. Even the staunchest opponents weren't lobbying to legislate what gamers did in their own homes.

If it was true, however, as the modder claimed, that “Rockstar build [sic] all this stuff in the game,” then they had a potential nightmare ahead. Had Rockstar gamed the ESRB by neglecting to disclose sexual content hidden in *San Andreas* in order to get an M-rating? If so, this would confirm the worst stereotypes of the industry and would provide a smoking gun that legislators and critics such as Jack Thompson had been hunting for all these years. Like the pixilated girl in the Rockstar baby tee, the gamers would be screwed. “If the publisher put the content on the disc,” Vance said, “somebody knew it was there.”

“THEY FOUND IT,” Sam wrote in e-mail to Les Benzies on June 13. “. . . [does] this cause any problems? Hope not as it is pretty cool.”

But why stop there? Rockstar could release its patch online anyway, so that less industrious gamers could easily “unlock this gem” of Hot Coffee themselves. Donovan, as usual, expressed concern. Releasing a patch now would only fan the flames of controversy and possibly cause the game to lose the M-rating they had labored so hard to receive.

By the next day, Hot Coffee was the talk of the office. Two producers within Rockstar were gossiping about the leak, saying that Benzies seemed psyched that the sex scene had been discovered by hackers because now “we don't have to do anything ourselves,” as one wrote. The other agreed that the hack was “better than an official patch” because of its cryptic nature.

Jennifer Kolbe, Rockstar's director of operations, e-mailed Donovan and Rockstar

producer Jenefer Gross that same day to further explain what had happened. “[W]hen we originally created the sex scenes that Sam wanted approved, we used girlfriend models wearing underwear,” she wrote. “Also present in the code (but unused by us) were fully nude girlfriend skins. The author of the mods used those skins instead of the clothed versions, making things appear even worse than we'd originally intended.” She added that the unlocked scene “is the entire sex animation that was in the game previously . . . the mod unlocked everything.”

In an e-mail to Donovan, Sam reiterated that deleting Hot Coffee from the game would have been too complicated. “We locked it away because there was no other way to get the game done on time—safely,” he wrote. “The code is very interwoven in [*GTA*] and everything reacts to everything else,” he continued. “The impact of yanking something late is too scary.”

Yet Rockstar's veteran technical officer, Foreman, didn't agree. Yanking the mini-game “wouldn't take that long at all,” he later said, “not even days.” The fact that it wasn't removed was “laziness, pure and simple,” he said. Foreman felt duped. When he had been told that the sex scene had been removed from the game, he assumed that meant it had been deleted from the disc, not merely wrapped. “We didn't question it,” he later said. “If it's out, it's out.”

For years, Sam had tried to play life like a video game, planning for every contingency, sculpting Rockstar's outlaw image, fighting conservatives, managing the media, plotting precisely how much they could get away with in a game. Real people—in their complexity and emotions and unpredictability—always seemed to be a source of frustration for him. No one believed in the games as he did. No one worked as hard for them as he did. No one saw the beauty in them as he did. Yet now, after one deft move by some gamer in the Netherlands, the carefully constructed world shattered. This crisis was real. Now he had to deal with it.

With Hot Coffee unleashed, Rockstar readied its PR team for the crisis. “There is some sexualized content that was removed from the released version of *San Andreas*,” Gross explained to the publicists in an e-mail. “The process of removing it involves burying it deep within the code, however, with the release of the pc version, modders (people who go into the code to add things/change things to make quirky things happen), have found the hidden code and accessed it revealing the sexual content that was removed from the released version. They then post instructions for others on how to access this content.”

Soon, all of Rockstar's PR and marketing people were pulled into a meeting, where they found a brash new PR guy at the table. As Todd Zuniga, a former game journalist who had joined Rockstar as a PR manager, listened to the new PR guy map out his militaristic strategy, he couldn't help but laugh inside. Zuniga ran a humor

site on the side and thought the scandal represented the height of absurdity. When he watched the Hot Coffee scene, he thought, “Look at this stupid shit. Why'd they put that in?” Even worse, the new PR guy sure didn't seem like a gamer to him and seemed to “say absolutely nothing and talk to you for an hour,” Zuniga later said. “Why did they bring him in? That's kind of weird. They have no faith in anyone. They think everyone's an idiot.”

As Zuniga said he was instructed, phone calls were to remain unanswered. One caller demanded an answer, however: Pat Vance at the ESRB. After talking with Eibeler, she called Lowenstein and told him the news. “They claimed it was a third party modification,” Vance said. In other words, Take-Two and Rockstar implied that the content was not on the disc but something created by a gamer for fun and released online. Vance, however, wasn't going to take Rockstar's word for it. “We're going to do an investigation,” she told Lowenstein.

“Do what you have to do,” he said.

On July 8, Vance released a statement announcing the ESRB's official investigation into Hot Coffee. “The integrity of the ESRB rating system is founded on the trust of consumers who increasingly depend on it to provide complete and accurate information about what's in a game,” she said. “If after a thorough and objective investigation of all the relevant facts surrounding this modification, we determine a violation of our rules has occurred, we will take appropriate action.” What that action would be, they didn't know. Nothing like this had happened before.

With news of the investigation, Hot Coffee became the biggest scandal ever to hit the game press. This was like their very own Watergate—Coffeegate, some joked—starring the most notorious and guarded publisher in the business. “Today, one of the most popular recent game industry rumors showed signs of turning into a very real scandal,” *GameSpot* reported.

Yet Rockstar seemed to be implying that the sex scene had been the creation of modders, not them. “We also feel confident that the investigation will uphold the original rating of the game, as the work of the mod community is beyond the scope of either publishers or the ESRB,” the company said in a statement.

“Was the Hot Coffee code included on the game discs manufactured by Rockstar?” a writer for *GameSpot* asked a Rockstar PR representative that day.

“No,” the PR rep answered.

As news of the investigation spread, politicians moved in. A young aide served up Hot Coffee to his boss, California state assemblyman and Democrat Leland Yee, one of the growing ranks of politicians who were sponsoring bills to outlaw the sale of Mature-rated games to minors. “It's outrageous,” Yee said. “It tells you how to copulate a woman. That should not be in the hands of children.”

Along with the National Institute on Media and the Family, Yee demanded that the ESRB slap *San Andreas* with the dreaded Adults Only rating. Rerating or altering the game would be a massive undertaking, requiring Rockstar to recall millions of products at a cost of surely tens of millions of dollars—not to mention banning it from major retailers. Yee had his own solution, AB 450, a bill to ban violent video games from being sold to minors.

Back at Take-Two, CEO Paul Eibeler struggled to keep up with the scandal. “It just spun out of control,” he later said. “It was a politician's goldmine.” There was a great irony at play. *GTA* was a scandal invented by a publicist in England, brought to America, where it became real. Now the people outside the United States were seeing this as a joke. Eibeler's colleagues in Europe couldn't believe the concerns in America over the scene. “The Europeans were laughing,” he recalled. “You're worried about some graphics that some hacker opened up and had sexual innuendo?”

To ease the minds of the already weary Take-Two board, Eibeler sent them a memo reassuring them that “these modifications are not possible on retail Xbox or PlayStation consoles.” This implied that the scene was not on the disc at all, which, of course, wasn't true—though it was unclear how much Eibeler knew at that moment. A follow-up memo from him the next day, however, acknowledged that mods had been found online for the consoles.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, Wildenborg's once-quiet home had been turned upside down. Within a month of its release, the Hot Coffee code had been downloaded more than one million times. Dutch TV camped outside his house. The phone rang nonstop with calls from the press around the world: CNN, the *New York Times*, ABC News. With his wife panicking as her young kids played, they soon took the phone off the hook. “We didn't know what was happening or how it would influence our future,” Wildenborg later said. As a precaution, he told his boss what was going on. His boss referred Wildenborg to his lawyers—just in case.

When asked by the Associated Press about Rockstar's denial of having put the sex scene on the disc, Wildenborg lashed out. “If Rockstar denies that, then they're lying, and I will be able to prove that,” he said. “My mod does not introduce anything to the game. All that content that is shown was already present on the DVD.”

Wildenborg wasn't fighting off only the press, but other modders, too. Some resented Wildenborg talking smack about Rockstar. “Seriously, Patrick,” wrote one modder in the online forums, “are you trying to dig them in deeper? They've denied it because they really don't want the game being re-rated as AO. If the game gets re-rated as AO, it'll hurt their sales, and they'll care less about modding in future games.” The modder suggested telling the press that the content wasn't in the

original game. “It might be bending the truth a little,” he wrote, “but it's better than going against Rockstar.”

“I don't think R* should have to go it alone,” another modder agreed. “This is every gamer in the US's problem if the soccer moms get the game b& [banned].”

“The last thing I want is to get rockstar into problems,” Wildenborg replied, but “. . . If R* denies that the content was on the disc, they basicly say I've been a liar all along (and a pr0n producer).” Yet the modders convinced him in the end. Wildenborg just wanted his life, and his hobby, back and agreed to stick by Rockstar's side. “I think the next time a journalist asks a question,” he wrote, “I won't be answering his questions, but just issue a R* friendly statement.”

Together, the modders strategized on how best to distract the media. One suggested pitting them against Sam's old rival, Electronic Arts, instead. Modders, they knew, had recently created a program to make characters in the EA game *The Sims* naked. Why not just point that out—even though it wasn't analogous to Rockstar putting the sex scene in its own game? At least, it would be a diversion.

When the *New York Times* e-mailed Wildenborg for an interview, he panicked, worrying that his broken English would do him in. So he had a friend compose what he described in the modder forums as an “exceptional Rockstar friendly reply,” including a dig at *The Sims*, which he sent to the paper in reply. “At the end of the day,” the *Times* quoted Wildenborg as saying, “*Grand Theft Auto* is not a game for young children, and is rated accordingly.”

On July 11, the day the *Times* story ran, Wildenborg's phone rang. Wearily, he answered, but it wasn't the press this time. The caller said he was from Rockstar Games. Wildenborg's heart raced. What did they want with him? He asked for an e-mail address for verification. Sure enough, when he got a reply from the Rockstar address, he knew this was real. When he phoned back, the caller told Wildenborg how much Rockstar appreciated the quote on his website and, specifically, the part where he said that Hot Coffee was only playable when the game was modified. Oh, and they wanted to give a heads up. “We're going to issue a statement tomorrow,” the caller said. “You shouldn't worry too much about it.”

Wildenborg hung up with a sigh. “I felt relief that not too much consequences personally, that they weren't suing,” he later said. The next day, Rockstar put out a statement finally addressing the scandal in full. There would have been one way to come clean: to admit, in clear language, that the sex scene was on the disc but had been cut and not intended for release. Rockstar could say truthfully there was no intention to deceive the ESRB or pervert the minds of the world's youth at all. Yet instead of being forthright, they seemed to throw the modders under the bus.

“So far we have learned that the ‘hot coffee' modification is the work of a

determined group of hackers who have gone to significant trouble to alter scenes in the official version of the game," the statement read. "In violation of the software user agreement, hackers created the 'hot coffee' modification by disassembling and then combining, recompiling and altering the game's source code. Since the 'hot coffee' scenes cannot be created without intentional and significant technical modifications and reverse engineering of the game's source code, we are currently investigating ways that we can increase the security protection of the source code and prevent the game from being altered by the 'hot coffee' mod."

Game sites across the Net seized the answer. "Well, that's pretty damn clear," reported the popular blog *Kotaku*, under the headline "Rockstar Official Denies Making Hot Coffee." *Kotaku* continued, "To summarize: We had nothing to do with it. Now we just have to wait and see what the investigations into the mod in the U.S. and Australia find. I'm pretty sure it will be easy to determine who's telling the truth and who's lying and *man* is someone gonna get in trouble when they do."

The modders, however, knowing the truth, felt incensed. Despite all of their efforts, their years of loyalty, this was how Rockstar repaid them? "R* are a bunch of fuckign [*sic*] retards," wrote one modder online. "They're now trying to demonise modding and make us out to be the bad guys. It's completely fucking stupid, and completely fucking pointless."

"They can't possibly have expected us not to find it eventually, if not Patrick, someone else later," wrote one modder of Hot Coffee. "It was just a matter of time with this one." Another wrote that "they are outright lying and trying to discredit Patrick from what I can see. I'm also sure heads will roll at Rockstar for leaving all that unused content in the game."

Within Rockstar, people were just as amazed by the press release. "You've got to be fucking kidding me," said Foreman, who read it while he was in Scotland visiting Rockstar North. Well aware of the truth behind Hot Coffee, he considered the press release "a huge miscalculation." After so many futile attempts to argue and change things, he thought it was pointless to talk with the Housers and Donovan about it now. Instead, he looked at the other gamers and cracked up. "What could we do?" he recalled. "We sat around and laughed about it."

Eibler later said, "It wasn't the best written press release." The Hot Coffee scandal confirmed all of the hysterical, overblown suspicions about *Grand Theft Auto*, and Rockstar's publicity department, which in the past had displayed an uncanny knack for building brand mystique, only seemed to exacerbate the outrage. "Blaming it on hackers was a colossal PR screw-up," Corey Wade later said. "It was a complete disaster. . . . They lied."

"They released that bullshit quote about how this is an act of hackers, which is

completely comical," Zuniga agreed. "We were, like, 'This company is run by arrogant English people. What the fuck was that statement? Why don't we tell the truth?'"

Work on Rockstar's games screeched to a halt. Approval for ads and publicity plans got derailed. Screenshots sat on computers awaiting sign-off. With the statement out, talking points were drawn up for the PR team—the plan was to spin this as an attack on the game industry by political conservatives out to undermine the industry. When *Rolling Stone* called, asking whether the creators of the sex scene were at Rockstar, the PR rep bristled. "They're not within the company," he said, then began to chastise the magazine. "One of our concerns with this story is that it might add to the confusion of people who don't understand how the industry works," he said.

Zuniga couldn't believe this ploy to cast Rockstar as victims. "These people are trying to undermine video gaming?" he asked dubiously. "It's an attack on the game industry?" He knew this was far from the truth. As one journalist told him, "This isn't attack on the game industry, you fucked up."

