The Big Apple's Silicon Alley

by Lee Dannacher

If you have the QuickTime plug-in, you can view a clip from Jaime Levy's *Cyberslacker.*

Once known as the techie-inhabited corridors extending from TriBeCa through SoHo to the Flat Iron grid, Silicon Alley is today more mind-set than geographical. Forging new paths in this "virtual" Manhattan are digital media workplaces totally distinctive and different from what has gone before. *Synonym:* hot.

It's no surprise New York's vibrant edginess offers the fertile ground necessary for cultivating new media's ideas and techniques. Four prominent "Alley" companies are illuminating this evolution on the animation front and are now jazzing up the Internet with cartoon fare.

Funny Garbage
SoHo based Funny Garbage is an across-the-board graphic, motion, interactive, information and `identity' design company -- with a burgeoning animation studio division. Co-founded in 1996 by creative directors Peter Girardi, Chris Capuozzo and president John Carlin, the company designs and conceptualizes Web sites for clients including The Cartoon Network, Children's Television Workshop and Oxygen Media. They also produce CD-ROMs, traditional graphic and print campaigns, music and film for clients such as Nickelodeon, Compaq and Barnes & Noble. And as of this year, they've jumped into the production of interactive animated shows for delivery on the Web. As Girardi sums it up, Funny Garbage's work entails "a collision of all these different media" which is producing increasingly mixed-media demands.

Native New Yorkers Girardi and Capuozzo began their artistic lives as graffiti writers on subway cars and abandoned lots. They continued their experiments with textural elements at the city's School of Visual Arts. While students, they made the leap to creating visuals for computers at a time when the applications were still being written. Later, as creative director of the Voyager Company, Girardi launched the award winning Voyager Web site when "the only other thing up there was, like, Yahoo," he recalls. Together with Carlin, founder and director of the Red Hot Organization, he produced the Beat Experience CD-ROM, thereby building a strong background in motion and time-based design. "All that work with Voyager," he says, "was a really big experience for all of us."

An invigorating relationship with Sam Register, vice president/creative director of The Cartoon Network's online division, matured during Funny Garbage's creation of the network's Web site (www.cartoonnetwork.com). That led to the
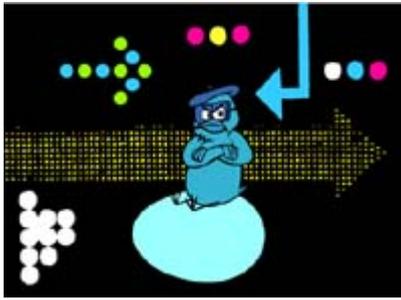
B.Happy by Mark Newgarden. Courtesy of Mark Newgarden.

company's production of Cartoon Network's first two Web Premiere Toons: *Pink Donkey And The Fly*, from Gary Panter, illustrator, comic-book artist, set designer extraordinaire, and *B. Happy*, from Mark Newgarden, renowned cartoonist, writer and conceptual artist. Both of these made-for-the-net series contain high levels of interactivity, necessitating what Girardi calls "a kind of weird hybrid team of traditional animators working alongside information architects and programmers." As always, the goal is entertaining storytelling, but Girardi adds: "One of the things we keep in our minds at all times is to never let the user feel they should take their hands off the mouse." Translation: Create wacky, fun, new 'toons while pressing the existing technologies to better fold interactivity into the narrative path of the cartoon.

Girardi is excited by what the improvements in Flash 4 will mean for their third Web production entitled *Coot Country*, a *Pink Donkey* spin-off to premiere online this fall. Having worked closely with Macromedia's key developers, they know Flash 4's higher quality audio stream, with MP3 compression, will allow them to incorporate more music and effects. The tech-advancements will also allow them to create more "conditional events," i.e. offering the audience choices to affect completely different outcomes to each story. "Really knowing the idiosyncrasies of the medium and using it for what it's good for," Girardi says, is their mandate in creating fresh entertainment for the 'net.

Coot Country, created by Funny Business for Cartoon Network Online's Web Premiere Toon series. It will debut in September. Courtesy of Funny Business.

