SAINTS ROW

A s we sit in the darkened space of Volition's new conference room, there's a palpable feeling of excitement in the air. The game's lead designers are gathered around the table as Jacques Hennequet, the producer for Saint's Row, starts to speak. This is, after all, their biggest project to date. They've moved into these sleek new offices only recently, to accommodate the vast size of the endeavor. Their last game had a team of 40 – Saint's Row has close to 120 people all told. After almost two years in development, they're finally ready to show off the fruits of their labor, and this is the first time someone outside their inner circle will be seeing the game. Hennequet begins to speak about the next-generation technical achievements, the vast size of the game world, and the expansion of the urban sandbox concept into an online multiplayer arena. As he continues to outline the dozens of features, modes of play, and vast ambitions for the title, it gets hard to keep up. There's a wealth of information they have to share about this huge title, but as Hennequet turns to hand us the controller, we learn one thing right away – Saint's Row is on track to be one hell of a fun game.

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THE NATIONS LEADING PAPER COVERING THE HOMETOWN NEWS, AVAILABLE TO ALL CITY RESIDENTS.

GANGLAND
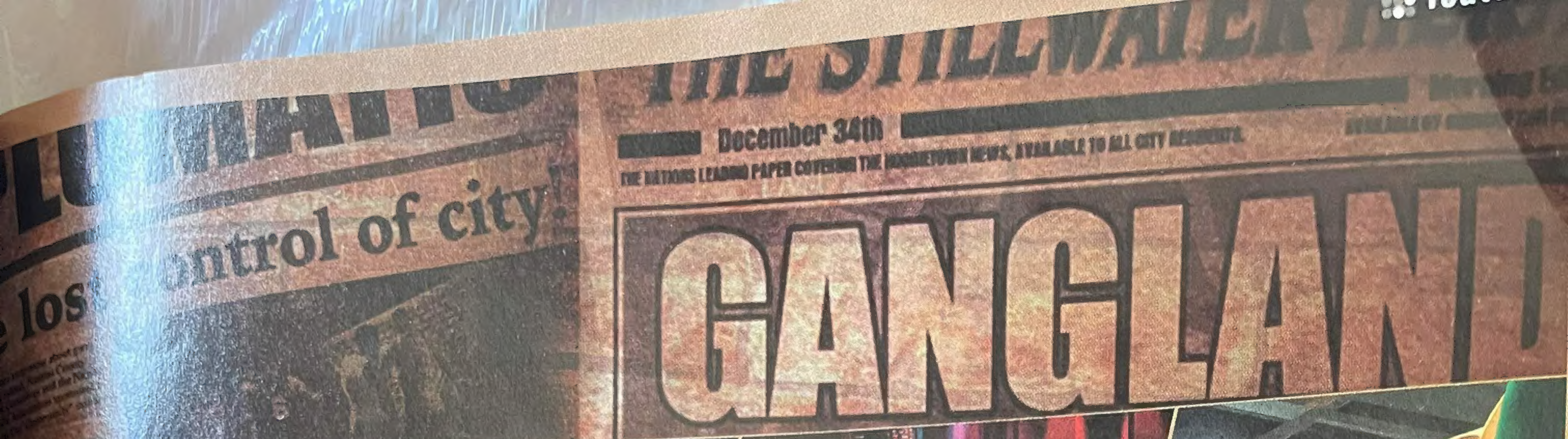
As we run our character down into the busy city street, things feel immediately familiar. Cars drive past, police patrol the streets, gang members wander in small, tight-knit squads. The similarity to the stellar Grand Theft Auto series is unmistakable. However, as we play, and the team continues to tell us about the game, it becomes increasingly clear that this is much more than a clone of the popular franchise. Chris Stockman, the lead designer, offers his perspective. "After doing extensive research we found most gamers just loved creating mayhem and destruction within GTA. They played a few missions here and there but ultimately went back to just messing around in the world. Unfortunately, this type of freeform gameplay didn't matter all that much in the GTA series. What we are doing with Saint's Row is taking this fun, freeform component and making it actually matter." We've certainly seen plenty of GTA clones in the past, but Saint's Row is poised to break the mold. Taking the template of the urban playground game, they are implementing dozens of the features that make the genre fun, and using that template to launch in an entirely new direction.

Saint's Row tells the story of the Third Street Saints, a gang in the fictional crime-ridden city of Stillwater. Your goal as a member of the Saints is to take back the city from the three rival gangs that hold most of the town. While much of this sounds familiar, it's the path to this goal that sets Saint's Row apart. From the technical marvels of the game to the progression of the story, there's a constant sense of dynamic reaction to every action you take. Stockman tells us more. "We're really adding a more open-ended feel to the game that we hope is refreshing to players. We're giving them an unprecedented amount of freedom to really play the game how they want to play it. They are no longer restricted to one linear story path to progress through the game."

Free to Roam

This player-driven mentality is present from the very opening of the game, thanks to one of the most extensive and involved character creation sequences we've ever seen. Dozens of sliders let you create a player of any size, shape, or ethnicity that you want. When we asked the team whether we could create a horribly deformed, hopelessly ugly

gang member, they just smiled and nodded. It's all about player choice. Your personal style offers up the same degree of flexibility. Instead of just choosing what clothes you wear, you decide how to put them on as well. Layer pieces on top of one another or wear them in unique ways. Zip up a jacket or leave it open. Wear your pants normally or roll them up. Button your shirt all the way or just fasten it at the top.

You start the game from your local crib, which serves as a hub where you can return to change clothes or access your garage of cars. Each district of the city you bring under your control garners you another crib, and your full collection of vehicles and apparel is available at each one. Once you emerge into the world beyond your safe house, an endless number of options await you. From the beginning of the game, the entire city is open and available for exploration. Every part of the game world streams directly onto your screen – there are no load times after you start the game. Run inside buildings, start new missions, or drive across town, and you'll never see a break for the game to load up the new area. You can immediately start the prologue story, which teaches

you the basics of gameplay. After that, each of the four gangs has its own story to pursue. Tackle them in any order – starting and stopping whenever you want. As you complete each gang's story, you'll conquer that area of town. You'll be able to play the game the way you want to play.

