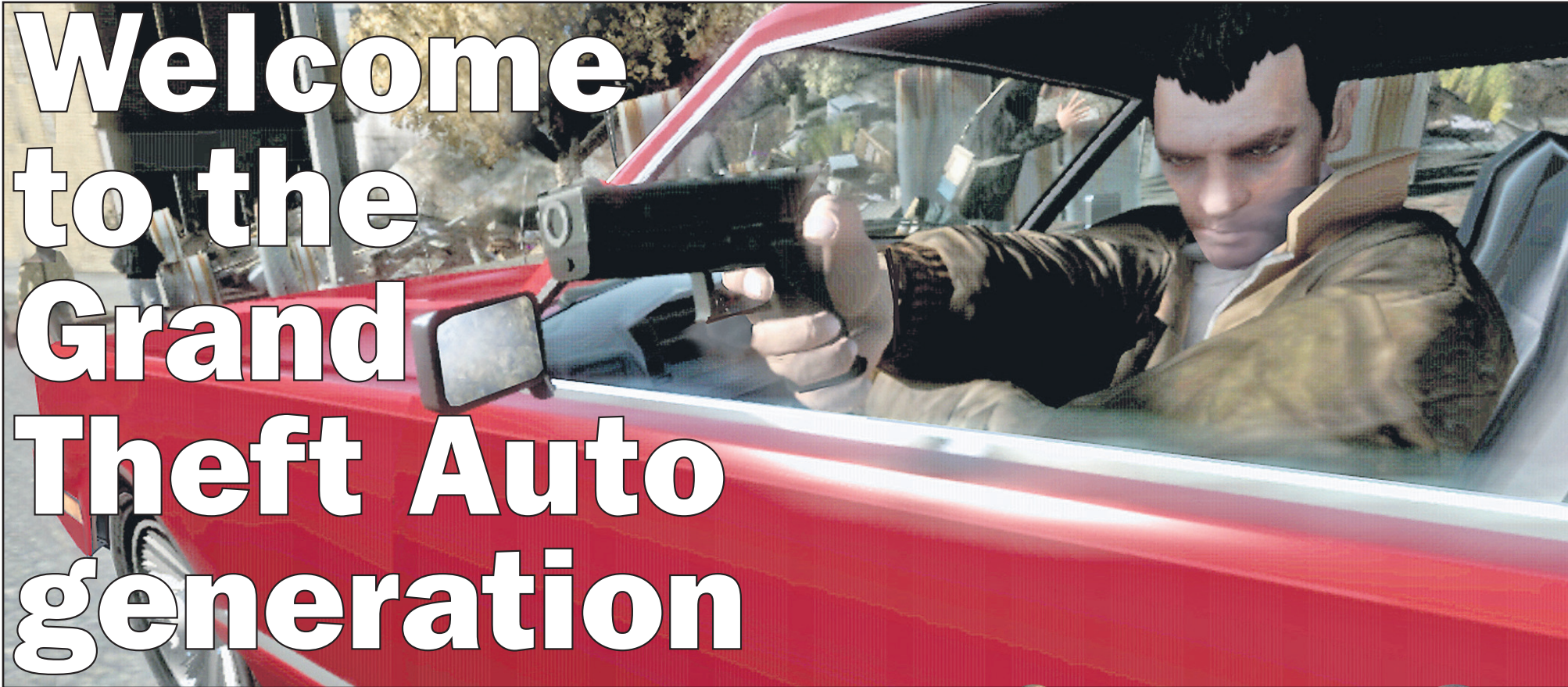


# As latest instalment of controversial game goes on sale...

# Welcome to the Grand Theft Auto generation



By James Millar

**C**OMPUTER game *Grand Theft Auto IV* hit the shops last week causing great excitement with gamers and consternation among parents.

It's little wonder. The game, developed by Scottish firm Rockstar, involves racing round an American city committing a series of violent crimes while rewarding players for stealing high-powered cars and killing police.