The future for Funny Garbage's animation division, run by veteran producer Denise Rottina, will continue to require a unique blend of traditional animators with their tools (light boxes and Oxberry stands - Girardi says, "We have them all!") and the digital medium's tech-expert illustrators and designers. Currently in project development on such futuristic possibilities as multi-player 'toons and 2D `live' characters on the Web, Funny Garbage is primed to take advantage of what the Internet's new audiences will want to see.
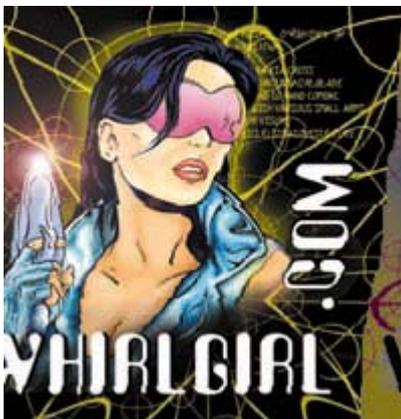
Visionary Media
Visionary Media's founder, Chairman and CEO David B. Williams sits atop an expanding next-generation entertainment studio. The young company's driving force is to develop properties with the cross-media appeal so desirable in today's "convergence" landscape. Beginning in 1992, Williams was instrumental in creating the SHOPPING2000 Web site and CD-ROM series for ContentWare, Inc., as well as producing award winning sites for *Smithsonian Magazine*. He then followed a passion to create entertainment for the burgeoning youth market. He recalls, "I had a sense that was where all the excitement was in terms of who was embracing the technology and consuming it most voraciously." So Williams broke away to found Visionary Media and soon began marshaling together a

group of talented people. This ultimately led to his creation of the company's signature animated net property *WhirlGirl*.

A comedy/action/sci-fi adventure (marrying what Williams calls "the fantastical with the down-to-earth"), *WhirlGirl* proved itself to be a critical and commercial success on its own Web site before being picked-up in January by Showtime Online. Setting an industry precedent, they aired the initial episode on Showtime's TV channel simultaneous with its new webcast premiere. The company is now in production on 28 additional episodes for the cable's online division. Visionary President and COO Glenn Ginsburg feels the Showtime deal allows them to do a lot of innovative experimentation in developing a show's Web and cable relationship. Anticipating the day when the TV and Internet will converge into one "appliance," Ginsburg says they are now working on what he calls "pre-convergence ideas." An early example of this type of synergy was when Showtime used *WhirlGirl* heroine, Kia Cross, to host a "Lethal Ladies" film week marathon. During a broadcast promotion, the animated *WhirlGirl* offered the audience a chance to choose what film they'd like to see the next weekend, inviting them to log on to her Web site to cast their vote.

WhirlGirl heroine Kia Cross. Courtesy of Visionary Media.

Williams' believes in creating shows that are, in his mind, "media agnostic." He explains: "That is, the shows can go on the Internet and have a vibrant life there but can also go to television, film, video games, and print because why consider a great character and great stories as only being able to live in one `box'?" First and foremost, though, Visionary keeps its focus on the medium of the Internet by concentrating on building compelling storylines with high-end graphics specifically produced to stream well within today's available technology. *WhirlGirl*'s eclectic crew includes the series head writer Betsy Hooper, whose background is stage and authoring children's books, art director/animator Joel Rodgers, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design and comic book artist, and sound designer/composer/production director Ephraim Kehlman, who came from traditional broadcast media and live sound direction. "We all wear a lot of hats," Williams said, "so it's a tight little team." Also on board working site production and series development is Christine S. Jones, who brings to the mix her previous experience with some of NY's top digital media firms.

WhirlGirl is not an interactive program, per se, but `outside' the show, the company is developing Web concepts to offer interaction and community-play. One of these is tentatively entitled "Make-A-Scene." *WhirlGirl*'s audience will be able to choose scenes from specialized categories, pick from selected music cues, and add in dialogue (delivered as captions) to direct and create their own shows. Williams sees this as an example of extreme interactivity, saying, "It exploits the opportunities the medium provides tremendously without detracting from your storytelling at all." With these many emerging formats for entertainment content, he sees the possibility of "a kind of `new' renaissance in animation." With five more projects already in the pipeline, Visionary Media is positioning themselves firmly at the hub of making it happen.

togglethis

togglethis, a three-year-old new media entertainment and technology group, is fashioning a new course in Web programming by producing animated shows distributed via their proprietary software platform. Co-founders Paul Maya and Marc Singer first met up in the multimedia division of the Times-Mirror where they teamed on software development and production of interactive CD-Roms.