If you're like us, this means a lot of explosions, crashing cars, and high speed pursuits. In order to integrate this random chaos, destruction, and lawlessness into the game objectives, Volition is including a mechanic called activities. These are small mission-style events that weave seamlessly into the flow of playing around in the city, like tiny attractions at a theme park. "Activities are a crucial part of Saint's Row. They are one of the primary devices we use to let the user decide 'how much of what' they prefer to do," Hennequet tells us. "Activities can be performed anywhere in the city, any number of times, and the player can focus on his favorite type of activities without any penalties. If you would rather race than smuggle drugs, go ahead and race as much as you want. If you prefer combat-oriented activities, do more of those." While there are 13 activities in all, each time you encounter them they'll be slightly
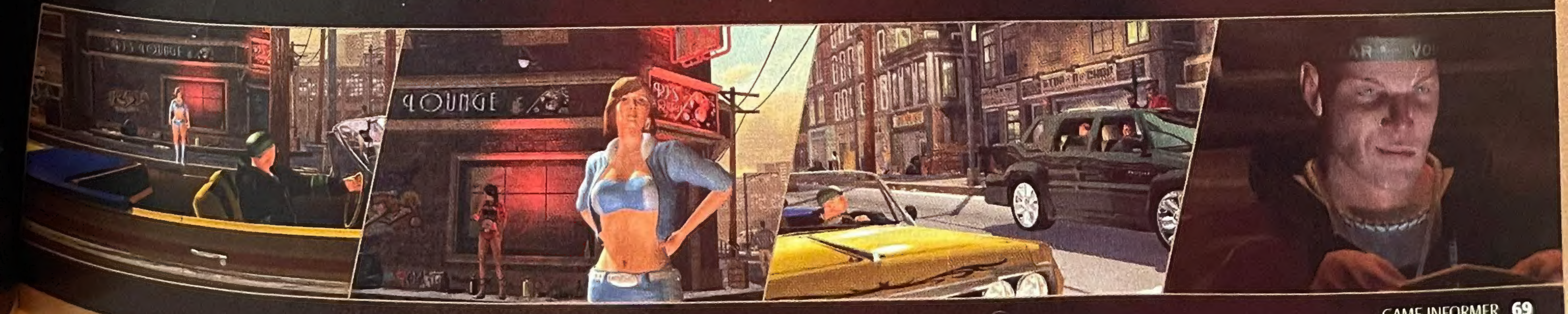
different, with small mini-stories and characters for each time they show up. The Theft activity can be triggered at one of the local pawn shops. From here, the shop owner will encourage you to go and break into another store. You'll have to grab a car for the job, but choose wisely. An open bed truck may be able to store more, but it's slower, and packages thrown in the back may tip and spill out if you get in a high speed pursuit, while a speedy sedan may not have all the room you want. Once you reach the job site, your break-in will trigger a timed alarm, showing how long you have until the police arrive to bust up the party. Steal all you can, load up your ride, and get to the drop off point.

Alternately, take up the Hitman activity. You're given a mark to take down, and a weapon to do so with. Sometimes it will be to run him over with a particular car, while for others it might be a high-powered sniper rifle. You don't have to kill him that way, but you get a bonus if you do. Following a different tack, the Vandalism activity encourages you to cause as much public and private destruction as you can in order to distract the police while your employers commit a crime elsewhere.

Escort jobs have you serve as a limo driver for a stripper and her celebrity client. You'll have to avoid the roaming news and paparazzi vans long enough for the couple to share some quality time together in the back seat. Highjacking activities task you with getting ahold of a particular vehicle, while simultaneously eliminating the pesky driver. There are all sorts of Racing activities, including street races, demolition derbies, and throw down combat races. Then there's our personal favorite – insurance fraud. Here, an unscrupulous lawyer encourages you to hurt yourself as much as possible by throwing yourself down stairs, jumping in front of the train, or otherwise causing yourself grievous bodily harm. In these missions, you'll have an actual button press that fakes your fall, exhibiting the exaggerated ragdoll physics that abound throughout the game. Injure yourself well enough, and you'll get a cut of the payout. The focus for all of these activities is constant fun doing whatever you like to do in the game. Each of the 13 activities is available in some form in every district of the city, so you'll never have to go far to start one up.

Choice and Consequence

When you've had your fill of random criminal deviance (as if that can happen), you can tackle the main story missions. Usually, several of these should be available at any one time, and there'll be 40 to 50 story missions in the final game. Many of the neighborhoods will only come under your control after completing one of the missions in that spot. Other neighborhoods are controlled by what the team calls a stronghold. Instead of a story mission, the only way to take over these parts of town will be by completing its stronghold task. In one area you might have to defend the building, and in others you'll just have to eliminate the entrenched gang leadership. There are over 25 strongholds throughout the city, and each can be brought under your sway. But like any large empire, don't expect to rule unchallenged. Rival gangs will occasionally push back and try to retake their stolen hideouts, and you'll have to return to defend your territory.

To tie the activities, missions, and random violence together, all of them go towards building up Respect. Respect is necessary to open up the new story missions or pinpoint the strongholds in a given area, and you'll only gain Respect from different gangs by completing tasks on their turf. As your Respect level grows, rivals on the street will cease being insulting you and instead flash grudging gang signs your way. Girls will move from uninterested to fascinated, and they'll flock to your local crib. Pedestrians will begin to converse about you. The whole world is alive to your exploits.

You'll also have to keep an eye on your growing notoriety in the city, which is tracked by two separate meters. If you attack or make moves against rival gangs, your gang notoriety will go up. Attack civilians, steal cars, or commit other crimes, and you'll find your notoriety with the police will rise