While Take-Two tried to placate the board and Rockstar struggled to manipulate the press, Rockstar also tried to repair damage with the modders it had so unceremoniously left behind. On July 13, an e-mail allegedly from Rockstar with the subject heading "Confidential—Private Statement to the *GTA* Mod Community" unexpectedly arrived in modders' in-boxes around the world. "I'm a bit disappointed that they only want to support us in private communication," one modder responded, "but that's probably because of pr, and it's better than nothing."

"We are sure that by now you are all aware of the media furor surrounding the 'hot coffee' mod," the e-mail read. "Several long-time critics of video games are using it to renew their attacks on *Grand Theft Auto*: *San Andreas* in particular and video games in general. Our critics are using the opportunity to distort *Grand Theft Auto* and suggest that games do [not] deserve to be treated the same as other forms of media. Therefore, we have been forced to counter their arguments.

"Unfortunately for the gaming community, elements of the mainstream media don't cover technology or new media well, and they can be especially bad with subtle details. As we defend the game and stress the delineation between the official retail version and the alterations to the code, we want you to know we continue to respect and admire the creativity involved in creating mods. The strength of the mod community proves that *Grand Theft Auto* will always have more fans than critics, and we wanted to take this opportunity to reiterate our gratitude. We will always admire the passion and technical brilliance of the mod community. Thank you for your notes of support, and thank you for not letting the personal agendas of our

critics get in the way of your enthusiasm for *Grant Theft Auto: San Andreas.*

“We are disappointed by the way the media have misrepresented *Grand Theft Auto* and detracted from the innovative and artistic merits of the game. But the biggest problem with all of this is that it serves to widen the gap between people who create and play games and people who don't. Critics create these controversies to undermine the rating system and to create a public appetite for censorship and extreme regulation. Indeed, the existence of a rating system is a fact our critics ignore as much as they ignore the fact that gaming is now an entertainment medium enjoyed predominantly by adults.

“Thank-you again for your support.

“Rockstar Games.”

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Adults Only

ESRB CONTENT DESCRIPTORS

NUDITY—Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity.

PARTIAL NUDITY—Brief and/or mild depictions of nudity.

SEXUAL CONTENT—Non-explicit depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including partial nudity.

SEXUAL THEMES—References to sex or sexuality.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE—Depictions of rape or other violent sexual acts.

STRONG SEXUAL CONTENT—Explicit and/or frequent depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity.

When Jack Thompson heard about Hot Coffee, he saw more than steam rising from a cup, he saw a smoking gun. For years, he had been banging his war drum about game makers marketing objectionable content to kids. With Hot Coffee, there would be no speculating anymore. If the scene really was on the disc, then everything he had ever warned the world about would suddenly be justified. He couldn't be called crazy anymore. He'd be right.

Thompson called his longtime ally in the culture war, David Walsh of the National Institute of Media and Family. The more Walsh listened, however, the more dubious he became.

“You don't have to agree with me,” Thompson replied, when Walsh divulged his concerns. “I'm the lawyer, you're the psychologist. You just do your research, and I'll take care of getting these games banned.” Thompson urged him to move fast on Hot Coffee. “Dave,” he said, “I think this is a big deal because if they put that in there, not only is it fraud, but it's distribution of sexual material to minors.”

Putting his differences with Thompson aside, Walsh issued what he called a “National Parental Warning” about Hot Coffee. “While *San Andreas* is already full of violent behavior and sexual themes, the pornographic sex scenes push it over the edge,” he warned in a statement. “Can you imagine the impact of 13, 14 and 15 year old boys literally enacting this scene?”

Thompson's phone rang later, but it wasn't Walsh. It was the office of Senator Hillary Clinton. “The senator wants to do a press conference on Hot Coffee,”

Thompson was told, “and we need you to prep her.”

Clinton was no stranger to *GTA.* In March, she had delivered a speech to the Kaiser Family Foundation about the impact of violent media on children, which she called a “silent epidemic.” She singled out *Grand Theft Auto,* she said, “which has so many demeaning messages about women and so encourages violent imagination and activities and it scares parents. . . . They're playing a game that encourages them to have sex with prostitutes and then murder them. You know, that's kind of hard to digest.”

Thompson had written to Clinton soon after her speech, urging her to join his fight. “I am a Republican; you are a Democrat,” he wrote. “As you know, this is not a partisan issue. . . . Senator, I believe the time has come for the United States Congress to prohibit the sale of mature-rated video games to children. I respectfully urge you to author a bill toward that end.” More Columbines, he warned her, were coming.

Now with Clinton calling for his help, he jumped to duty, schooling her on the scourge of *GTA.* Emboldened, he fired off an open letter to the members of the Entertainment Software Association, including Take-Two and Sony, lauding her. “Millions of American parents should be thankful to the Senator for striking back against what can be fairly called ‘Grand Theft Innocence' at the expense of our children by only some within your industry,” he wrote.

Clinton sent a letter apprising the chair of the Federal Trade Commission of the ESRB investigation into Hot Coffee. “Alarmingly, it seems that no one yet knows the source of this content,” she wrote. “We should all be deeply disturbed that a game which now permits the simulation of lewd sexual acts in an interactive format with highly realistic graphics has fallen into the hands of young people across the country.”

Lieberman called for an independent investigation to look further into the scandal.

Clinton introduced legislation to ban the sale of violent and sexually explicit video games to children—with a $5,000 penalty for retailers who do so. “The disturbing material in *Grand Theft Auto* and other games like it is stealing the innocence of our children and it's making the difficult job of being a parent even harder,” Clinton later said. “I am announcing these measures today because I believe that the ability of our children to access pornographic and outrageously violent material on video games rated for adults is spiraling out of control.”

Vance raced to Washington to meet with Clinton and encouraged her to use this moment to educate the public about the ratings system. When Vance arrived, she was told she'd have ten minutes. She earnestly and deftly went through her presentation, handing Clinton brochures on the ratings system, the efforts of the

ESRB. Clinton remained silent until the end, when she leaned back and said, “I just want to protect kids.” Then she got up and left. The meeting was over.

Vance felt stunned. “For her to put up a wall was surprising,” she recalled. “Considering her intellectual abilities, that was disappointing.” Yet Vance felt that the gamers were as much to blame. “Politically, it's such an expedient issue that they don't get negative push-back from constituents,” Vance added and took the gamers to task. “The consumers of video games have not been vocal about these shenanigans,” she said. “They're not calling up senators to say stop with this nonsense.”

With Clinton's call for legislation, Walsh and Thompson pushed to have Take-Two reveal the truth about Hot Coffee, once and for all. “I challenge Take-Two, just tell us: is it on the disc or not?” Walsh told the press.Within hours, Walsh's phone rang. The caller wouldn't identify himself but said he worked in the game industry and had inside information on Hot Coffee. “Dr. Walsh,” the mysterious person said, “I can guarantee that it is on the disc.”

Walsh felt as if he were suddenly in a spy movie; his heart pounded long after the mysterious caller hung up. With this tip, he began to scour Minneapolis for a computer expert to crack the code. Finally, he reached a hacker who said he was a concerned parent and willing to help. “This is what you do,” the hacker told him, “reverse-engineer it.”

“I don't even know what that means!” Walsh said.

The hacker said he'd do the job for $2,000. Walsh agreed. Two days later, the hacker called back. “It's on the disc,” he said.

Walsh knew the ESRB was conducting an investigation of its own, and he was eager to get the news out immediately, but his lawyer advised him against it. “Don't do it,” his attorney said. “You're playing with dynamite. You have to be absolutely certain. You can't take the word of an anonymous tipster. You need a second independent verification, then I could advise you to go public.”

Walsh hung up, flustered. He couldn't afford to pay another hacker, so he thought of a less expensive alternative: the Geek Squad, the tech supporters for hire at Best Buy.

Walsh figured that Best Buy, one of the major game retailers in the United States, had plenty at stake in the possible rerating of *San Andreas*. He thought he might get someone there to help him out, gratis. “Here's what I know,” Walsh told the Geek over the phone, filling him in on the scandal. “Are you interested?” The listless Geek said he'd have to get back to Walsh.

Yet there was no need. Back in New York, Eibeler's phone rang at Take-Two

Interactive. It was Vance, who told him the ESRB had finished its investigation. “You should come up,” she said. “We should meet.” When he asked why, she told him they had determined that Hot Coffee, despite Rockstar's denials, was in fact on the disc. Eibeler sounded surprised. Vance thought it must not have been what his people had told him.

“We have two options,” she explained. “One is to put out a statement to revoke the rating, and basically the retailers would ship the product back, and the product would be off the market. Or we can put out a statement that says we're revoking the rating, and these are the steps that Take-Two is taking.” Vance preferred the second option, which would mean that the publisher, not the retailers, was assuming responsibility.

Rockstar put up a fight. The ESRB had never rated games based on a modification before, Sam and the others argued, and there was no reason to start now. They refused to accept the rerating of the game from M to AO. “Fine,” Vance told them, “you're leaving us with no option but to put out a press release saying it's revoked, and we don't want to do that.” She couldn't believe “the arrogance” of Rockstar, as she later put it. “They were saying we don't have the right to do it, we were saying we do.”

It was undeniably ironic. For years, Sam had tried to make his games more adult. Now he was getting his wish, but not in the way he intended. On July 20, less than a day after a media watchdog group called the Parents Television Council demanded a recall of *San Andreas*, the ESRB announced its findings.

“After a thorough investigation,” Vance said, “we have concluded that sexually explicit material exists in a fully rendered, unmodified form on the final discs of all three platform versions of the game (i.e., PC CD-ROM, Xbox, and PS2). However, the material was programmed by Rockstar to be inaccessible to the player and they have stated that it was never intended to be made accessible. The material can only be accessed by downloading a software patch, created by an independent third party without Rockstar's permission, which is now freely available on the Internet and through console accessories. Considering the existence of the undisclosed and highly pertinent content on the final discs, compounded by the broad distribution of the third party modification, the credibility and utility of the initial ESRB rating has been seriously undermined.”

And so it was done. In an unprecedented move, the ESRB mandated that Rockstar tell retailers to cease all sales of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas.* The game had a new rating now: Adults Only.

22

Busted!

ANSWERS.YAHOO.COM > GAMES & RECREATION > VIDEO & ONLINE GAMES

QUESTION:

I JUST started playing GTA: San Andreas on PS2 (I know I am behind the times). . . . What are you supposed to do after being wasted/busted? Run somewhere? Thanks in advance.

BEST ANSWER:

When you are wasted/busted: Time advances by 6 hrs. You lose all your weapons and $100, unless you have relationships with cops and nurse girlfriends. When you are wasted your max health is somewhat reduced, say about 0.1%. When you are busted your respect increases, again about the same trifle. If you are wasted/busted while doing a mission, you fail that mission and you have to do that mission again.

As the sun beat down during the summer of 2005, Sam knew just where he wanted to go to escape the heat: Gander Mountain. Gander Mountain was a sprawling, log cabin–shaped store in upstate New York, not far from where he and Dan had bought a rural vacation home.

Though it had been nearly seven years since they moved to the United States, Sam still marveled at the wonderful excess of this country, and nothing was quite as wonderfully excessive as this outdoors store. It looked like a prop shop from *Deliverance*: camouflaged paintball face masks, fold-to-go toilets, battery-powered, rabbit-shaped Quiver Critter Decoys. Toward the back, something caught Sam's eye: an M16 rifle. “Wait a minute,” he later recalled, “Wal-Mart is going to pull our game, but you can go in there and buy a pump-action or a Glock or whatever? I don't get it.”

No matter. The awful wake of Hot Coffee had begun. In response to the ESRB's rerating of *San Andreas* to Adults Only, Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, and Circuit City stores pulled the game from their shelves. “We hope we're sending a statement to manufacturers that they need to cooperate with the ESRB,” said a Best Buy spokesperson. Rockstar would now have to remove the sex scene from the game and re-release the discs in order to receive the M-rating again—a process that would take at least until the fall. Wal-Mart alone accounted for 20 percent of game sales, a huge loss in the meantime. In total, Take-Two would spend a reported $25 million to fix,

recall, and rerate the games.

Take-Two tried to save face. “We are deeply concerned that the publicity surrounding these unauthorized modifications has caused the game to be misrepresented to the public and has detracted from the creative merits of this award-winning product,” Eibeler said. Yet there was no more avoiding the fact that Rockstar had been busted for the oldest trick in the book: a hidden fuck.

In July, the board of the ESRB—consisting of representatives from Sony, Nintendo, and other major publishers—met to discuss the fallout. Vance found a room full of angry faces, people angry at Rockstar because they had to, as she later put it, “clean up their mess.” Hot Coffee mucked up years of lobbying and public education efforts. Vance pleaded for more power to enforce her ratings system, but the political backlash grew.

“It looks like Take-Two Interactive purposefully conned the video game industry rating board and parents across the country,” Washington State representative Mary Lou Dickerson told the *Los Angeles Times*. “*San Andreas*, as a top-selling game in the country, now is in the hands of thousands of children who can practice interactive pornography. There should be legal consequences . . . so [the company doesn't] laugh all the way to the bank.”

On July 26, Take-Two dropped another bomb: it was being investigated by the Federal Trade Commission. The House voted 355–21 to pass a resolution asking the FTC to see whether Rockstar had committed fraud by intentionally duping the ratings board to avoid an Adults Only label. Threatening fines, the director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection called this “a matter of serious concern.”

The feds weren't the only ones pursuing Rockstar. On July 27, an eighty-five-year-old grandmother from the Bronx, New York, named Florence Cohen filed a civil suit against the company. Cohen said she had bought the game for her fourteen-year-old grandson and wanted her money back (along with unspecified damages for the false advertising and consumer deception) after learning of the hidden sex scene.