One Croydon games shop opened at midnight on Monday to sell the game. When a man in the queue was stabbed, his fellow gamers thought it was a publicity stunt.

Rebecca Mileham of the Science Museum in London published her book, *Powering Up: Are Computer Games Changing Our Lives?* on Thursday.

She's no fan of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise but says her research doesn't support the theory that computer games are a social evil.

"There is no evidence that by performing a violent act in a computer game you're more likely to commit a similar act in real life," she said.

"*Grand Theft Auto* is not something I want to play, but I lump it in the same category as horror films like the graphic *Saw* series. I wouldn't necessarily be able to stomach it and I can't really see the appeal, but I accept they exist.

"I spoke to a psychologist who said that when he first heard about *Grand Theft Auto* he thought it sounded very grim.

"But when he played it he changed his view. He said it was a series of challenges and he regarded it as something more theoretical, almost like chess. When you play chess you aren't really planning to kill a monarch."

## Violent

There is some, albeit fairly flimsy, evidence that playing driving games can make young men take greater risks behind the wheel, but Rebecca points out that young men were among the highest-risk drivers long before computer games were invented.

*Grand Theft Auto* has also been criticised for its portrayal of women. Players are encouraged to use prostitutes before violently killing them to steal their takings.

Rebecca added, "I was delighted to interview a lot of women who work in the games industry, but unfortunately not many are programmers and developers. But the same goes for the film business, where most of the directors are men.

"When there's a broader spectrum of people working in the industry that will be reflected on screen."

Rebecca (35) reckons attitudes towards computer games are



■ Top — Guns, cars and crime have been *Grand Theft Auto's* winning formula since 1996. Above — The latest in the series, *GTA IV*, is destined to be one of the year's biggest-selling games. Left — Rebecca Mileham explored the growing popularity of computer games in her new book.



of computer games is linked to the obesity epidemic, but Rebecca spoke to Australian academic Michael Gard who refutes any such connection.

His research found that the kids who spend the most time playing games are the same ones that play the most sport. He blames junk food for obesity and points out that if kids are playing on a computer, they can't be munching burgers at the same time.

And Rebecca found further surprises. "I expected to find a lot of strong evidence linking games and aggression. During a game a player's brain patterns mirror exactly those of someone committing a real act of violence, but once they stop playing the brain activity stops. There's no long-lasting effect."

Rebecca also found computer game technology being put to very positive uses, such as *Triage Trainer*, a realistic game that prepares medics for the stresses and realities of working in accident and emergency.

Scientists at Nottingham

University tried using a racing game and a virtual reality headset to treat children with a lazy eye, usually fixed by wearing an eye patch. One hour of game play achieved a similar improvement to 400 hours wearing the patch.

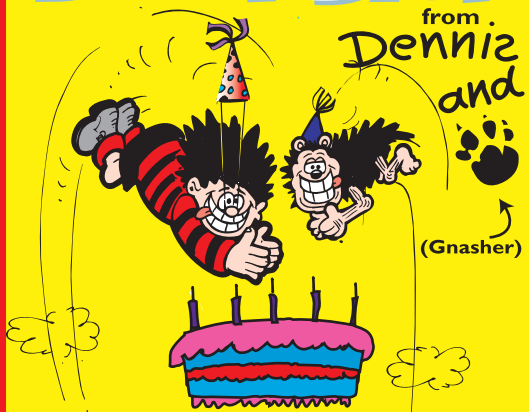
Added Rebecca, "Like anything, if you play computer games too much they can be harmful, but there are so many positive stories about them we don't hear about.

"Gaming is still in its infancy. The success of the Nintendo Wii has shown how games can change. They're no longer for playing alone on a small screen, now the whole family can join in and they can be very active.

"There's still a degree of snobbery surrounding games. Parents are happy for their children to spend hours reading a Harry Potter book but less keen for them to spend the same amount of time playing the computer game, for example.

"But generally computer games are no longer regarded as just for the wayward and the lonely. They're part of everyday life."

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