All targeting is manual, with only a small assist from the game. You can always aim in 360 degrees, whether on foot or in your car
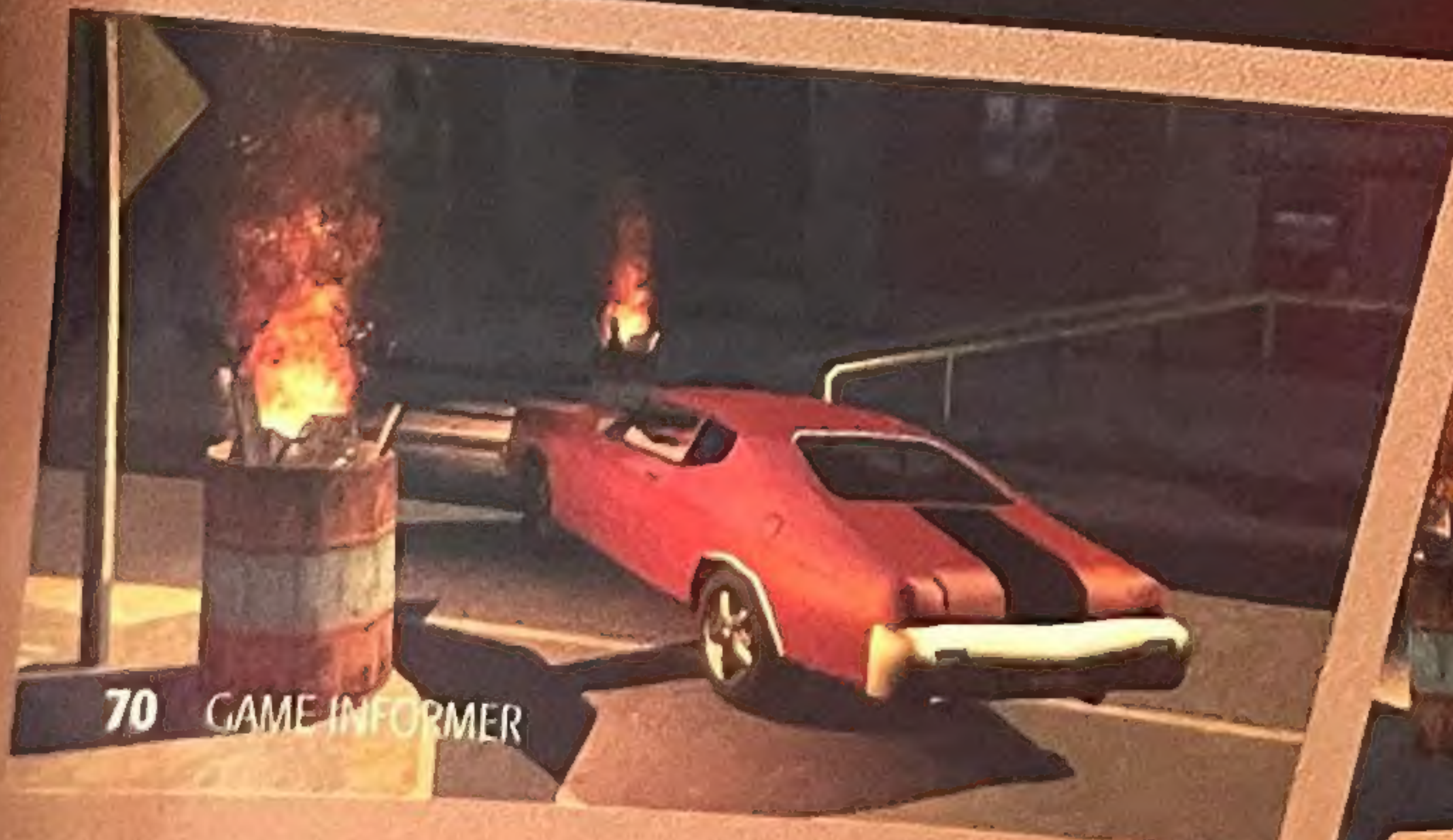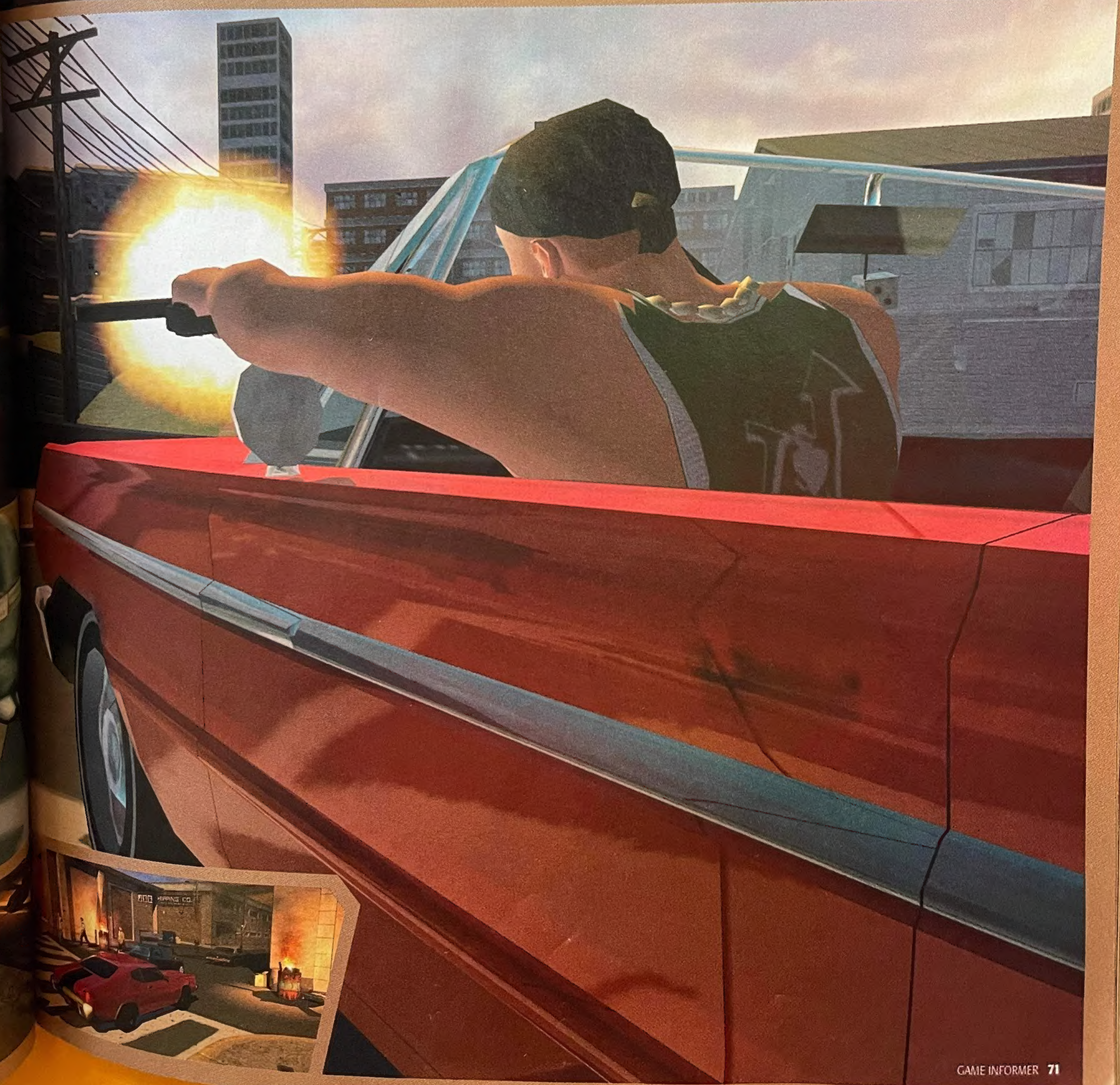
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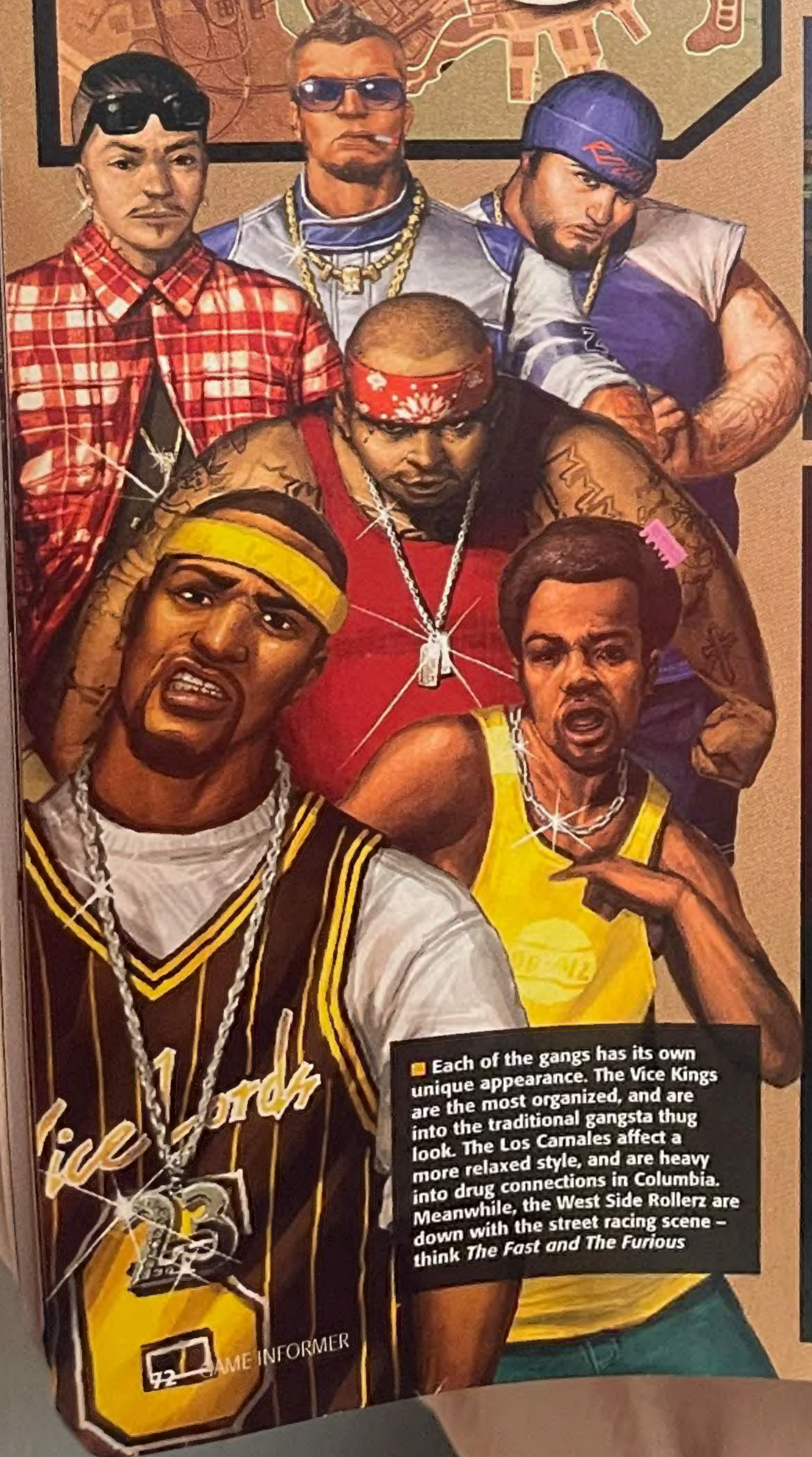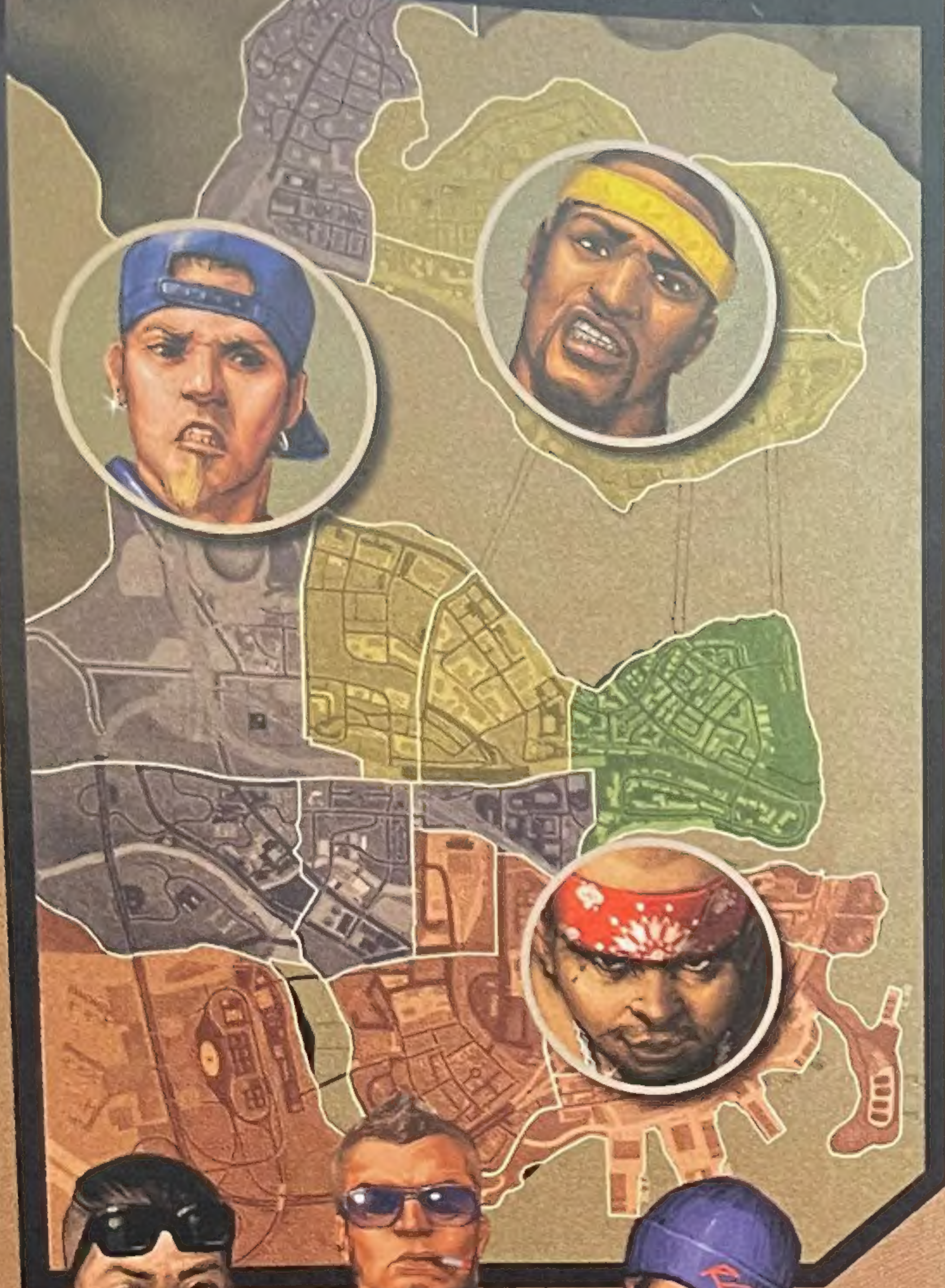
Starting from Saint's Row (in green), you'll forcibly retake the massive city of Stillwater district by district