Though Hot Coffee skirted much controversy in the United Kingdom and other countries, the ratings board of Australia declared *San Andreas* illegal to sell, advertise, or distribute after revoking its rating. States that included California, Michigan, and Illinois heightened their fight to ban the sale of M-rated games to minors. “That's what tipped it for the whole industry,” Yee said of Rockstar. “They lied to us.” Fifty-six-year-old Yee called himself a First Amendment defender but drew the line at video games—even though he didn't know *Pac-Man* from table tennis. “When I was in grad school, computers still had lightbulbs,” he said. “I used to play Ping-Pong, you know, that game with the guy eating up balls.”

On October 9, flanked by Girl Scouts and seated behind a table of outdated video

games such as *Postal* and *Manhunt*, California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (the star of his own violent *Terminator* video games) enacted AB 1179: a bill that banned the sale of violent video games to anyone under eighteen. Under the new legislation, retailers such as Best Buy and Wal-Mart would be subject to a $1,000 fine for each violation.

The controversy once again underscored the bias against the medium of gaming. While politicians fretted about children confusing games with reality, they seemed to have a harder time distinguishing between the two worlds than the players did. They spoke of the games as if players were committing the crimes in real life. "You're the one who rapes someone," James Steyer, the CEO of Common Sense Media, the San Francisco–based nonprofit that provided the legal underpinnings of the bill. "You're the person who is serviced by a prostitute in the back of a car."

The next month, Clinton and Lieberman introduced the Family Entertainment Protection Act, which would, among other things, ban the sale of M-rated games to children and allow for government audits of both the game industry's rating system and retailers' enforcement policies.

As the backlash grew, acclaimed game designer Warren Spector took the stage at the Montreal Game Developers Conference and did something few in the industry had before—hit back against Rockstar and *GTA*. "*GTA* is the ultimate urban thuggery simulation, and you can't take a step back from that," he said. "But I sure wish they would apply the same level of design genius to something we really could show enriches the culture instead of debases it . . . . We are dead square in the cultural crosshairs right now."

An editorial in *GameDaily*, the industry trade, echoed the sentiment. "The video game industry is well along the road to losing the culture war in the United States," it warned. "That this could be happening at a point in which games enjoy unprecedented commercial popularity is simply mind boggling."

Yet the momentum against the players couldn't be stopped. Even the city of Los Angeles filed a suit against Take-Two, alleging that the company had violated the state's business code through deceptive marketing and unfair competition. "Greed and deception are part of the *Grand Theft Auto*: *San Andreas* story," said the L.A. city attorney, "and in that respect, its publishers are not much different from the characters in their story."

DARKNESS COVERED New York City, as the neon-pink Ferris wheel spun over Coney Island. A subway car slowly snaked into the station near where a gang had gathered. It looked just like the opening scene from *The Warriors*, but not exactly. It

was a lovingly rendered, shot-for-shot recreation created by Rockstar for a video game version of Sam's favorite childhood film. The game, due in October 2005, cast the player as a new member of the Warriors gang, working his way up through the ranks as he battled off rival squads in scenes and settings straight from the film.

A team of fifty artists and programmers at the company's Canadian studio, Rockstar Toronto, had been laboring for four long years on the title. For Sam and Dan, it felt like coming full circle, taking the fantasy world of their childhood dreams and making it real. Sam retreated gladly into the virtual world of his games. Anything was better than dealing with the feeling of being ganged up against in real life. People were drowning in New Orleans while President Bush flew overhead, and the Feds were coming for them? “These guys are out to get us,” Sam told Dan one day. “They'll garrote us whatever we do. They don't give a shit. This is crazy. They're throwing the serrated-edge boomerangs like the little kid in *Mad Max 2*.”

Sam was also overseeing his most autobiographical game yet, *Bully*. Developed by Rockstar Vancouver, the game followed the adventures of James “Jimmy” Hopkins, a troubled, bald, chubby new kid on a mission to survive a boarding school called Bullworth Academy. With his monogrammed school sweater and battles with teachers and preppies, Jimmy could have come straight out of St. Paul's. Jimmy wasn't the Bully of the title; he was an underdog warding off the bullies with a cheeky arsenal of stink bombs and potato guns. The game mashed up tropes from sources such as *The Outsiders*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Sixteen Candles* to create an archetypal high school setting. Just as *GTA* players had to ingratiate themselves with the mob, the yakuza, and the triads to advance, players of *Bully* had to win over the geeks, the jocks, and the preps.

Within Rockstar, however, the gang of developers weren't feeling so chummy anymore. After years as the self-proclaimed rebels of the industry, being treated like real outlaws didn't feel so hip. Employees hunched quietly at their desks in the office, tapping at their keys. The foosball table and the arcade games collected dust. Members of the public relations team were still twiddling their thumbs because Rockstar refused to discuss the scandal in detail with the press.

To promote *The Warriors*, Dan agreed to talk with the *New York Times* but would not address Hot Coffee. “Certainly, it's frustrating when people don't wish to understand what you do and don't wish to learn,” Dan said. “Anyone who plays any of our games and wishes to criticize it, having played it, experienced it, and thought about it, they are, of course, welcome to do that. But when large numbers of people criticize something and haven't even done it, it's very frustrating. There's a large amount of the population that lives in relative ignorance and only hears scary stories about what we do.”

As a cone of silence enveloped the company, veterans of the team watched in despair. Dave Jones, still working on his own action game, *Crackdown*, thought that "to leave [Hot Coffee] in there was risky and they chose to do that." Former BMG Interactive head Gary Dale, now the managing director of Capcom in Europe, thought that Rockstar's refusal to answer questions only exacerbated the problems. "That just made it worse," he said. "Someone should have publicly engaged and nipped it in the bud, early. It was allowed to drift and drift."

Behind the scenes, some were blaming Brant for not stepping up and, as a result, leaving Rockstar to reel in the chaos. "Sam was extremely frustrated," Eibeler recalled. "He felt he was being personally called out for things—and that other games were being held to different standards. It was more of a political football."

"It definitely had a lot of effect on the company," King recalled. "Distraction, waste of time, slowed our momentum down, took key resources away." They weren't so invulnerable after all. "For me, it was an education in American morals, and history," he said. "Perhaps Hot Coffee symbolized that."

Sam had spent decades warding off the culture warriors as he stuck to his mission, but Hot Coffee was slowing eating away at him. On one level, he felt his legacy under siege. "I don't want that game being remembered for Hot Coffee," he later said, fearing that it "was going to take this really beautiful piece of work and it was just going to be known for something else."

For years, it had been easy to shrug off the critics of video games as simply player haters—out-of-touch politicians and parents. It was almost Freudian. The haters represented mom and dad. Something had changed, however, in the wake of Hot Coffee and the pile-up of murders and mayhem and sensational media associated, no matter how wrongly, with *GTA.* That change became more evident than ever one morning when the Rockstars heard a crowd chanting outside their office on Broadway. "Hey, hey, ho ho," the protesters yelled, "Rockstar has got to go!"

As the players looked down from their windows, they didn't see a mass of middle-aged blowhards outside. They saw a sea of fresh young faces—150 children, mainly black, holding handmade signs with slogans such as "Prosecute Rockstar Games. They are felons" and "Put the Cuffs on Rockstar, Not Youth." The protesters were called the Peaceaholics and had traveled from Washington, D.C., to rally against Rockstar. "These games are training our children to be criminals," one of the group's advisers told ABC News. "Our children are being trained to be killers, murderers, rapists, drug users, drug dealers."

As the crowd swelled, Rockstars who hadn't yet arrived were advised to enter through the back door for safety. Leading the protesters was a familiar gray-haired man. He wore a white button-down shirt and a blue tie and held a bullhorn, chanting

as the kids danced behind him: Jack Thompson.

At the end of many video games there is a Boss Level, when the player faces off against the most imposing foe. Yet when Thompson demanded for someone from Rockstar to come down and meet with them, no one came. To him, they were cowards. He wasn't the hater, he believed; he was fighting for love. Love for the higher power. Love for his son, Johnny. Love for the children surrounding him here. Who was the player now?

23

Bullies

WANTED LEVEL

I AM GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!!!”

That's what the e-mail to Jack Thompson said. He had received it from some anonymous gamer on the heels of his victory over Hot Coffee. “I think video games or [*sic*] freaking awesome, and they are my entire life,” the player wrote, “and for you to insult them, is like telling me my life is totally worthless. For this, sir, I AM GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!!!”

This wasn't the only death threat in his in-box. “Everyone thinks you are insane,” read another, “hence the name ‘Wacko Jacko', which makes you the equivalent of a molester. Therefore you are gay. I hate you, and the world would be a better place if you were brutally murdered.” And another: “This is not spam, its [*sic*] my right as a citizen to send you thousands upon thousands of emails saying the same thing until you die painfully from gun shot wounds.”

Though Thompson considered himself a religious crusader, empowered by a mission from God, he knew he was mortal—and a father to boot. He couldn't take these threats lightly. A few weeks before his protest at Rockstar Games, he sought an unlikely ally for help: the game press. He forwarded the death threats to *GameSpot*, whose editors weren't taking his word. “Are you crazy?” Thompson fired back. “People are threatening to kill me.”

Thompson sought an even higher power: Clinton and Lieberman. “I have had a number of video gamers threaten to kill me in the last few days in the aftermath of the success against *Grand Theft Auto*: *San Andreas*,” he wrote to the senators. “The use of death threats in retaliation for my participation in the public square serves to prove, rather convincingly, that the violent video games are having the attitudinal effect that psychologists such as Dr. David Walsh and others who have testified before Congress say they have.”

Thompson wasn't crying wolf. A sixteen-year-old gamer from Texas was later charged with harassing him. In a mass e-mail about the boy, Thompson called it par

for the course in the war between the players and the haters. "'Shoot the messenger' is the video game industry's strategy," he wrote. "This time, because of the arrest in Texas, it didn't work. It backfired."

Yet that wasn't all. After so many talk shows, so many mass e-mails, so many lawsuits and diatribes against violent games, Thompson found himself battling a new opponent in the culture wars: the players, just as Sam was besieged by the player haters. It had started with flames on forums and message boards with titles such as "Jack the Fucking Video Game Ripper!" and "This man is certifiable!" Then came entire websites and blogs devoted to railing against him—StopJackThompson.com and Hating Jack Thompson Since Before It Was Cool—and the petition Gamers United to Stop Jack Thompson.

Gamers spent hours a day fighting villains, and Thompson—with his gray hair and schoolmarm ways—was a hybrid of Darth Vader, the Teacher from *The Wall*, and Mr. Hand from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High.* One gamer made and sold Jack Thompson Toilet Paper emblazoned with his name, available for $5.95. "Wiping my butt with him may be better than he deserves," the seller wrote. One made an online comic about Thompson. "Rockstar are CRIMINALS!" spewed a manic Thompson in the strip. "They should be sent to prison, raped, then SHOT." An anonymous word balloon responded, "Er . . . for making video games?"

The salvo from gamers only made Thompson more defiant. "The amount of energy put into trying to destroy me tells me they know this is about something worthwhile," he said. Thompson made his e-mail, home address, and phone number (which, to gamers' delight, contained the prefix 666), readily available online and became famous for replying to those who contacted him. The dialogues would eventually end up online. When one game reporter e-mailed to ask for an interview, Thompson replied, "Kiss the game industry good-bye."

Thompson had a new game to kiss off, *Bully.* With little to go on other than the title, he exploited the frothing eagerness of the press by painting a foreboding version of the unreleased game. CNN was quick to give him his airtime. "Tonight, another disturbing example of our culture in decline," bellowed host Lou Dobbs. "A new video game to be released this fall encourages children who have been bullied to become bullies themselves."

"What you are in effect doing is rehearsing your physical revenge and violence against those whom you have been victimized by," Thompson warned. "And then you, like Klebold and Harris in Columbine, become the ultimate *Bully.*"

In response, Thompson penned an open letter to Doug Lowenstein and the press called "A Modest Video Game Proposal." He promised to write a $10,000 check to Eibeler's favorite charity "if any video game company will create, manufacture,

distribute, and sell a video game in 2006 like the following . . .”

Thompson described a game that would follow Osaki Kim or O.K., the bereaved and vengeful father of a boy who'd been bludgeoned to death by a violent gamer. Equipped with a choice of machetes and baseball bats, Kim, Thompson wrote, “hops a plane from LAX to New York to reach the Long Island home of the CEO of the company (Take This) that made the murder simulator on which his son's killer trained. O.K. gets ‘justice' by taking out this female CEO, whose name is Paula Eibel, along with her husband and kids. ‘An eye for an eye,' says O.K., as he urinates onto the severed brain stems of the Eibel family victims, just as you do on the decapitated cops in the real video game *Postal2*.”

After taking out video game lawyers, arcades, and retailers, the player then maneuvers O.K. to his final mission, the 2006 E3 convention in Los Angeles, as Thompson wrote, “to massacre all the video game industry execs with one final, monstrously delicious rampage.” He concluded, “How about it, video game industry? I've got the check and you've got the tech. It's all a fantasy, right? No harm can come from such a game, right? Go ahead, video game moguls. Target yourselves as you target others. I dare you.”

The moguls didn't pick up the gauntlet, but the players did. One team of modders released a free game called *Defamation of Character: A Jack Thompson Murder Simulator*. Built as a modification of *GTA*: *San Andreas*, the game cast players both as Thompson and as Thompson's fictional alter ego, Banman. The ripped-from-the-headlines missions included stopping a truck full of *Bully* games from reaching a store and busting Lowenstein from putting secret sex scenes in a game. Players could even hold a press conference in the game, calling up a menu of Thompson's real quotes. Another mod team made a game more explicitly based on his proposal.

Thompson wasn't buying it. “I'm not interested and won't be commenting on the mod,” he told the site *GamePolitics* in an e-mail. He added that his proposal “was intended to highlight the patent hypocrisy and recklessness exhibited by the video game industry's willingness to target cops, women, homosexuals, and other groups with some of their violent games. To be fair, though, you can't expect a bunch of gamers to understand the satire if they think that Jonathan Swift, the author of ‘A Modest Proposal,' is the name of a new Nike running shoe.”

