



They Got Game

With the new Sony PlayStation 2 on deck, ROCKSTAR GAMES—the designers behind *Grand Theft Auto*—are gunning to steal the show. BY NOAH ROBISCHON

AIMEE SWEET, AUGUST 1998's *Penthouse Pet*, is looking at us...again. Since the June 14 Pet of the Year party at Manhattan's Saci Club is peopled by, well, me and a gaggle of middle-aged ad sales doofs in knockoff suits pretending they aren't married, she must be eyeing Kevin Gill. He's the only 6'4" bottle blond wearing a dragon-print shirt, and a distinctive silver ring imprinted with a star dangling off the letter R—the logo of Rockstar Games, New York City's hippest videogame design company.

Gill isn't a typical product manager, but his attention-getting style typifies Rockstar Games. Formed in 1998 by transplanted Brits Sam Houser, 28, and Terry Donovan, 29, the company turns out games with the rebellious panache of a Sub Pop or Matador



HAVE CARS. WILL TRAVEL
Rockstar's 'Midnight Club'
and 'Smuggler's Run'

Records (hence the cocky name). The soundtrack for their 1999 release *Thrasher: Skate and Destroy* grooves through the last 20 years of rap, from the Sugarhill Gang to Gang Starr. Their game concepts—*Grand Theft Auto* has players hijacking cars while running gangland errands—are as disturbingly tantalizing as their upcoming line of T-shirts (one features stars from an American flag pouring out of a red-and-white-striped gel cap).

Then there are the infamous Rockstar Loft parties that are held every so often in some newly discovered Manhattan space, feature top-shelf DJs, and are so popular that 5,000 people vied for the 1,000 tickets to the one this past March. And while many companies are simply rehashing their hit titles for the Oct. 26 U.S. launch of Sony's PlayStation 2, Rock-



Donovan and Houser

star is hatching two original games.

At Rockstar HQ, just above the Guggenheim SoHo in Manhattan, Gill—who scored only Sweet's autograph in the end—is at the PS 2 controls, showing off his favorite trick in the new game *Smuggler's Run*. The goal is to pick up contraband—DNA, medicine, explosives—and move it between Mexico, the U.S., and Canada, while steering clear of competing couriers, the border police, and the CIA. (“I wanted pounds of Colombian powder,” says Houser. “But Sony had issues with that.”) Gill ignores the game's objective and drives into an adobe-brick-perfect Mexican village. The vaqueros run, but Gill rams one from behind, sending him high into the air. He lands headfirst in the red-tinted sand, legs kicking aimlessly back and forth. Chasing down bystanders “is like a game in itself,” chuckles Gill, as the un-bloodied vaquero pops out of the hole and walks off into the desert.

Smuggler's Run is about as subtle as MTV's *Beach House*, which helps explain why the cable net signed a four-year exclusive agreement to let Take Two Interactive, Rockstar's parent company, publish games based on its shows. There are deeper connections as well: Terry Donovan's father directed the video for Robert Palmer's “Addicted to Love”—you know, the one with the *très chic* mini-skirted babe band—and Sam Houser was also a music-vid creator. Still, they're an odd team. Donovan, a DJ and former A&R man, is soft-spoken with a shaved head and a fan of techno, house, and *nuevo* rock, while hyperactive Houser, with a beard and shaggy mane, collects obscure '60s rock.

When it comes to games, though, their sensibilities match perfectly. “The average age of the videogame player worldwide now is over 20,” says Donovan. “They're being spoken to as adults by the movie industry, the music industry, the fashion industry, so why should we treat them as children and give them a game about head-chopping dragons?”

Hence the unapologetic mayhem of *Grand Theft Auto*, which has been spun into a series of games that netted \$50 million last year, and *Midnight Club*, the second new title for PlayStation 2. *Midnight* is based on illegal street-racing gangs in Japan, and the duo sought out real Tokyo racers—usually high-powered businessmen who spend tens of thousands tricking out classic cars—to license their gang names and logos. Most said they were honored, but couldn't take part—they did help out, though. “We have licenses from all the car-tuning shops around the world,” says Houser. Which means that the low rider skidding across neon-lit 42nd Street looks and handles differently than the souped-up Honda Civic look-alike zipping through Trafalgar Square. And the graphic subtleties blow the old PlayStation to bytes: The cars reflect the multicolored street lighting, which changes when you hit a lamppost.

One day, Rockstar wants to see its action-movie-inspired games—none of which have cracked the annual top 10 best-sellers list—on film or TV. But for now, Houser is busy working with the designer of the new T-shirts. And Donovan is happy lining up the house-music soundtrack for *Smuggler's Run* and searching out a location for the next Loft party. No date's been announced yet, but Gill will be there—just look for the big blond in a dragon-print shirt. ●●●