■ Each of the gangs has its own unique appearance. The Vice Kings are the most organized, and are into the traditional gangsta thug look. The Los Carnales affect a more relaxed style, and are heavy into drug connections in Columbia. Meanwhile, the West Side Rollerz are down with the street racing scene – think *The Fast and The Furious*
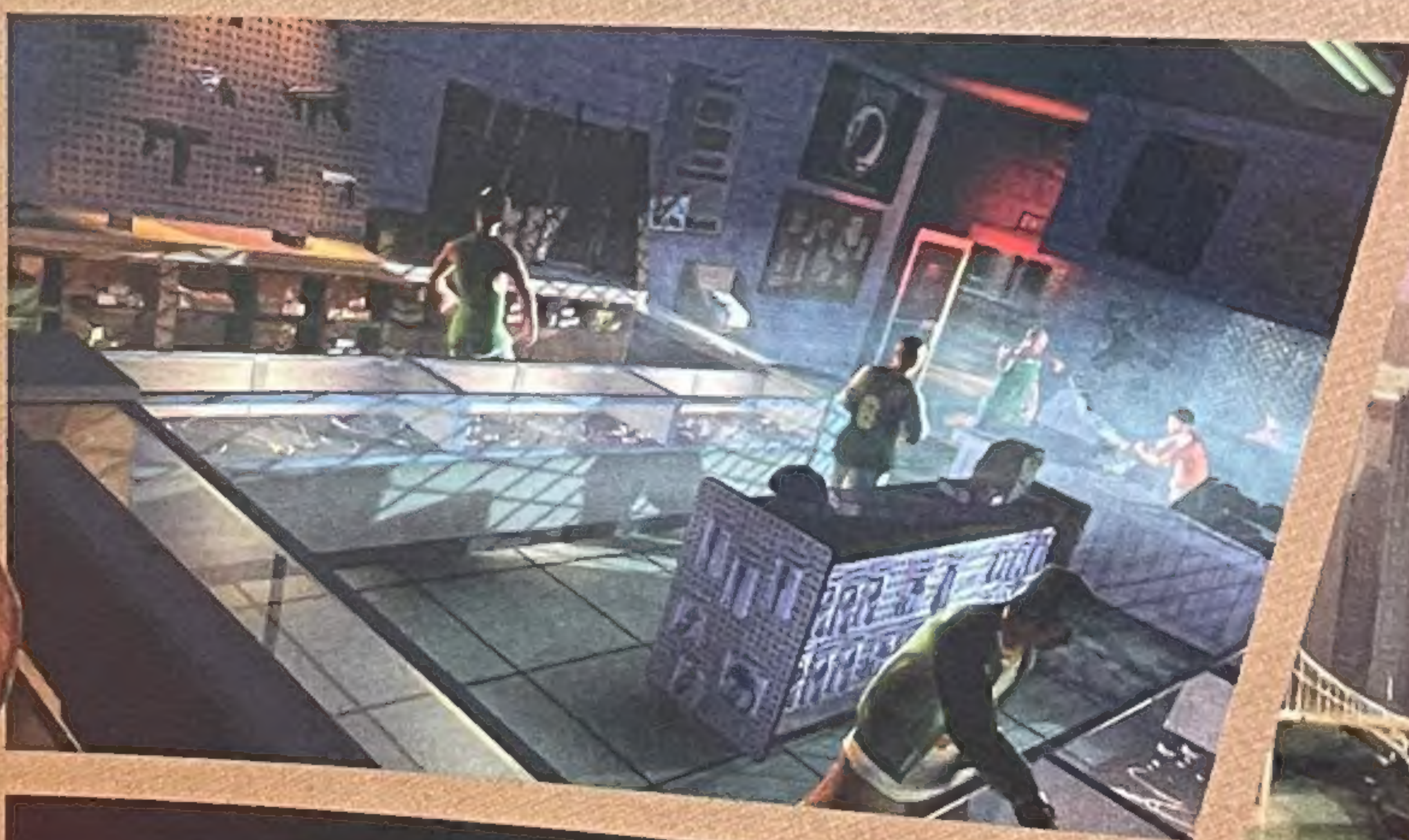
significantly. Either way, you're looking at serious trouble for you and your crew. To decrease the danger, you can certainly lie low for awhile. Alternately, find a good forger to make up a nice fake ID. And if you're really feeling drastic, go to the local plastic surgeon. Here, you can effectively remake your character to appear entirely different. Beware, however – low cost surgeons don't always get things exactly right.