Over in their self-described “fortified bunker in Seattle,” Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins, the cocreators of the popular video game web comic *Penny Arcade*, had had enough. On October 17, they posted a response. “You know what, Jack? We're going to be the men you're not,” they wrote. “You said that your insulting, illusory ten thousand dollars would go to the charity of Paul Eibeler's choice. We've got a good guess that he'd direct your nonexistant [*sic*] largesse toward The Entertainment

Software Association Foundation, a body that has raised over six point seven million dollars over the last eight years. We've just made the donation you never would, and never meant to. Ten thousand dollars' worth. And we made it in your name."

Thompson wasn't amused. He faxed a letter to the Seattle police chief, urging him to "shut this little extortion factory down and/or arrest some of its employees." Krahulik and Holkins never heard from the local officers. "We should thank our stars that we have someone as impotent as [Thompson] is in his role," Holkins said after the fracas. "Our fear is that someone intelligent and charismatic should take over."

Thompson's "Modest Proposal" turned into a major backlash. In an open letter distributed widely online, David Walsh of the National Institute of Media and Family, the organization Thompson had long cited in his tirades, cut Thompson off for good. "Your commentary has included extreme hyperbole and your tactics have included personally attacking individuals for whom I have a great deal of respect," Walsh wrote in a public letter.

Thompson dismissed Walsh as "an idiot," and Walsh, in a subsequent interview, distanced himself from Thompson even more. "We're coming from a scientific and public safety perspective," he said, "not a religious one." When pressed, however, Walsh admitted that hard evidence linking violent games with violent behavior was lacking. "None of these studies are definitive," he said. "I would never say that playing a violent video game is going to make a kid act violently. What I would say is as kids have risk factors, if you add violent video games into the mix, you're increasing the chances."

Though Lowenstein had always done his best to avoid speaking directly about Thompson, he publicly refused to engage him anymore. "My comment for the record is we have no comment on the work of Jack Thompson," Lowenstein said. "By 2010, the digital generation will be in the seats of power, they'll be in editorial meetings and they will be making news decisions and what people in government and the cultural elite regard now as dangerous will be seen merely as rock and roll."

With Thompson vulnerable, Rockstar moved in against him, too. The guys' first missive came, fittingly, in a game. On October 25, the company released *Grand Theft Auto*: *Liberty City Stories*, a game for the PSP that became the top-selling title on that platform. Thompson surfed over to Rockstar's website promoting the game and found a surprise. Players could click on a fictional e-mail from someone named JT with a group called Citizens United Negating Technology For Life And People's Safety—or C.U.N.T.F.L.A.P.S. for short.

"The internet is unambiguous evil," read the fictional e-mail. "The only things worse than the internet are computer games and liberals. . . . Only last week, I was

using the internet to look up some information for my 15 year old niece, who is a keen water skier and state wide sailor. Trust me when I say this—searching under the subject matter ‘Teenage girls water sports' is not for the faint hearted.”

Outraged, Thompson spammed the Net about the attack, accusing Rockstar and Take-Two of “furthering the notion that its most abiding and most effective critic, Jack Thompson, is himself a sexual pervert.” Thompson added that he “can assure the world that the only thing to which he is ‘addicted' is eating entertainment industry scofflaws for breakfast—and golf.”

Yet his battle with Rockstar was no laughing matter anymore. In November, Thompson went to Fayette, Alabama, to face off with Rockstar in person again. The occasion was a hearing over the $600 million civil lawsuit he filed on behalf of relatives of Devin Moore's victims against Take-Two, Rockstar, Sony Corporation of America, Wal-Mart, and GameStop, where Moore purchased *GTA*: *Vice City.* Moore had been recently convicted of the murders and sentenced to death, but Thompson wanted the game companies to pay.

On November 3, 2005, he and Rockstar's lawyers faced off in a Fayette courtroom. “These *Grand Theft Auto* games are unique,” Thompson argued. “They are murder simulators. The only thought they convey is how to murder people and how to enjoy killing.” Rockstar's team wasn't having any of it, though, and filed a motion to have Thompson removed from the case. “This isn't a street fight,” said one of Rockstar's attorneys. “He's going to turn the courtroom into a circus and we can't have it.”

Thompson lashed out, accusing Rockstar of labeling him a “bisexual and a pedophile,” as he told the judge. Exasperated, the judge pulled out a stack of the e-mails and press releases that Thompson had been spewing across the Net.

“Why did you do this?” the judge asked Thompson.

“You said after the criminal trial to ‘have at it,'” Thompson replied.

“Your idea of ‘have at it' and my ‘have at it' are not the same.”

Days later, the judge issued an order preventing Thompson from participating in the case. “Most of these communications contained long and angry speeches by Mr. Thompson that can only be described by the court as bizarre and childish,” the judge said. “If Mr. Thompson continues to inundate the court with prohibited and irrelevant communications, this court shall use its contempt power for relief.”

Thompson came home to Coral Gables to find a pile of mail at his door. Among the envelopes was a package and a note: “Enclosed please find the sample you requested.” Thompson removed the wrapping to find a small bottle of Astroglide Silken Secret, a “vaginal moisturizer to help relieve the discomfort associated with vaginal dryness.”

The gamers! Thompson thought. He marched over to his computer, his mission command, and his fingers hit the keys. “Dear Judge,” he began. Though he was off the Alabama case, he wanted the judge in the case to know that Rockstar and its fans were still “targeting me.” They were the bullies, not him. “Is there any connection,” Thompson wrote, “between [Rockstar] stating to its video gamer minions that I head an organization whose name refers to vaginal folds and the sending of me and my wife a vaginal moisturizer? A good question and a fair question, don't you think, Judge.”

FIRST PERSON point of view. Wintry day. January 2006. Capital City. Sam stood at the steps of the Federal Trade Commission building in Washington, D.C. He was here voluntarily to answer questions for the FTC's investigation into whether Rockstar had purposely deceived the ESRB to avoid an Adult Only rating for *San Andreas.*

So it had come to this. Ten years, ago he was just a bloke in England who dreamed of invading the United States of Def Jam. Now here he was in the nation's capital, the seat of power, a stone's throw from George W. Bush himself. And for what? There was Bush and the lies and the wars and the madness, and now the United States was spending taxpayer money to investigate a game? If gamers were outlaws in the eyes of the public, they had never seemed as outlaw as this before. “I felt those people were out to crush us,” Sam later recalled, “and if they could have crushed us, they absolutely would have.”

Keith Fentonmiller, a senior attorney for the FTC's Division of Advertising Practices, knew it would be a touchy investigation beyond the obvious First Amendment concerns. “What hackers did was technically illegal,” he later recalled, “but when you're encouraging or turning a blind eye to years of them doing this thing, it just doesn't look so good.”

Sam took his seat with his three lawyers across from a trio of government investigators. The Feds had everything. A towering stack of Rockstar papers. Internal e-mails. Timelines. *San Andreas* art. Sam's head spun as he listened to their questions: *Why have you done this? Why have you done that? Why have you put that word in apostrophes?*

At one point, an e-mail of Sam's surfaced that seemed to cut to the core of his feelings. “Why are they so concerned about what we're doing in the game when we're bombing the hell out of people in Operation Enduring Freedom trying to keep our freedom,” he had written, “and we're back here trying to curb the freedom that we're paying the taxes to fight for.”

The clock ticked endlessly. One hour. Two hours. Four. Seven. The questioning lasted for nine hours. “It's a heavy one, right?” Sam later recalled. “It's not many game designers that have been in that position that I know of . . . which goes back to the point about having the fire for this game.”

He returned to New York to a piece of the past that was, literally, in ashes. A five-alarm fire had raged through their historic old digs at 575 Broadway, which still housed Rockstar's corporate sibling, 2K Games, along with Brant Publications, Ryan's father's company. The spring collection at the $40 million, Rem Koolhaas–designed Prada store went up in flames, along with a wallpaper mural titled *Guilt Incorporated*. When word leaked that the storage closet fire was deemed suspicious, one gamer posted the absurd joke that “Jack Thompson got caught smoking a little too close to the building.”

It wasn't only 575 feeling the heat. In a public relations industry's annual list of top ten PR blunders, Hot Coffee made the cut and was ranked by *Business 2.0* magazine as one of the dumbest moments in business of the year. The business site MarketWatch anointed Eibeler the Worst CEO of the Year, citing that “so far this year it has sliced earnings guidance by more than 60% to a range of 53 cents to 56 cents a share . . . . Congratulations, Paul! (To shareholders: condolences.)”

In a feature story in *Fortune* called “Sex, Lies, and Videogames,” journalist Bethany McLean detailed the financial scandals that plagued the company around the time when Hot Coffee was discovered. This included the chief financial officer's sales of more than $5 million in shares and the chief operating officer's exercising of 20,000 in options. Brant, then Take-Two's publishing director, had reportedly taken home more than $4 million.

Take-Two's corporate drama grew with the resignation of Barbara Kaczynski—a board member and the former CFO of the National Football League, who had been brought in to chair the audit committee after the SEC investigations began. According to her attorney, “her concerns have risen significantly because of what she views as an increasingly unhealthy relationship between senior management and the board of directors.”

In the aftermath of Hot Coffee, *GTA* had come to represent, for some, a broader coarsening of the culture. This went beyond games into a burgeoning and graphic genre of blockbuster horror films, such as *Saw* and *Hostel*, nicknamed “torture porn,” as well as torture-happy TV shows such as *24*. The fact was, perfectly sane players did like kicking pedestrians into bloody pulps in *GTA*—and, in fact, traded clips on YouTube of killing sprees in the game.

In April 2006, the New York attorney general and leading candidate for governor, Eliot Spitzer, joined the high-profile fight against the violence and sex of video

games. “Nothing under New York State law prohibits a fourteen-year old from walking into a video store and buying a game labeled ‘Adult Only'—a game like *Grand Theft Auto*,” he said, “which rewards a player for stealing cars and beating people up. Children can even simulate having sex with a prostitute.” If elected, no one was going to simulate sex with a hooker under his watch.

On June 2, Take-Two and Rockstar entered a consent order with the FTC, without admitting wrongdoing. As part of the settlement, the company agreed to disclose all relevant content for ratings in future games and establish a system for making sure nothing like Hot Coffee ever got buried on a disc again.

For months, Sam had been fighting to keep the voices of the haters out of his mind, but the pressure was growing too great. He later spoke to journalist Harold Goldberg of panic attacks and wanting to flee the United States for good. A doctor compared his trauma to that of a car crash victim. Sam tried to lose himself in his games, flying to Edinburgh to work with Rockstar North. During a train ride back to his old home of London, however, he answered his cell phone, and the world emptied out below him. The Manhattan district attorney, he learned, was issuing a grand jury subpoena into Hot Coffee. The battle wasn't over at all.

Sam wanted out, away from the industry and the world. It was like some weird mission from Liberty City brought to life. New York City, their haven, their inspiration, had just boosted their wanted level to a maximum six stars. In *GTA*, there was always an easy fix. No matter how many cops were on your tail, you could drive into a body shop, get a fresh coat of paint for your car, and your wanted level would drop to zero. It wasn't that easy in real life.

WHERE'S JAMIE? The question made its rounds at Rockstar. Jamie King—Rockstar cofounder—was gone, and no one seemed to know why. He had simply left the office at the end of one day in January 2006 and not returned. With a number of games in production at the various Rockstar studios, it wasn't uncommon for King to be on the road, dispatching orders from New York. “Maybe he's traveling,” some said.

Gary Foreman suspected that something more ominous might be in play. In the aftermath of Hot Coffee, Foreman had noticed that King seemed sullen and withdrawn. Though the two were close, they didn't discuss it, sinking back into the shells they had built to survive the chaos of the recent years. Foreman, however, became suspicious when, seemingly apropos of nothing, a Take-Two executive told him, “You know, the senior management are really big fans of yours, we're going to take care of you.” Foreman eyed him dubiously. “It was surreal,” he later recalled.

“It was like, yeah, I've been here a long time, I built this business up, I hope you would value me.”

Foreman wasn't the only one feeling adrift. On the morning of May 6 in Austria, the one hundred employees of Rockstar Vienna, the acclaimed studio that worked on games such as *Max Payne* and *Vice City*, had arrived to find security guards turning them away at the front door. Producer Jurie Hornemann quickly broke the news online. “This morning, as I came into work, I was greeted by security guards,” he blogged. “It turned out Take-Two has closed their Rockstar Vienna office, effective immediately, ‘due to the challenging environment facing the video game business and our Company during this platform transition.'”

With no warning, Rockstar Vienna had been closed. Even in the game industry, known for its volatility, the abruptness was unusual. As word spread in the blogosphere, gamers—including anonymous Rockstar employees—blamed Hot Coffee, in part, for the mess. “The Hot Coffee brouhaha, ridiculous as it was in many respects, did nothing to increase the popularity of Rockstar Games both inside and outside of the industry,” Hornemann blogged. “Whichever way you look at it, game development has become a bit harder for everyone because of that incident.”

Commentators on the blog, many claiming to be ex-Rockstars, vented angrily. “Rockstar is NOT cool after all, the employees who worked for this hypocritical company WERE! good luck to all of us!!!” one wrote. “If this is what you do to hard working employees, who the hell would or want to work for you Rockstar?” posted another. This couldn't be dismissed as sour grapes of anonymous exes. Even Scott Miller, the veteran publisher of games such as *Duke Nukem*, who had worked on the *Max Payne* blockbuster with Rockstar, chimed in.

“Other than *GTA*, a brand Rockstar did not invent themselves (they bought the IP from DMA), what have they created that's truly a hit?” he posted. “*Manhunt*? Nope. *Warriors*? Nope . . . not a huge hit, and not their home grown brand. *Max Payne*? Nope . . . Rockstar so far is no different than [*Tomb Raider* publisher] Eidos, in that they've had one success and everything else is on par with the same-old-same-old the rest of the industry puts out.”

The downward spiral continued. In May, Rockstar released a table tennis game (inspired by their legendary matches at the Chateau Marmont) that, while technically impressive, bombed. Amid the mounting lawsuits over Hot Coffee, Take-Two stock plummeted—soon down by 13%. Then came word on King: he wasn't coming back. No one knew why, and it wasn't the only defection. *GameDaily* ran a story on the exodus at Rockstar. “When Jamie King (a Rockstar co-founder), two different directors of marketing, and others all leave within the same period that the parent company's stock is in a freefall, it smells fishy,” wrote the site.

Fed up, Foreman marched into Donovan's office. “Look, you know what?” he told Donovan. “I need to make some changes here in the processes and end all this constant crunch mode.” He mapped out his vision of how to impart a structure to the process, allocating more people to the teams when *GTA* titles ramped up. “These are things I want to do,” he said, “but I'm really frustrated after all this time, of this thing we built. I want to make it better. I want to take it to the next level, and I don't have the ability to do that.”

As foreman recalled, Donovan sat there nodding, staring at the floor, but he had nothing to say. Though open communication had never been a strength at Rockstar, Foreman found Donovan's behavior particularly odd. Foreman wondered whether maybe Donovan was simply thinking through the impact of what he was suggesting or how life at Rockstar might be without him. “I need to change things here,” Foreman continued, “and if you're telling me I can't do it, then this isn't the place for me anymore.”

Finally, Donovan broke his silence. “Things work as they are,” he said, “we're doing okay.”

Foreman felt as if he were living in some kind of alternate reality, a reality that, he realized in that moment, he couldn't deny anymore. “This isn't going to work,” he said. He quit. As he was gathering his stuff in his office, however, Kolbe came in. “Sam and Terry have asked me to come in here and ask you to change your mind,” she said.

“Wow,” Foreman said.

“What do you mean ‘wow'?”

“As much as we've been friends for a long time, wow on two things. One, I almost can't believe they sent you here to deliver their message, and it's really cheap, but, yeah, I can understand that they have. But also if either of them truly meant that, one or both of them would be here having this conversation with me.”

Foreman was gone—and he immediately knew who he wanted to track down, once and for all: King. Reaching out through a mutual acquaintance, he asked the friend to have King call him. King replied, and the two met at a restaurant in Chelsea. “You know I left?” Foreman told him.

“No, you didn't,” King said.

“Yeah, I did,” Foreman said and filled King in on his final days. As Foreman and everyone else had known for years, King had been strained and unhappy. King had been burning candles at both ends for so long, he was out of wax. Like Foreman, he felt that Hot Coffee had been, as he called it, “a horrible episode for Rockstar.” The years of drama had finally become too much.

“I was like, fuck it, I'd rather be broke,” King later explained. King wanted to move on, and Foreman and he talked about starting their own company, one built on new franchises and new ideals—without repeating the mistakes epitomized by Hot Coffee. “What I learned from that is to be very, very upfront about what we're doing,” King said.

With Foreman and King gone, it was just the beginning of the end of an era for Rockstar. One day in September 2006, Donovan walked out the door—and didn't come back. Employees were cryptically told that he was taking a leave of absence. The next month, Brant resigned from the company—followed soon by an announcement from Take-Two that the company would be restating its financial results from 1997 to April 30, 2006. Brant pled guilty to backdating stock options, paid an additional $7.3 million in penalties, and accepted a lifetime ban on serving in a management position of a public company. By the end of the year, Take-Two had lost $184.9 million.

Sam tried his best to maintain a sense of normality for his staff—in his own inimitable way. For the holiday party in December 2006, they filled a nightclub with strippers in Santa outfits and red hot pants. Festive young employees took turns swallowing shots from a giant ice luge. This was one of the great truisms of Rockstar—and the game industry as a whole. That no matter how tough things got or how many people quit, no matter how great the stress or long the hours, no matter how much they were exploited and unorganized, there was always a new generation of developers eager and willing to sign up for the promise of fun.

As Sam looked across the crowded party, no one at Rockstar personified this dedication and the promise of the future more than William Rompf. Preppy and blond in his ever-present pullover sweater and tie, Rompf was almost like a long-lost American cousin of the Houser brothers. He had been refined in boarding school, then in the prestigious business program at NYU, and said his goal in life was to become “landed British gentry.”

Yet like the Housers, he got the bug for games, transforming a time-biding postcollege job at Rockstar into a full-blown obsession. Able to find hundreds of computer bugs during sixteen-hour workdays, Rompf quickly earned his stripes, rising to the top of the quality assurance team. He earned and wore every new Rockstar monogrammed jacket with pride, happily working through the night as he heard Heart's song “Barracuda” blasting from Sam's office down the hall. Rompf would forward his boss articles from the *Economist* and anticipate the next mission. “I believed in everything,” Rompf later said.

Though Rompf knew about all of the recent departures, his devotion hadn't been swayed. Fueled on shots from the ice luge, he stumbled up to Sam to pledge his

support. “Dude, I fucking love you,” he shouted over the music, “and I love this place.”

“No,” Sam replied, “I fucking love you. Don't ever leave this place. Don't ever fucking leave me.”

“I'm here forever,” Rompf vowed.

But the others weren't sticking around. A few weeks later, on January 12, 2007, Donovan's fate became official. He wasn't coming back. Sam later said that the emotional trauma since Hot Coffee had been too much for him. “It was very important to them that the public persona of Rockstar was one big happy family, and I think cracks started to show,” Foreman later said. This seemed to clarify why Donovan was acting so oddly when Foreman had come to him that day. “It explained his behavior,” Foreman said. “He was already gone.”

In March 2007, shareholders themselves were done with all of the games. An investor group that included several prominent hedge funds voted to replace Eibeler and most of Take-Two's board at the company's annual shareholder meeting. Rumors began to circulate that the company might be sold. (Tellingly, the stock jumped on initial reports of both of these developments.) Many noted that potential purchasers had to balance the upside of Rockstar's immensely profitable *GTA* franchise against the downside of the many lingering SEC investigations and class actions.

Rockstar announced that Gary Dale, the former head of BMG Interactive, was returning as chief operating officer. “Rockstar is a very robust organization and has tremendous depth,” a company representative said. “It has over 600 artists and developers, marketing people. . . . Sam and Dan is the leadership now, along with Gary Dale. The roles have been filled.”

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Flowers for Jack

FLOWERS

Flowers are an item found in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* that are classified as weapons within the game. Flowers are placed in Slot 11 in the weapons inventory. The flowers can be used as a weapon by Carl Johnson, inflicting slightly more damage than regular fist fighting.

It was a bright blue February day in Las Vegas, as the highest rollers of the game industry milled about the glittery, palm-lined Green Valley Ranch Resort. Thin and patchy Will Wright, the cerebral creator of the best-selling computer game franchise of all time, *The Sims*, puffed on a cigarette. Spiky-haired Cliffy B, the bratty genius of the brawny shoot 'em up *Gears of War*, chatted with Microsoft execs. Lanky Phil Harrison, the PlayStation guru, schmoozed nearby.

They had come for the 2007 D.I.C.E. (Design, Innovate, Communicate, Entertain) Summit, the industry's most exclusive event of the year. A welcome reprieve from the circus of E3, this fancier and more intimate affair was when the leaders of the industry could hang out and play Hold 'Em in peace. The highlight was the annual Interactive Achievement Awards, the Oscars of the business. This year, the list of nominees signified something radical: the end of an era.

The pixilated wall between gamers and the rest of the world was fading. In the decade since the first *GTA* was released, the sheer complexity of video game controllers—all of those intimidating buttons and sticks—had alienated two generations of potential players: little kids and boomers. The average person needed only eyes and/or ears to consume every book, TV show, song, or movie ever made, but when it came to consuming games, most people were all thumbs. Or, rather, they were dumb thumbs; they were Thumbies—lacking the requisite hand-eye coordination to survive the virtual worlds.

The impact was profound, both economically and culturally. In addition to missing out on legions of customers, the Great Thumbie Divide had spawned a sociopolitical backlash that went all the way to Capitol Hill. Unable to play games, politicians and pundits instead relied on watching short and often sensational video clips—which is as unlike playing a game as watching porn is unlike having sex. Games are, fundamentally and essentially, an experiential medium. It's easy to hate the players

when the haters can't play—and vice versa.

Change had come, though. It started in late 2006 with the recent release of the Nintendo Wii, a new console with motion-sensitive controllers. Instead of tapping an elaborate combo of buttons, people could play Wii Tennis simply by gripping the Wii Remote and swinging their arms as if they were holding racquets for real.

With more than six million units sold in its first four months, the Wii quickly became the fastest-selling console in the world, from the United States to the United Kingdom, and catapulted Nintendo back to the top of the industry. This despite the fact that the Wii lacked the high-definition graphics and the photorealism of its competitors. In the first six months of its release, the Wii would outsell Sony's PlayStation 3 and Microsoft's Xbox 360 combined.

At the same time, the blockbuster franchise *Guitar Hero*, played with guitar-shaped controllers, took the medium even wider. The spin-off game *Rock Band* would earn more than $1 billion. With more and more people playing casual games online and on Facebook and the recently released iPhone, the plight of the Thumbies seemed to be ending for good.

Yet it wasn't only the end of this era at D.I.C.E. It was the end of Doug Lowenstein, the president of the Entertainment Software Association, who had been the face of the industry during its awkward adolescence. Since taking his post in 1994, the year of the *Mortal Kombat* hearings, and defending it through Columbine and Hot Coffee, Lowenstein was moving on to launch a private equity trade group. Yet the game makers and the media people who crammed into the auditorium to hear his farewell speech discovered he had to settle one last score.

“The publishers and developers who make controversial content and then cut and run when it comes time to defending their creative decisions, nothing annoys me more,” Lowenstein said. “If you want the right to make what you want, if you want to push the envelope, I'm out there defending your right to do it. But, damn it, get out there and support the creative decisions you make.” People in the room wondered. “If you want to be controversial, that's great,” Lowenstein continued, “but then don't duck and cover when the shit hits the fan. Stand up and defend what you make.”

Lowenstein wasn't gunning only for Rockstar, however. He chastised the game industry for staying silent and politically inactive. When he asked how many in the room had joined the Video Game Voters Network, an activist group, and saw few hands, he snapped, “That's pathetic! . . . no matter how good we are, and we're good, we can't win the war without an army. And you're the army. And most of the people in this room who have the most at stake are too lazy to join this army.”

Furthermore, he lambasted the game press for granting the most notorious culture

warrior such a wide platform. “You know who gives Jack Thompson more attention than anyone else? The games press!” Lowenstein fumed. “The games press legitimizes Jack Thompson. Everyone gets so upset that Jack Thompson has so much ability. I just think it's nuts.”

AS MUCH AS the gamers thought they knew Thompson, in many ways, they didn't know Jack at all. Yes, there were tiny crucifixes on his hand towels and a Bush magnet on his fridge, but there were also signs of the other version of the man. Not Jack the Ripper, but Jack the Dude.

After he spent so many years fighting against the scourge of pop culture, something surprising had happened: Thompson had become kind of hip—not hip as in cool, but hip as in aware. His pop savvy was the unlikely by-product of his obsessive immersion in his cause, surfing the channels and the video games and the radio stations for hours on end. An outsider himself, he gravitated toward black comedy. His favorite shows were *Ali G* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which filled his DVR and he could quote from memory. He still had a soft spot for Frank Zappa. “I think Zappa was prescient,” he said, “and I love his live album at the Fillmore East.”

One hot morning in the spring of 2006, Thompson looked like a weathered fifty-five-year-old fraternity adviser. Dressed in khaki cargo shorts and a faded white polo shirt, he was unshaven with a beard grown into a Fu Manchu. He kicked back on a cushy recliner near a percolating aquarium. He had taken to saying “dude” a lot. When someone e-mailed him good news, he replied with phrases such as “way freaking kewl” typed in cherry red 36-point font.

It wasn't just the culture war keeping him young, it was his son. Johnny was going on fourteen now, an athletic kid with whom he regularly shot baskets out back by their pool. For old times' sake, Johnny still helped his dad out on his cause now and then. On the heels of *The Warriors* video game release, Johnny dutifully headed into a Best Buy on a sting to see whether the clerk would sell him the M-rated game—while his dad videotaped the transaction from outside.

Yet Johnny had become something of a gamer, too. He begged his parents to get a Sony PSP handheld game device, along with an Xbox. One morning before he headed off to lacrosse camp, he mustered up his nerve to stake out his ground with his father. “Dad,” he said, “if you don't mind, I don't think I'll tell anyone that I'm your son.”

When Thompson recalled this tale a few days later, his face slackened, his eyes blinked, and his words, often gushing, halted to a stop. The fish tank burbled. For an awkward moment, he wasn't the big bad culture warrior anymore. He was just a

father dealing with the bittersweet reality of a child growing up. When asked how he responded to his son, Thompson straightened his back and narrowed his eyes. “I tell him I'm sorry that he goes through that,” he said, “but I'm not sorry for what I've done.”

In fact, bolstered by Hot Coffee, Thompson's fight against the gamers was going strong. A group of players raised money from around the world to send a bouquet of flowers in tongue-in-cheek reconciliation to Thompson, whom the campaign organizer characterized as “a shining example of the hysterical anti-youth bias in American government and media.”

Their campaign, which they called “Flowers for Jack,” went viral, bringing in news and money from around the world. Thompson received the bouquet, then forwarded it to Take-Two, as he wrote in an accompanying note, “in the memory of all of the people who now lie in the ground because of your reckless design, marketing, and sale of mature-rated murder simulators to children.”

Yet this wasn't just a war of roses. Thompson's battle against *Bully* was reaching a feverish and effective pitch. He spammed the Net with a screenshot of brawling kids from the game, which, he promised, “will allow teens to practice beating up their virtual classmates.” To the surprise of gamers worldwide, he successfully convinced his local Miami-Dade School District, the fourth largest in the country, to unanimously issue a resolution asking Take-Two not to release *Bully* and urging parents not to buy it—despite the fact that no one had seen the unreleased game.

He wasn't stopping there. In June 2006, the Louisiana legislature passed a bill Thompson coauthored, banning the sales of violent video games to minors. Then in September, Thompson spearheaded a $600 million wrongful death lawsuit against Rockstar, Take-Two, and the Sony Corporation of America. The suit claimed that *Grand Theft Auto*: *Vice City* inspired a teenager named Cody Posy to kill three people one day in 2004 on the New Mexico ranch of television anchorman Sam Donaldson.