Even your bad habits have consequences. Alcohol is readily available throughout the city, and unlike in the real world, it manages to enhance your performance. Specifically, a moderate binge gives you "beer muscles", letting you throw drunken punches with the best of them, flinging your opponent high in the air and against the far wall. Overdo it on booze (or other intoxicating substances) and you'll find yourself waking up in a dark alley, stripped of your jewelry and clothes, and with no idea where you are – feeling in all respects dazed and confused.

The Look of the Future

As we brazenly wandered the streets of Stillwater, it was hard not to stop and marvel at the technical prowess with which the entire world has been rendered. The Xbox 360 allows for a tremendous leap forward in how a game environment of this size and complexity can be presented. Shiny, reflective surfaces cover all the cars. Weapon muzzle flashes light the face of a gunner. Intricately detailed textures cover the tall buildings. Alan Lawrance is

the technical director on the game, and he explains the huge array of features the team has been able to play around with. "There is an amazing amount of power under the hood in the Xbox 360, both from a CPU and GPU [Graphics Processing Unit] perspective. On the graphics side we've been able to create a world where every light is dynamic and everything can cast real-time shadows." He exhibited exactly what he meant within the game by entering a command to speed up the passage of the day. On this cue, all the on-screen shadows began to rotate around in response to the sun moving overhead, perfectly displaying the shape of each image and form, from the highest building to the smallest curbside fire hydrant. Lawrance went on to explain the Xbox 360's support of Shader Model 3.0. The complexity of this tool can be summed up simply – it affords a huge range of options to make surfaces respond more realistically to the effects of light, including everything from the subtle shading of skin and hair to the fluid reflective surface of a watery pool.

While these features make the city look unbelievable, it's the action sequences that really need to pop off the screen. "We use Havok 3.0 in the game, which provides a strong physics base for us to build on," Lawrance told us. "We have spent a lot of time adjusting the ragdoll behavior to get the best results, and we feel we have the best looking (and behaving) ragdolls in any game out there today. The CPU power

of the Xbox 360 allows us to have many ragdolls simulated at once, and we don't shy away from that." To see what he meant, we fired off a rocket launcher at a nearby truck. A whole slew of nearby pedestrians were flung high into the air as the force of the explosion blasted outwards. We watched how the truck's damage modeling altered in direct response to the point of impact and force of the blast. The hood ignited with a tremendous burst and one of the driver-side tires careened off and flew directly at our character, knocking him to the ground as the back end of the truck flew off in the opposite direction. Damage to all the objects in the game is similarly dynamic. Shoot out a tire, and the car will veer off in that direction. Slam into a vehicle head on, and you'll see the opposing driver come smashing right through his front windshield. All of the action is over the top – just slightly beyond the realm of realism so that it feels like a ridiculous action movie stunt. And you're right in the middle of it all.