With *Bully* slated to come out at the end of October, Thompson filed a petition to prevent Wal-Mart and other major retailers from selling it on grounds that the game violated Florida's public nuisance laws. In what the *Washington Post* called a “major coup” for Thompson, Take-Two was ordered to give a judge a preview of *Bully* to see whether in fact it violated such a law. After viewing the game, however, a Miami-Dade County circuit court judge ruled against banning the sale of the games to minors, as Thompson had hoped. The game ultimately earned a Teen rating, suggested for anyone thirteen and up.

Thompson argued that the judge had erred by allowing a Rockstar employee to show him the game and thus could have navigated away from the more violent

encounters. A video clip of *Bully* leaked online showing boy-on-boy kissing. “You did not see the game,” Thompson told the judge. “You don't even know what it was you saw.” Thompson then sent an open letter to the judge, saying, “You have consigned innumerable children to skull fractures, eye injuries from slingshots, and beatings with baseball bats.”

When Take-Two sought to have Thompson declared in contempt of court, Thompson fired off another open letter in response. “You want to play hardball?” he wrote. “You want to try to throw me in jail? You have no idea what you are unleashing in doing this. You're at the brink.”

On October 25 at 4 p.m. Thompson sat in a Miami courtroom for his contempt hearing. A reporter for a game site called Destructoid recorded the proceedings on a shaky camera and posted it online as a short film titled *Jack* (written in the same font as the *Bully* logo). The footage of Thompson—sitting in his suit, clutching a poster board on which he had printed the definition of contempt, and getting scolded by the judge—delighted gamers as his final comeuppance. When the judge revealed that he was personally filing a complaint to the bar against Thompson, it seemed to mark the beginning of the end.

With the specter of disbarment looming, Thompson sent another open letter to the judge, chastising him again for “the game that you unleashed on . . . kids.” He wrote: “You don't care because you don't have a teen in a school as I do.” Thompson refused to back down, but after threatening to sue to block the release of *Manhunt 2* and the next *GTA* game, he claimed he got a call from Take-Two to come to meet its executives in New York, once and for all.

Thompson said he flew to New York and convened with an intermediary for Take-Two's new CEO, Straus Zelnick, in what he later called “a double secret probation meeting on Central Park West.” Thompson told the intermediary, “Look, I'm here to tell you to stop selling your *Grand Theft Auto*s and other mature-rated games to kids, and if you do that, and tell your retailers to stop, I will call a press conference and tell them Take-Two is the most responsible bunch of people I ever met.”

They weren't having it, however. “We are in a war with you, Mr. Thompson,” Thompson later claimed he was told, “and we will do whatever it takes to defeat and destroy you.” In March 2007, Take-Two petitioned the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida for relief. “Thompson has a history of making multiple threats of legal action, whether substantiated or not, both against (Take-Two) as well as the retailers who purchase the video games and offer them for sale to the public,” the complaint read.

After all of the years of fighting against *GTA*, Thompson was up against a wall. The efforts to ban violent games were failing, including his Louisiana law, which

was ultimately declared unconstitutional. He faced charges of contempt and disbarment, and now, he was looking at hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees, including fees that Take-Two wanted to collect for the cases against him, if he didn't settle with the company. “I looked at it and said, this is not working,” he later recalled, “so I agreed.”

In a settlement reached on April 17, 2007, Thompson agreed not to sue or threaten to sue Take-Two or to direct any future communications to them through their attorneys. In short, his public war with Rockstar would cease. Boss Level complete. Game over.

IT WAS 11 A.M. at Rockstar, but what still felt like the middle of the night to Will Rompf. As one of the company's most devoted foot soldiers and heads of quality assurance, Sam's preppy acolyte was starting another sixteen-hour day testing *Manhunt 2*—the ultraviolent sequel to their controversial 2003 thriller. Yet it wasn't only the endless nights of bloody decapitations and nut-busting groin kicks that were getting to him.

For Rompf, the electric thrill of working at Rockstar had begun to fizzle dark. It started, he felt, not long after Jamie King (“Kinger,” as Rompf called him affectionately) left the company. Though Rompf hadn't fully appreciated it at the time, he thought now what a buffer King had been for him—such as encouraging him to go home after a long day's work. “Things changed massively when Jamie left,” Rompf recalled.

His crunch time at the office now raged unabated. Rompf was losing touch with his family, his friends, and his girlfriend. To survive, he was self-medicating. It started with late-night bong hits, then he'd down four Tylenols and a shot of bourbon to fall asleep after arriving home at 9 a.m. following a graveyard shift, only to return hours later with the help of amphetamines.

Rompf, a diehard Marxist, never failed to put his heart and soul into his work and, even in his bleakest hours, pledged himself completely to the company. To the consternation of his friends, he had even branded himself with his devotion—getting a Rockstar logo tattooed on his wrist. But his body and mind were losing the fight.

This morning, as he slashed through *Manhunt 2*, he could feel himself begin to snap. It happened when an irritating colleague kept obnoxiously looming over his computer. “Dude, just get the fuck away from my desk,” Rompf said. “I'm stressed, I'm tired, I'm working all the time.”

“No way,” the guy replied.

“Get the fuck away, dude,” he said, gripping a pen, “or I'm going to stab you.”

The words sounded alien coming from the mouth of a former volunteer for Tibet, who had once been personally honored by the Dalai Lama, but he couldn't help himself. Rompf saw the guy approaching in the reflection of his computer monitor and thrust back his hand, meaning to warn him. He realized how badly he'd misjudged the distance when he heard the guy scream and saw the tip of his pen broken off in the guy's hand. “Will just stabbed me!” the guy yelled, running off to the hospital. Though spooked by his outburst, Will stayed behind, completing his task at hand.

He wasn't the only one reeling. The climax of departures and dramas in the previous year had become almost operatic. There was the exodus of Brant, Eibeler, Foreman, King, and Donovan. The shareholder revolt. The FTC hearing. The mounting class-action suits over Hot Coffee. The games were suffering, too. Despite the brilliance of *Bully*, sales of the game fell flat. Rockstar's adaptation of *The Warriors* met a similar fate.

Now, even the reliable *GTA* cash cow was ailing. *GTA: Vice City Stories*, a spin-off for the Sony PSP handheld released in October and ported to PS2 in March, was the worst-selling game in the history of the franchise. *Manhunt 2* received an Adults Only rating by the ESRB in the United States and was refused classification in the United Kingdom. Though Rockstar begrudgingly dialed back the violence in the game to earn an M-rating, sales disappointed. For Rockstar publicist, Zuniga, the crash seemed like post-Coffee karma. “Hot Coffee pretty much did fuck Rockstar and did bring the company down in a way,” he later said. “They were the bully of the industry, and they got punched in the face.”

Former Rockstar producer Jeff Williams posted a lengthy blog called *Life during Wartime*, in which he exposed life inside the company. In addition to claiming that he was among those who knew about the presence of the Hot Coffee scene, he railed against the working conditions. “Every Rockstar project turned into a huge clusterfuck,” he wrote. “I mainly blame this on a horrendously inefficient company structure, combined with a few individuals who thought they were hot shit but really didn't know anything about either video games or marketing. . . . Rockstar was arrogant to the point of absurdity.” Later, the blog came down.

Of course, many people still worked at Rockstar and surely had differing opinions of day-to-day life there. Presumably, there were those who were quite happy and nonplussed by the drama. Maybe Rockstar was just, like many ambitious companies, a hard-crunching, late night culture. But beacause the majority of current employees at Rockstar were seldom, if at all, heard form publicly, the comments online gained a great deal of attention among the game press. As more and more ex-employees began sounding off across the Net, game industry observers smelled blood. “If you

look at the content of what these guys have distributed, it's so offensive and inappropriate," said James Steyer, the CEO and founder of the San Francisco–based multimedia ratings group Common Sense Media. "It's not surprising to learn they had committed massive acts of fraud at the board and CEO level. The chickens have come home to roost for this company—and I say good riddance to these guys." *Motley Fool* CEO Tom Gardner summarized it: "You have backdated options, hidden porn, accounting issues, and mismanagement. You have management that was at best incompetent and at worst dishonest."

Such jibes were hurtful enough to Rockstar, but most devastating of all was the shocking death of Jeremy Blake, the designer who'd come up with the iconic Rockstar logo. On July 10, Blake had found his girlfriend, video game designer Theresa Duncan, dead from suicide in her apartment. One week later, he left the offices of Rockstar and took the subway to Rockaway Beach in Queens, where he was last seen wading naked into the water. His body washed up near the shore of Sea Girt, New Jersey. A second suicide at Rockstar within weeks of Blake's only exacerbated the sense of despair in the company—how could such a beloved long-time employee with a family take his own life?

To treat the bad energy in the office, the company brought in a spiritual healer. In her hand, she held a string with a crystal hanging from the end and swung it slowly like pendulum. One by one, she passed the desks of the hipsters and the gamers, their computers, their Xbox controllers, and their desk tchotchkes. She stopped at an empty desk, where she felt, as said, "pretty strong readings." The fact that this incident had been reported by the *Wall Street Journal* sent a clear message to those worried about the future of Rockstar and their parent company: a new era had begun.

As if to mark it, the company soon had its biggest blowout yet for Sam's birthday, in honor of his turning thirty-six at a trendy bar down town. Gorgeous Belgian strippers in pigtails and cowgirl outfits poured shots down employees' throats. Out in the back, Rockstars took turns donning giant inflatable sumo wrestling suits and slamming one another gleefully to the ground.

Yet the real action was inside, where they lined up the tables again and readied the greasy cheese balls. As was the tradition, buckets were strategically positioned for puking. Rockstars reached into their wallets for fat wads of cash to bet. It seemed just like the old days—except, of course, it wasn't. With the other cofounders long gone, there were only the Houser brothers calling the shots, just as they did when they were kids in London. Now Sam and Dan had to prove to everyone that they could rise up and do what they did best: make amazing games. They knew just how to do it, by pouring everything into their fantasies and creating a new reality of their own.

Sam, dressed in a black T-shirt, and Dan, bald and beefy, dressed in white, loomed at the head of the table as the Rockstars squeezed in around them. Nauseous competitors hunched over their soiled plates at the table. As Sam grinned behind his unruly beard, Dan shouted through his bullhorn at the woozy eaters who were about to compete in the next round. “Let's move on to cheese ball fourteen!” Dan said in his thick British accent. “One minute, one cheese ball! It's easy! You've done it before! Let's go!”

25

New York City

FINALE

Now you make your final choice, a choice that dramatically affects the overall story and how the game's final three missions unfold. . . . Which outcome will you choose: money or revenge?

It was late one night in Brighton Beach, the Russian neighborhood near Coney Island in Brooklyn. Inside a gaudy nightclub, a group of young guys took turns at the karaoke machine, downing vodka, and poking at the jellied sturgeon on their plates. Shady mob types lingered cryptically. A security guard who'd been escorting the group said that if they came under fire, he'd be able to rescue only one person. They should decide now.

The young guys weren't mobsters. They were artists and coders sent over from Scotland to research Rockstar's most ambitious game yet: *Grand Theft Auto IV*. They had hired a cop to protect them while they roamed the city's edgier streets. In the past, the *GTA* games had emulated gangster films and lost eras, but not this time. The guys at Rockstar had set their sights on their hometown in all of its current glory: New York, present day.

Although the Liberty City of earlier *GTA*s had always been based on the Big Apple, Rockstar had never had the technology or the experience to bring the city in all of its crazy and beautiful detail to life. Now the time had come. “If video games are going to develop into the next stage, then the thing isn't to try and do a loving tribute,” Dan said. “It's to reference the actual place itself. . . . If we can't do that now about New York, then when the fuck could we do it?”

With their powerful new processors and high-definition graphics, the new generation of consoles—the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360—would let them render more astonishing details than ever before. Dan compared it to the leap from 2D to 3D, but this time they were going from low-definition to high-def. Rockstar enlisted a breakthrough new software engine designed by two graduates of the zoology department at Oxford. Drawing from both human and animal behavior, the engine—called Euphoria—combined a fluid mix of artificial intelligence and biomechanics. Characters could be built around skeletons true to human anatomy, from the way their muscles flexed down to their nervous systems. The moment Sam saw a demo

of the engine, his blood raced. “That's my dream—it's happening!” he said. “It's there, let's do it!”

The heightened realism would enliven everything from the handling of the vehicles to the waves lapping up on a beach. Sophisticated physics enabled more believable reactions, such as pedestrians whose rag-doll bodies tumbled and twirled through the air when struck by a car. Enhanced animation allowed for more cinematic close-ups, so vivid that when, say, a mobster gets a bad call, his eyes narrow believably in frustration. Supple lights and shadows would bathe Liberty City, from the giant neon credit card billboard ads to the blood-orange sunsets over the skyline.

Such innovations weren't only eye candy. The new palette enabled a more sophisticated level of storytelling and design. Dan's six-page treatment told the story of Niko Bellic, a Serbian national who came to Liberty City after a wartime betrayal left his closest friends dead. Yet like many immigrants, Bellic came to find that the American Dream was more like a nightmare. His cousin Roman, a drunken loudmouth cabbie, needed Bellic to help him with petty missions to resolve some gambling debts. As in the other *GTA*s, the ensuing missions unlocked a series of lowlifes and gangsters, each with his or her own battles and plans. The deeper Bellic went, the more tangled he became in balancing his deep sense of loyalty with his need for money and revenge.

Sam and Dan, immigrants themselves, were drawn to the struggles of Niko's fish-out-of-water story. After seeing (and making) so many portrayals of Italian American mobsters, the Housers found the character of a Eastern European especially fascinating. “On one hand, he's an innocent,” Dan recalled. “On the other hand, he's battle-hardened and world weary. A modern ‘arriving in America' story felt very interesting to us.” Sam said, “These new guys off the boat, they're coming with something to prove, and they mean business. They are fucking fearless.”