Music To Your Ears

It's easy to forget the incredible effect that audio has on the gaming experience. Even with all the hyped up graphics and constant action, it's often the music, vocals, and sound effects that really pull you into the world – make it feel alive and breathing. To address this issue, the development team is pursuing excellence in audio with the same fervor that is being applied to the rest of the title. The in-game radio is

■ Run solo or bang with a crew – you'll be able to recruit up to three homies to help conquer the city
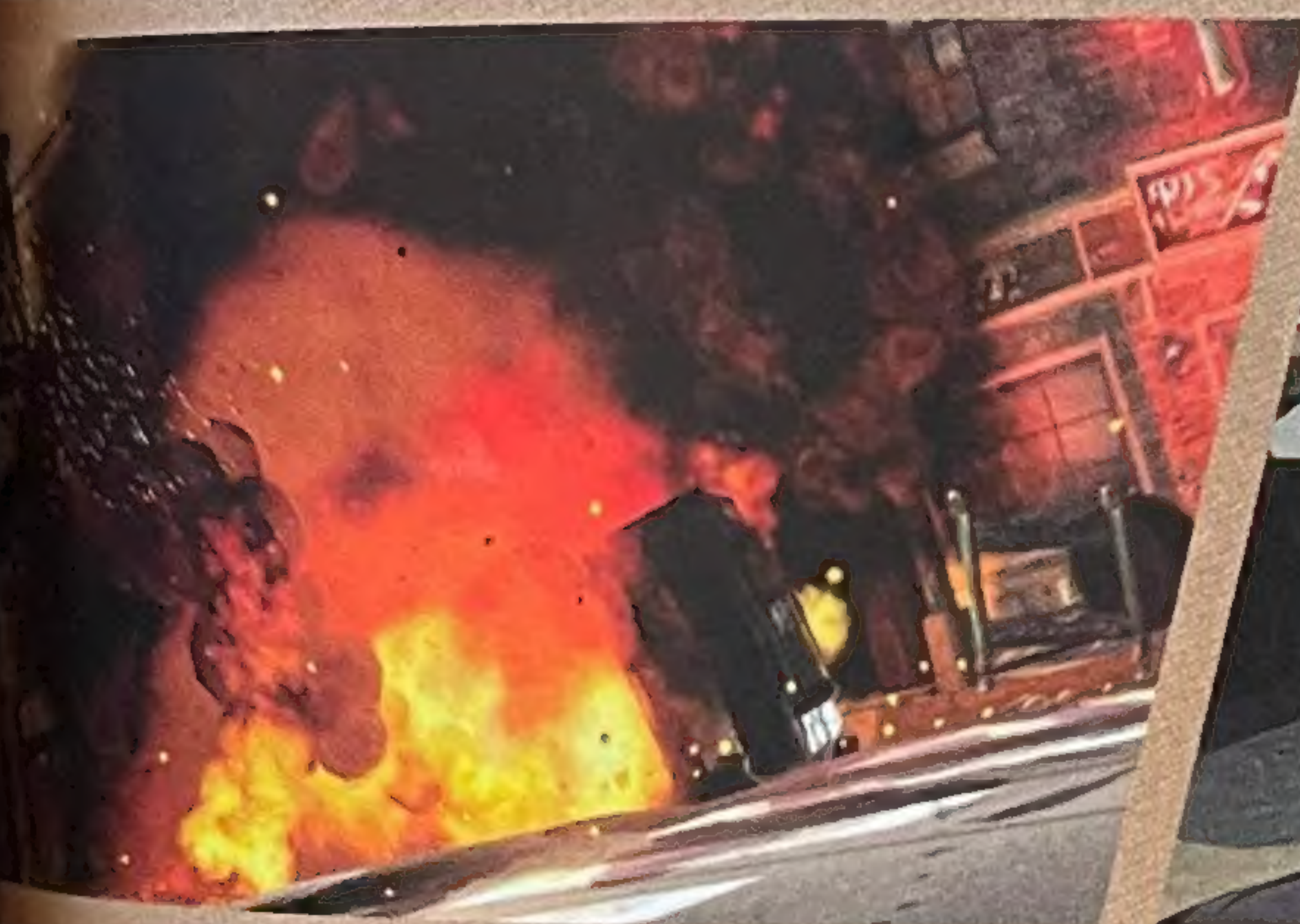
■ Combat is brutal and efficient, and all the damage you do is location specific – nail a guy in the leg and he'll start to limp