To best immerse players in Bellic's world, Sam wanted to focus on packing as much dense detail as they could into their fictional New York. The task was insanely ambitious—not only to make the gangster movie they had always dreamed of, but capture the Big Apple in all of its madness. “What epitomizes New York?” Dan asked.

To find the answer, the coders and the artists from Rockstar North arrived with cameras and notebooks in hand. It remained one of *GTA*'s great and largely unappreciated ironies—that a bunch of Scots were creating the most influential simulation of America ever made. More than fifty of them scoured the neighborhoods, taking thousands of photos of the people and the places to get the right feel. Sam began to take weekly treks to Brighton Beach.

Geeks trolled the karaoke bars and the nightclubs, the restaurants and the clothing stores. They even studied the public bathrooms in Brighton Beach, watching in awe as old Russian men shaved their armpits over the sinks. On more than one occasion, they got threatened for taking photos of passersby. Some guy in Harlem warned that he'd shoot them if they didn't put their cameras away.

No detail proved too arcane or obsessive. They hung plasma TVs over the developers' desks in Edinburgh and fed them with nonstop footage of New York. They studied a library of books on the city, from the architecture to the sewage system. They pored over census data to ascertain the appropriate ethnic makeup of each neighborhood. Researchers grilled the Taxi and Limousine Commission to find the precise ratio of cabs to other cars in NYC.

They set up a time-lapse video camera aimed at the sky over the city, just to see how it changed throughout the day. They watched hours of DVDs of traffic patterns from New York, simply to get the flow of taxis and cars right. To ensure the accuracy of the types of cars in the streets, they researched auto sales reports. The audio engineers spent hours getting just the right sounds for the amount of coins in a character's pockets.

With more than 150 artists and programmers working on the game, *GTA IV* came to life. Within six months, they had built out a detailed map of Liberty City. The action would unfold over five boroughs based on the real NYC: from Algonquin (Manhattan) to Broker (Brooklyn). Each borough would feature a meticulous reconstruction of real NYC locales, the iconic Statue of Happiness, the flashing lights of the Times Square–style Star Junction, the Brooklyn/Broker Bridge, the JFKish Francis International Airport in Dukes (Queens). Though the Rockstars insisted that their pixilated city was a dream-version of reality, *GTA IV* was one of the most passionate love letters to New York City ever written.

As the story got outlined and the city mapped, artists created the characters: Bellic, with his broad forehead and bent nose, his Serbian swagger; Michelle, the vaguely ethnic girl in the fashionable pea coat, whom he dates; Little Jacob, the Jamaican smuggler, with his dreads and drugs; Trey “Playboy X” Stewart, the crack king in the rainbow hoodie. To capture the spontaneity of street interactions, they created a range of oddball passersby—crackheads and cougars, hipsters and hot dog vendors. They labored to get every detail right, from the dialogue to the fashion. To make sure the peds were dressed properly, they even hired NYC stylists to design their virtual clothes.

Dan and his team broke the narrative into cut-scenes and missions. At the core, *GTA IV* was still essentially a racing-and-shooting game, but the missions were designed to tour the player throughout the rich and wonderful Liberty City world. To

whack one foe, the player needed to climb a series of ladders to the roof of a construction site, then leap over buildings as the sun set gorgeously on the town. In another mission, the player would wipe out a series of dockside Russians, chasing down coke dealers in a speedboat around the city. Along the way, the player would be given moral choices—such as revenge or deal?—that would affect the direction of the game. If you stood up Roman for a guys' night out, his respect would go down accordingly.

The action sequences were broken up by naturalistic diversions. While *San Andreas* had introduced role-playing game elements to the story, *GTA IV* expanded the richness of the open world by bringing interiors to life. A trip to a nightclub to see a review of cheesy jugglers and torch singers. A date to a bowling alley, complete with a ten pin mini-game. Owing something to the real-world scenes innovated in *Bully*, *GTA IV*'s everyday moments were sublimely banal. A player would take a long ride on a quiet subway through Liberty City at night or sit in a car wash, as the sudsy foam bathed Bellic's stolen ride.

With the expanded online capabilities of the new consoles, Rockstar had new ways to enhance its virtual world. Missions wouldn't end with the original disc. Microsoft paid about $50 million to Rockstar to distribute two additional episodes of the game exclusively over the Xbox 360 (this along with, for the first time, having a same-day release as the PS3 version of the game). *GTA IV* would feature a multiplayer online version, too.

In the past, *GTA* players ran between phone booths and received pages, but now *GTA IV* was catching up to contemporary communications. The game included a mobile phone for placing and receiving calls and even sending text messages to crime lords and girls. There'd be an in-game Internet with more than a hundred fake websites (craplist.com, for classifieds; friendswithoutfaces.com, for social networking). Maybe best of all, they put a television set in Bellic's apartment, complete with three channels of programming that players could sit and watch (from a PBS-style “History of Liberty City” to stand-up performances by comedians Ricky Gervais and Katt Williams, appearing in pixilated versions of themselves).

As the game's work progressed, so did its size. The budget neared $100 million, the most ever spent on a game, and the development time soon spilled over three years. The environment grew to four times the size of other *GTA* games and included three cities, twelve towns, and surrounding woods equivalent to seventeen square miles. There'd be a record-breaking eighteen radio stations (such as Tuff Gong for reggae and Vladivostok FM for Russian dance tunes). In total, there were 218 licensed tracks and plans for a deal with Amazon.com to let players download in-game music directly from the site. Rockstar hired a private eye just to track down

the rights to the 1979 song “Walk the Night.”

They hired New York news radio personality John Montone to do the voice for a similar station in the game. In honor of the Housers' dad, Sam said, “Let's do jazz properly” in the game, too. Walter Houser suggested tracks from Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Charlie Parker. When eighty-three-year-old jazz legend Roy Haynes heard he'd have a song in *GTA IV*, he was happy that “the youngsters are going to check that out in the game, you know, and that'll be cool.” Sam and Dan even included a version of their dad playing saxophone in the game.

Rockstar hired a cast of 861 voice actors to play the parts of mobsters and pedestrians and waitresses. In all, they'd have more than eighty thousand lines of dialogue, in languages that included Chinese, Spanish, and Russian. And, yes, they'd have hookers, too, with HD-quality implied oral sex in dark alleys—though nothing that went beyond the M-rated line and there were no hidden scenes.

For *GTA IV*, Rockstar changed its once mod-friendly end user license agreement to prohibit reverse engineering and copyright protection circumvention. As longtime Rockstar Jeronimo Barrera told MTV News, “Are we going to have a ‘Hot Coffee' situation? Absolutely not.”

OLD CITY. Aerial view. A car cut through the city of Edinburgh. Sam had come to check on the development of *GTA IV.* It had been a decade now since the first *GTA* game, and so much had changed. This wasn't a ragtag group of nerds working in a frat over a pub in Dundee. Sam pulled up to a sleek modern building and strode into a lobby marked only by the R* logo—and blocked by security. Upstairs, he found dozens of workers laboring in a neat, orderly office, distinguished only by a couple of arcade games—*Super Off Road* and *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*.

On one floor, three round-the-clock shifts of game testers—known in the industry as quality assurance, or QAs—filled cubicles, playing through every moment of the game, looking for inconsistencies, glitches, and programming bugs. Unlike many games that allowed players to choose difficulty levels, *GTA* didn't offer such customizations. Instead, the team would play and play and play the game, until the challenges hit the sweet spot: so that an average player could finish a mission in fewer than three tries. Too many cars in a chase scene? Remove them. Too much space to jump over between buildings? Narrow them down.

Yet Sam had his own ritualistic way of checking out the game—by immersing himself inside it. Sitting in front of a screen, he grabbed a controller and began to walk Niko down the virtual streets. He passed the storefronts under the overhead train track. He passed decrepit gray buildings, tall bleak apartment complexes.

Yellow cabs streamed by. The flutter of newspapers kicking up in the breeze. The vendor pulling hot dogs from the steaming cart.

Sam could feel it. The weight of reality. The simulated world suspending his disbelief in ways he only dreamed of. This was it. He went to jack a car, but the driver wasn't having it and started to chase him down the street. Sam stopped dead in his tracks. “I'm not running from you any more,” he thought. “I'm going to fucking have it with you now, mate.”

As he stood there, ready to slug the guy, a car suddenly careened past and—bam!—sent the dude flying like a pathetic ragdoll through the air. The collision was just another random event driven by the artificial intelligence of the game. The living, breathing world Sam had long craved came alive before his eyes. “This is how we always wanted *GTA* to be,” he later recalled, “but it simply wasn't possible until now.”

Climbing into his car, Sam knew just where he'd like to go: the Steinway Beer Garden, a pub where Niko could swill pints of stout and, according to a commercial, “watch drunk fat old men throw sharp instruments around a crowded room.” In real life, Sam sucked at darts, but the mini-game of darts was one of Sam's favorite and most accomplished pastimes in *GTA IV*—and something he could actually win.

Sam pulled up to the walled garden of Steinway's and walked in under the orange arch. He stepped into the outdoor patio, then walked along a line of trees with red autumn leaves. Drinkers socialized at white plastic tables under red-white-and-blue umbrellas that had plastic flags strung between them. Through the front door he went, into the pub with the lute music playing. A bartender stood behind the taps in a long walnut-colored bar on the right, rows of booths to the left along green-paneled walls. Down to the right in front of the bar, he saw the tattered red, black, green, and white dart board. It was time to play.

With his left thumb over the left controller stick he aimed his dart, and with a tap of a button, he let it fly. As the Irish music played, he heard a satisfying *thwack* as the tip of the dart logged into the board. With each dart, Sam felt a bit of his real self dematerialize, cells replaced by pixels, blood by electricity, a gamer immersed in a game, until he wasn't Sam anymore. He was Niko.

Sam had always had relationships with his game alter egos before, but there was usually some impediment to his suspension of disbelief: the top-down view of *GTA* and *GTA2*; the silent protagonist of *GTA III*; Liotta's voice in *Vice City*. Yet this felt different. The technology and the design of *GTA IV* had conspired to create something magic. “Niko is a real person to me now,” Sam thought.

This feeling of connection extended to relationships with other players in the game. Befriend one, and he brings you a helicopter; earn the trust of another, and he

introduces you to an important contact. In a scene that Sam found particularly moving, Niko had to save Roman from a mob of fifteen angry Albanians. As Sam urgently worked his buttons while his cousin screamed for help, he felt awed by the emotions swirling inside him. “The idea of having feelings for a bunch of polygons is very profound,” he later recalled.

Sam realized the implications of this one morning back in New York as he was driving over the Brooklyn Bridge. In the distance, the skyscrapers rose above the South Street Seaport, where he had lived with the others in the Commune so many years ago. They had come to America to live out their fantasies, to make the games they wanted to play, and, in turn, to make games urgent for a new generation. They had fought for this dream, from the streets of SoHo to the halls of Capitol Hill. They had been celebrated and vilified, rewarded and fined, had survived murders and marriages, suicides and births. They had even seen the tallest buildings in town crumble and fall.

Yet through it all, this amazing city remained. New York. The place he'd dreamed of as a kid sitting in his bedroom listening to Slayer. Now the city was his to share. Decoded. Replicated. Simulated. A living, breathing world on a disc that anyone could play. For weeks, he had been in Edinburgh, immersed in Liberty City, but now, as New York City towered above him, something shifted inside him. *Why doesn't this feel different?* he wondered. Then it hit him. It didn't feel different because the simulated world had come so vividly to life. “I didn't feel like I'd left,” he realized, “because I'd been here the whole time.”

THE STOCK MARKET crash of 2008 didn't stop gamers from buying *GTA IV.* When the game was released on April 29, 2008, it broke the Guinness World Record to become the most successful entertainment product launch of all time—bigger than any game, movie, or album.

Taking in more than $310 million on its first day alone, it eclipsed the box office champ *Spider-Man 3* and even *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final book in the series. Not even *The Dark Knight*, which *GTA IV* outsold five-to-one, came close. By the end of its first week, the game had sold more than six million copies for more than half a billion dollars. Electronic Arts attempted a hostile bid to buy Take-Two for a reported $2 billion but didn't succeed.

According to MetaCritic, which aggregated reviews, *GTA IV* became the best-reviewed game in history. *GameSpot* called it “the series' best by far.” *Game Informer* effused that “it completely changes the landscape of gaming.” *GameSpy* deemed it “an instant classic, a game unlike any we've played before. As is the case

with many great books and movies, you'll want to know what happens to the characters after the game ends, and one can't help hoping that all of their American Dreams comes true." The game took nearly every major game industry award.

In the past, controversy had dogged every new *GTA*, but now (with the exception of the Chicago Transit Authority pulling *GTA IV* ads from buses for fear of inciting violence) something had changed. The mainstream press was focusing on the one thing Sam had championed all along, the game. The *Sunday Times* in London said *GTA IV* "embodies the future of entertainment" and called it "the pinnacle of a British-created phenomenon."

"The real star of the game is the city itself," effused Seth Schiesel in the *New York Times*. "It looks like New York. It sounds like New York. It feels like New York. Liberty City has been so meticulously created it almost even smells like New York." A blogger for *New York* magazine wrote, "It will finally allow us to do all the things we fantasize about doing whenever our urban surroundings impede on our ability to not be completely annoyed . . . head-butt that guy who made us miss a 6 train this morning or drive a tank through the living room of our jerk next-door neighbor with the surround sound."

Not everyone was so keen. Back in Dundee, some of the original *GTA* team thought the series had been losing its sense of humor since *Vice City*. "*GTA IV* is so dour," lamented Gary Penn. "It's become a very serious franchise," said Brian Baglow. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist Junot Diaz admitted to be a longtime fan of the series but thought that *GTA IV* failed to rise to true art. "Successful art tears away the veil and allows you to see the world with lapidary clarity; successful art pulls you apart and puts you back together again, often against your will, and in the process reminds you in a visceral way of your limitations, your vulnerabilities, makes you in effect more human," he wrote. "Does *GTA IV* do that? Not for me it doesn't, and heck, I love this damn game."

Yet ultimately, being a damn good game was enough. With *GTA IV*, Rockstar finally had achieved its lifelong goals—to break the wall between reality and fantasy and have its medium respected as mainstream entertainment. "There was a sense that in some way movies were a higher art form and video games could aspire to be like them," Dan said. "I think now, because we and a few other companies are making products, that this isn't the case. They're just different and video games are capable of things that movies aren't."

In the United Kingdom, the first battleground over the games, *GTA IV* wasn't merely celebrated, it was fueling one of the country's most esteemed institutions: Oxford. Because the university retained a share of the company that created the *GTA IV* engine, Oxford would be making money from the game. A university

spokesperson called it “a huge success.”

After a decade of fights and betrayals, dreams and nightmares, the players had done it. Video games didn't seem so outlaw anymore—and neither did the industry's most influential player, Sam. The thirty-six-year-old was now living in a tony brownstone on a leafy street in Brooklyn with his wife and kids. He had even gone through the long naturalization process to become a United States citizen. After making such iconically American games, he was now an American too.

When Sam reflected on the adversity he'd overcome, it was as if he spoke for the entire generation who had grown up on his games. “It's made our resolve that much stronger,” he told a reporter one day, “and in some ways I feel that some of the negative stuff had to happen to keep everybody's feet on the ground, and to keep everybody hungry and motivated. . . . the fact that, after all this time, we can still be this hungry and ambitious and driven and crazy—that's got to be a good sign. Because if they can't shake us now, then what can they do to us?”

This game was over; this mission, complete. It was time for another to begin. “What have I got left to achieve?” Sam asked. “Everything.”

Epilogue

Outlaws to the End

FREE ROAM

You can choose people to enter your posse by hitting back and separately inviting each of the players. If you receive a posse invite, tap back and accept the invitation.

Perhaps more than any other entertainment product of its time, *Grand Theft Auto* defined a decade. “It was a defining creative work that represented the coming of age of a breakout industry,” as Lowenstein said. Yet that decade—spanning the inception of the franchise through its crowning achievement, *GTA IV*—marked more than the awkward adolescence of the industry. It signified one of the most disruptive chapters in the history of media.

When players weren't exploring Liberty City, they were toying with powerful new tools from YouTube to Facebook, from texting to Twitter. A new world emerged on the other side of our TV and telephone and computer screens. We started the millennium thinking that tweeting was for birds. By the end of the decade, we couldn't go long without peering through the looking glass into the wonderland online. Whether you thought technology brought out the best or the worst in humanity or maybe a little of both, life would never be the same.

Neither would video games. Sam Houser's dream of seeing games get taken as seriously as films had been fulfilled. *GTA* made it possible to have the game industry's equivalent of Scorsese films: arty, funny, dark, violent, and authentic. Franchises from *BioShock*, a sort of retro futuristic thriller, to the military shooters, such as *Call of Duty*, represented, along with *GTA*, a new wave of cinematic storytelling—just made for participants with controllers in hand.

In addition to maturing as a storytelling medium, games had become a huge business. By 2010, the $60 billion global game industry was expected to hit more than $90 billion within the next five years. The stereotype of the pimply teenage boy gaming in his basement was finally fading away. A new generation of online games—nicknamed social or casual games—had become the craze. Often free to download and play, the games were cheeky and accessible, such as the biggest hit on Facebook, a farm simulator called *FarmVille*. Every day, 62 million people were harvesting virtual corn.

Mobile gaming, once a pipe dream, had millions of fingers twitching and swiping their screens. Cheap to make and easy to produce, these games spawned a new golden age of start-up development. While *GTA IV* had a team of 150 and a budget of $100 million, a mobile game hit could be made by one intrepid coder with a laptop and a dream. That was pretty much the case with *Angry Birds*, a Finnish physics game that despite its surreal premise (slingshot birds at kidnapping pigs?) became the *Pac-Man* of the iPhone generation.

With casual games seducing moms (and grandmas), consoles broadened their audience as well. Riding on the success of the Nintendo Wii, Microsoft and Sony introduced their own motion-sensing controllers—the Kinect and Move. Players didn't need thumbs that danced like Michael Jackson anymore. They could simply wave their arms—or jump or shout—to play.

Despite whispers at game conventions that the age of the blockbuster might be over, the big-budget epics that *GTA* pioneered kept coming. In fact, it didn't take long for *GTA IV*'s blockbuster sales record to be broken. The latest champ was the military shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, which brought in more than $650 million in its first week alone. The game industry remained the testing ground for technological innovations, such as 3-D television, and a new wave of blockbusters was always around the corner.

As a broader range of games served a wider demographic, another seismic shift occurred in the wake of the *GTA* Decade: the sociopolitical battle subsided. Some took it as a sign that the Bush era was over, and the Obama one had begun. “It feels at last like we're moving on from that debate,” Dan said. “The audience is getting past thirty so it all becomes a bit silly.”[1]

Hot Coffee, despite all of the headaches, was credited with making the game industry stronger. It pushed the ESRB to refine its submission process, ensuring that such a costly scandal would likely never happen again. “It forced us to address issues we hadn't addressed before,” said Vance, who noted that stores now card 80 percent of minors buying M-rated games, as opposed to 20 percent at the beginning of the decade. Hot Coffee “gave us an opportunity to show to critics that we're not in the tank,” Lowenstein said.

At the same time, the suppositions about the effects of video game violence wore thin. In a meta-analytic study called “Evidence for Publication Bias in Video Game Violence Effects Literature,” Dr. Christopher J. Ferguson of Texas A&M International University's Department of Behavioral, Applied Sciences and Criminal Justice found what he called “a systematic bias for hot-button issues” that resulted in overstatements and misleading findings.

“No one has shown a causal link between violent games and real world violent

behavior," said Dr. Cheryl Olson, a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School's Center for Mental Health and Media. "As with the entertainment of earlier generations," she said, "we may look back on some of today's games with nostalgia, and our grandchildren may wonder what the fuss was about."

In November 2010, the debate reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which held a hearing on the controversial California law banning the sale or rental of violent video games to minors. Protesters—including one dressed in a fake mustache and a red hat like Nintendo's ubiquitous hero, Mario—took to the steps, calling for justice. During the hearing, the California Attorney General argued that the "deviant level of violence that is presented in a certain category of video games" necessitated the law.

Conservative justice Antonin Scalia questioned whether such restrictions should apply to violent stories such as Grimm's fairy tales as well. "Are you going to ban them, too?" Scalia asked. The following June, the high court voted to throw out California's violent game ban entirely. "Like the protected books, plays and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas—and even social messages—through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player's interaction with the virtual world)," Scalia wrote. "That suffices to confer First Amendment protection."

The hypocrisy of the war against games was not lost on many—especially when, not long before, New York governor Spitzer, who campaigned against the virtual prostitution of *GTA*, got busted for the real thing. One familiar player, however, was absent from the debate: Jack Thompson, who had come to an unexpected conclusion of his own. At first, after settling with Take-Two and agreeing not to sue or correspond directly with them again, Thompson continued to speak out. He called *GTA IV* "the gravest assault upon children in this country since polio" and, legally bound from contacting Take-Two directly, wrote an open letter to Take-Two chair Strauss Zelnick's mother instead. "Your son, this very moment, is doing everything he possibly can to sell as many copies of *GTA IV* to teen boys in the United States, a country in which your son claims you raised him to be 'a Boy Scout,'" Thompson wrote. "More like the Hitler Youth, I would say."

Yet his legal battles were soon done. On September 25, 2008, the Florida bar voted to permanently disbar Thompson because of "the extensive misconduct of respondent and his complete lack of remorse." The U.S. District Court ruled that Thompson's numerous lawsuits were "abusive and vexatious." For gamers, it was like the melting of the Wicked Witch of the West, and they flooded the Net with YouTube videos and online comics rejoicing.

Thompson soon found a higher calling than *GTA*, however. In January 2011, he

revealed that he was enrolled in the online Reformed Theological Ministry to join the clergy. “As a virtual minister, Thompson will be able to seek the absolute and eternal justice he was denied over and over again,” reported the *Miami New Times.* “Thirty-one years fighting with the bar and the entertainment industry is a pretty good run,” Thompson said. “I'm surprised that I lasted that long.”

While the conflicts of the *GTA* Decade came to a close, one question remained: the legacy and the future of Rockstar Games. Despite the success of *GTA IV*, the company could not completely escape its past. In September 2009, Take-Two announced that it would be paying $20 million to settle the class-action lawsuits from Hot Coffee—in addition to the estimated $25 million already spent to recall the AO version of the game.

Three months later, Rockstar's wall of silence shattered like never before. It happened when the self-described “Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees” wrote a public blog alleging dismal working conditions for the studio working on *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* and *Red Dead Redemption.* They complained of twelve-hour-a-day, six-day work weeks that “turned [employees] into machines as they are slowly robbed of their humanity.”

The wives said that “the current Rockstar management has grown a thirst for power,” while failing to adequately compensate employees. “The last *Grand Theft Auto* game made over a billion dollars of revenue,” the wives concluded, “so where is the recognition and appreciation to those of whom, without them, such success would not have been made?” They vowed legal action, seeking compensation “for health, mental, financial, and damages done to families of employees.”[2]

The blog triggered similar allegations by people claiming to be ex-employees of Rockstar. One compared the company to the Eye of Sauron, the fire-rimmed, all-seeing eye of the dark lord in *The Lord of the Rings.* Rockstar NYC wouldn't comment—directly, at least. Shortly after the Eye of Sauron comment, the company posted a series of psychedelic wallpaper images on its website titled “The Eye Is Watching.” In one, a giant eye clutched a lightning bolt as it stared down on an exploding R* icon. The wives weren't laughing and pursued their class-action case with more than a hundred employees from Rockstar San Diego. The blog doystig reported that in April 2009, Rockstar settled out of court with the group for $2.75 million.

The next year, similar allegations about working conditions surfaced following the release of *L.A. Noire*, a critically acclaimed detective thriller published by Rockstar and developed by Australian game makers Team Bondi—prompting an investigation by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA). “Certainly, reports of twelve-hour a day, lengthy crunch time, if true, are absolutely unacceptable and

harmful to the individuals involved, the final product, and the industry as a whole," said IGDA chair Brian Robbins. Some felt it was time to unionize the game business —like other parts of entertainment industry—once and for all.

Even the Rockstar who most exemplified the selfless devotion to the company, Will Rompf, Sam's acolyte, left broken in the end. After five long years of work, he was finally crushed by the crunch time. It happened just three weeks before the release of *Grand Theft Auto IV*. One day he looked up at his friend from his desk and said he couldn't endure the stress anymore and needed to take the rest of the week off. Within hours of his leaving, he said his Rockstar e-mail had been shut off—but an uncommon practice when an employee leaves a company, lot one that seemed abrupt.

Unable to give 100 percent of himself anymore, Rompf chose not to come back. Assuming he'd be cut from *GTA IV*'s credits, despite all of his work, as was Rockstar's way, he made one last call to the company—asking a friend to be the one who removed his name. "I wanted someone I love and trust to do it," he later recalled. Eventually, Rompf got back on his feet, cleaned up, and took a job as the head of quality assurance at a major game publisher. Despite the ups and downs, however, he still had a deep-felt connection to Rockstar. "I kind of want back," Rompf later said with a laugh.

He wasn't the only Rockstar veteran with mixed feelings. Jamie King, who had launched his own company, 4mm Games with Rockstar cofounder Gary Foreman, suggested that perhaps nothing great could come without some degree of chaos. "We never believed in the easy way," King said. "You don't create something amazing that's easy." In the end, it was this obsession that raised the profile of games to the point they had recently reached. "Games are very cool now," he said, "and now even in the movies if the character is a gamer, the guy gets laid!"

Replicating the success of Rockstar, many realized, wasn't easy. Dave Jones, *GTA*'s original creator, spent more than five years creating a multiplayer online urban action game, *APB: All Points Bulletin*, only to see it shut down following disappointing sales shortly after its release in July 2010. Fernandez and Pope, who had left Rockstar to launch their own start-up, Cashmere Games, met a similar fate when their company dissolved.

Pope went on to make a very non-*GTA* game for self-help doctor Deepak Chopra. "It's taking everything that's amazing about games and doing something positive," he said. "With video games you're either creating or destroying; with *GTA* we were definitely destroying." Fernandez, a producer at another company, kept a quote of Sam's over his desk. "It says, you must always fight for greatness," Fernandez said. "If you get complacent, you're dead. If you're not fighting for greatness, you're

dead.”

Rockstar still had plenty of fight. In May 2010, the company released *Red Dead Redemption*, its open world Western. The game arrived in a dust storm of notoriety. In addition to having come from the embattled Rockstar San Diego studio, it was at the heart of a controversy in Australia, where a game journalist was fired after posting an alleged e-mail from Rockstar seemingly pressuring him to give the title a positive review. “I did not sign up to become a journalist to write advertorials masquerading as editorial,” he said.

Rockstar didn't need his help, though. With its sweeping sunsets and old world grit (and, yeah, horse-jacking), *Red Dead Redemption* was a critical and commercial hit. The game became 2010's fastest selling title, racking up more than eight million copies in sales and numerous awards. More than anything, it proved that Rockstar wasn't a one-trick pony. As players rabidly awaited *GTA* V, which would be set in Los Santos, the fictional Los Angeles from San Andreas, it seemed like anything in the future could come. “Until we've simulated the world outside,” producer Les Benzies said, “we're not going to stop.”[3]

In the meantime, they had a little gift for their fans. It came on June 22, 2010, as a free bonus for buyers of *Red Dead Redemption.* Rockstar created a new pack of missions for the game, from raiding a mining camp to protecting a herd of cattle, but there was a twist. Instead of rustling on one's own, a gamer could team up online to play cooperatively with up to three others.

Gangs had always been crucial to the guys at Rockstar, from their own gang of developers to the ones they simulated in their games. Now, all across the world, posses of players hopped on their horses and rode off into the sunset together. It was a fitting finale for the ones who seemed so outcast not long ago. Yet no matter what was on the horizon, they'd never forget from where they came. The name Rockstar gave to the *Red Dead Redemption* mission pack ensured this:

Outlaws to the End.

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