Ragdoll physics in the game are totally over-the-top, reflecting the overall style of the game. Hennequet describes Saint's Row as "reality as seen through the prism of a music video"
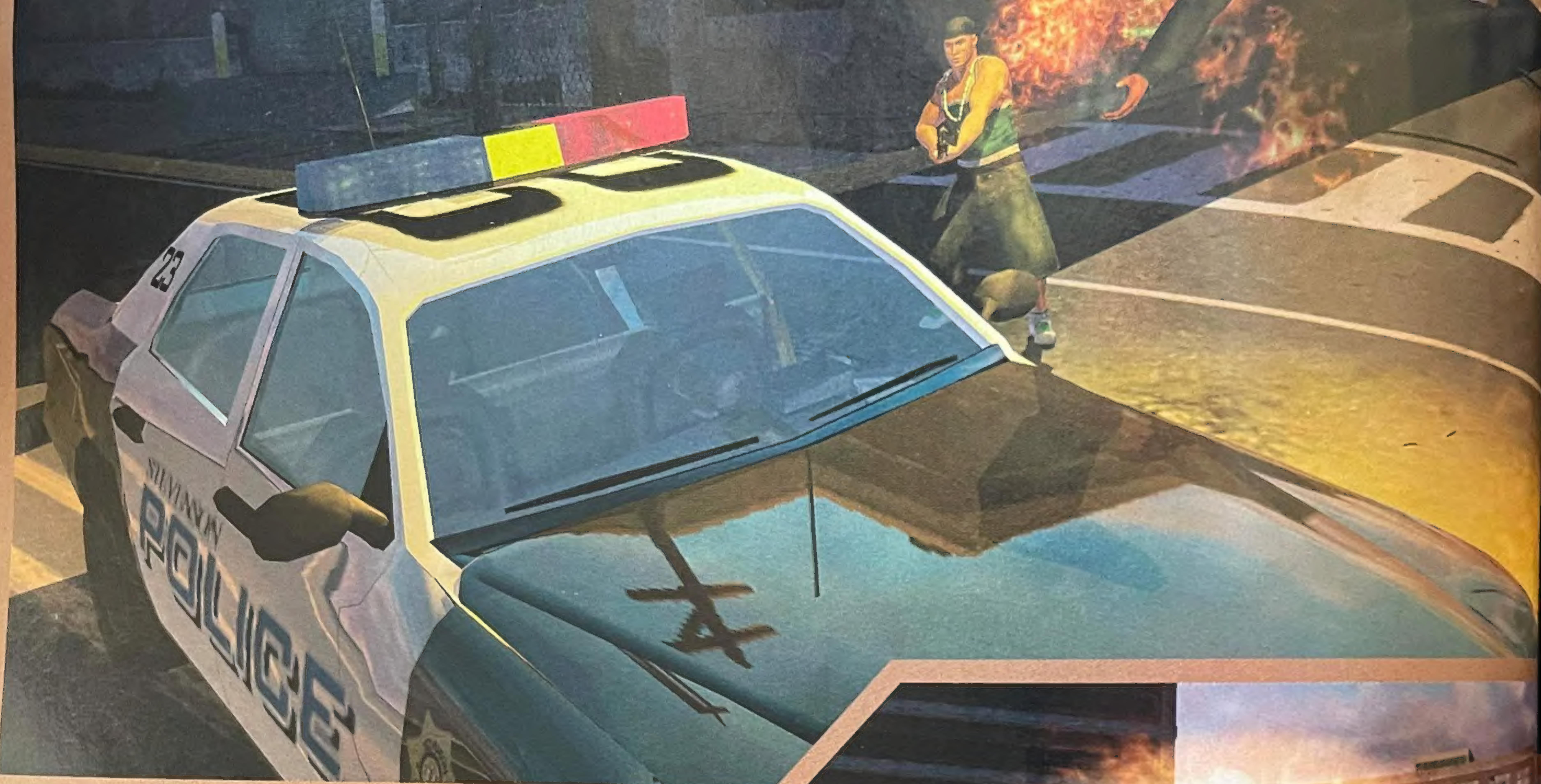
populated by a dozen full stations, 10 with music and two for talk. Plans include over 130 complete songs, including six unlockable tunes that have been written especially for the game. To fit the style of the title, a majority of the songs are being licensed from up-and-coming hip hop acts. However, if your preferences swerve in a different direction, you can tap into the dozens of rock, indie, euro dance, '80s, and '90s songs, or even a full-fledged classical music station. While we may have seen this sort of thing before, the team has distinguished itself with several cool features. First, the music won't be on a loop. Song order will change each time through, and the frequency of different songs will change depending on the time of day. Additionally, the on-air commercials will be dynamically connected to the world around you. If you hear a store owner advertising a big sale for the rest of that day, you'll literally have to get there before the sale ends to take advantage. You'll even have a personal MP3 player. With that, you can go to the local music store in-game and buy your favorite songs off the radio to listen

to as you walk down the street. Or, like any Xbox 360 title, you'll be able to use your own custom soundtrack.

An equal focus is going into bringing the world alive through its voice actors. Approximately 25,000 lines of spoken dialogue have been recorded for the game, with some of the rumored actors to include David Carradine, Mila Kunis, Tia Carrere, Michael Rappaport, and Freddy Rodriguez. The archvillain of the game is played by Clancy Brown, most recently seen as Brother Justin on HBO's *Carnivale*, but also known for his roles in *Highlander* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. For Saint's Row, he plays a truly despicable city politician in the midst of a reelection campaign. Feigning disgust at the city's gang warfare problem, he's actually playing a leading role in criminal actions throughout the town.

Two is Better Than One

There's one last thing that sets Saint's Row apart from so many other similar games in the marketplace, but it's a big one – online multiplayer. Microsoft's next-gen approach places a great deal of importance on the continued evolution of Xbox Live, and
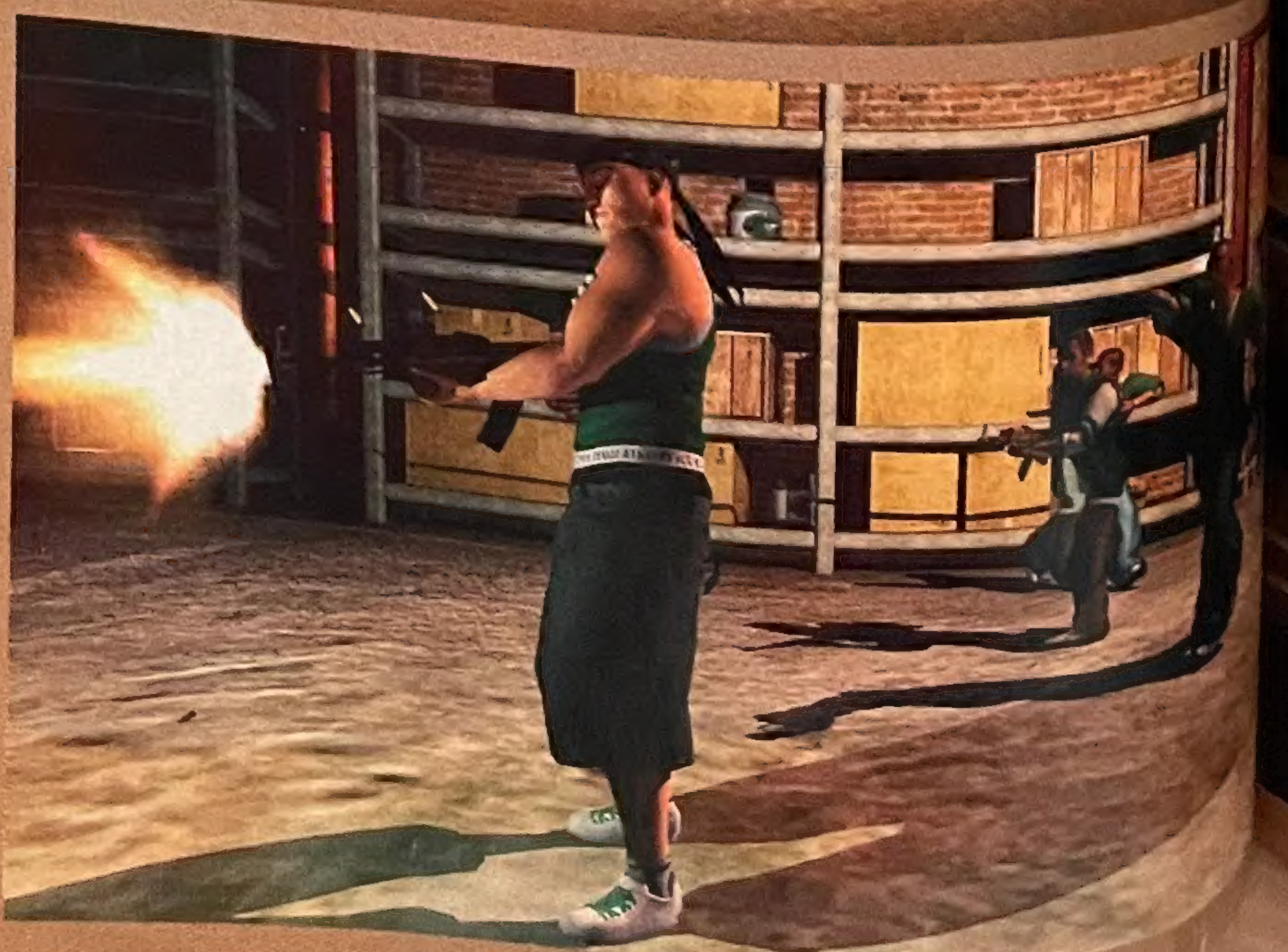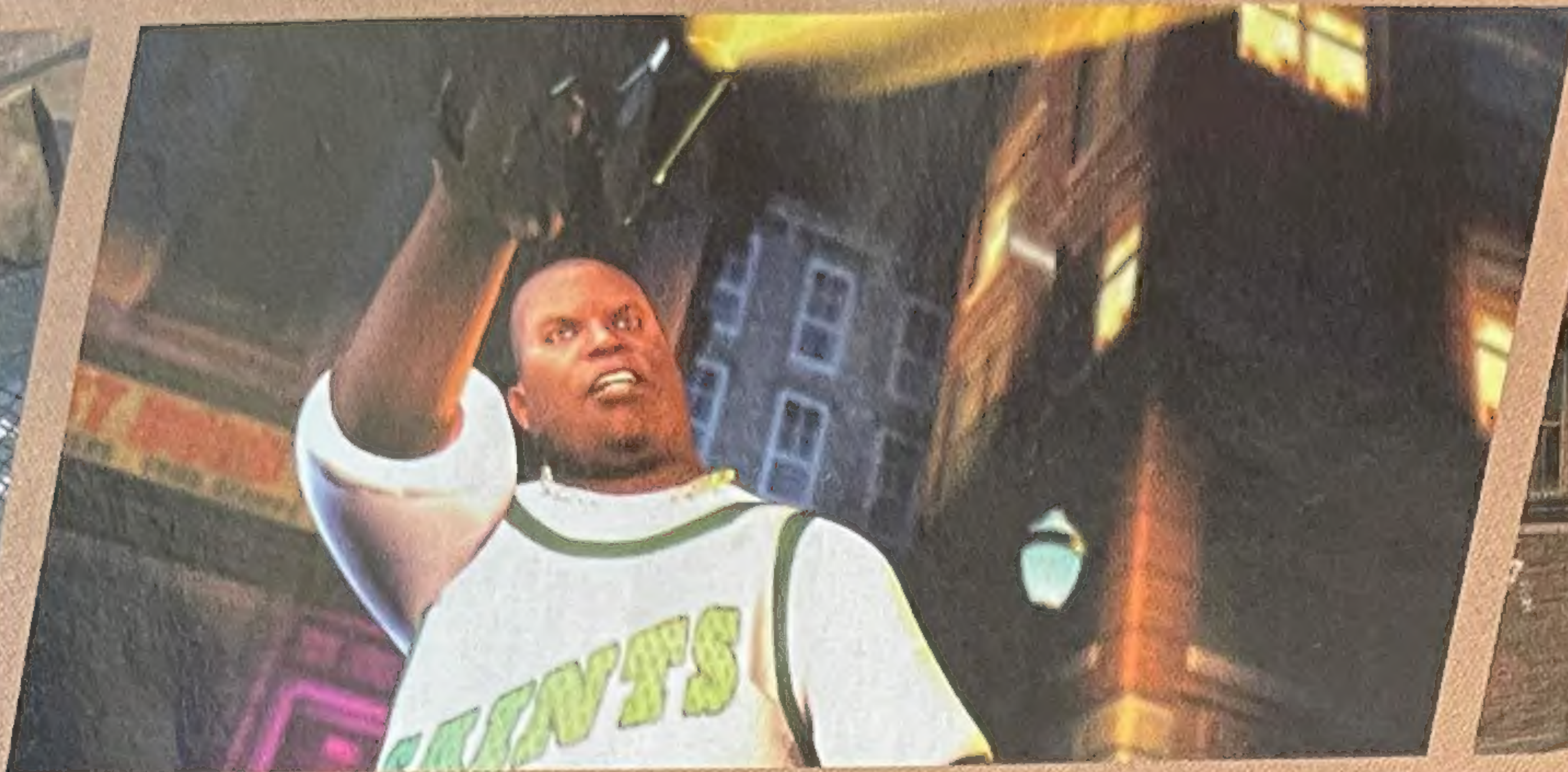
Saint's Row won't be left behind. We were overjoyed to hear that you'll be able to play two-player online co-op through a set of objective-based games, including working together to see how long you can stay alive against an increasing barrage of police, SWAT, and helicopters. If you lean more in the competitive direction, you'll be able to jump into one of several gang warfare modes, in four-versus-four matches including such gems as Protect the Pimp. Here, a team will have to escort one of their members (the pimp) to the brothel before the other team takes him out. Don't worry, though. The pimp has his own protection, including a special attack called the Pimp Slap that results in a one hit kill. All of the multiplayer modes have a familiar feel to them, but with an added humorous tinge to set them apart from other games. Blinged-Out Ride has your team earning money as fast as possible in order to trick out your car at the local chop shop, with the winner being whomever hits the upgrade goal first. There's Big Ass Chains (and Team Big Ass Chains, of course), in which you attempt to take out your opponents in order to steal their neck chains. And then there's the straight up deathmatch-style mode – Gangsta Brawl.

As you play online, you'll quite literally wear your status on your character. You can import your single-player character or make a new one to use online. Either way, completing matches awards you money, especially if you win. This money can then be used to purchase new clothes, jewelry, and other accessories to show off your skills to competitors. We also heard of possible plans to include downloadable content in the future, with the possibilities ranging from new apparel and music to car types, and even new multiplayer stages.

Without a doubt, Saint's Row is an enormous undertaking. Not only is the feature list immensely ambitious, but the development team has all the struggles of dealing with entirely new hardware and the challenges that come with it. Thankfully, the team seems more than up to the task. Even many months before the game's planned release around the launch time of the new Xbox, the game already plays and handles great. Lead designer Chris Stockman tells us their biggest goal is "giving the player the choice in how he plays Saint's Row. If the player has that feeling of freedom while playing the game, then we did our job. We're trying to build a franchise with Saint's Row, so we'll do what it takes to create a fun, polished – and most importantly – *entertaining* game experience." As gamers eagerly await the arrival of the first of the next gen consoles, we're sure that the huge potential of Saint's Row is almost certainly going to be yet another reason for anticipation to skyrocket. ■ ■ ■

■ Vehicles morph realistically to the damage they take, but the massive explosions that often result from a crash are exaggerated and cinematic in scope