Turning their attention to the Internet, they set out to develop new forms of Web entertainment and advertising that could work more effectively than the ubiquitous promotional banners and buttons. The result was their invention of the toggled software, a system which delivers fun, engaging characters right into the `net audience's mailbox.

Their 1997 flagship project was an in-house series called *Bozlo Beaver* which Warner Bros. featured on its site and continues to distribute. The success of the popular, irreverent character won them their first toggled advertisers and soon other marketers and entertainment companies came to call. In just a few short years, togglethis has signed on some of the hottest clients in the business, creating toggled shows for Cartoon Network Online (*Space Ghost)*, Disney (*Mulan*), Universal New Media (*Xippy Malone*, *Cub Reporter*) and New Line Cinema (*Lost in Space*). This summer the company worked again with New Line to create an animated series for *Austin Powers,* to coincide with the sequel's theatrical release (www.austinpowers.com/togglethis). The added spice in these episodes is the cross-promotion antics of an animated Richard Branson, Chairman of Virgin Atlantic Airlines. This series is also, Singer feels, "a good example of how we integrate traditional, serialized storytelling, however non-linear that may be."

The Interactive Austin Powers.
Courtesy of togglethis.

toggled shows work like this: once a viewer signs up (and downloads the IC engine), they are emailed weekly episodes which they can screen on their desktops at any time. Having the key art and music already on their hard drives, viewers can almost instantaneously play each new episode's content. On or offline, viewers can push, pull and drag the comedic characters around, interacting with and affecting the outcome of the show. Singer says they concentrate on using animated programming because, "It's all about communication and building a relationship with the character -- and everyone loves animation." Although they occasionally scan in original artwork, the majority of their projects are complete digital productions. Their unique email-based distribution system means low bandwidth restrictions haven't been a real problem for them. They do, however, continue to improve on and release new versions of the software (the next coming in late September), and Singer points out that this on-going internal development will enable more dynamic sound and richer content as time goes by.

togglethis also licenses their patent-pending software to outside companies, providing them the choice of handling their own creative process with franchise characters and brands. Although they encourage this side of the business, Singer acknowledges that: "It's cool technology but then the question is really, in the software world, what's the application? What are you going to do with it?" He admits his company's strong creative track-record as a production studio is why the majority of clients still rely on them to develop the fun mix of entertainment and interactivity that will stand the test of time.

Audiences can get togglethis productions from a variety of sites including HotWired's Animation Express (www.hotwired.com/animation) and the group's own Web site (www.togglethis.com). Additionally, an exciting new deal with Lycos (www.lycos.com) not only covers the distribution of certain toggled shows, but will also launch the company's new series *Superheroes and Sidekicks,* an interactive, prize-giving game show featuring the portal's mascot, Lycos the Dog.

Electronic Hollywood

Electronic Hollywood is best described as "a full service production studio for the Internet." With over 10 years experience in new media creation, CEO and founder Jaime Levy runs a broad-based company with a wide array of clients including SonicNet, IBM, MSNBC and Samsung. The studio produces content and animated projects for interactive advertising, `net cartoons, on-line games and communities, as well as providing cutting-edge interface design. As Levy states with a laugh, "I'm not about one `opp.' It's about being prolific." Included among the studio's varied campaigns, they have produced two Shockwave action games running on World Opponent Network (*Die Roach Die* and *Dog Run*), conceptually designed and built the Silicon Alley Reporter Top 100 site, and created "MalicePalace," a graphical chat environment set in a virtual post-apocalyptic city.

A current priority for the company is *Cyberslacker*, an animated series that chronicles the life of a 22-year-old hacker chick who moves to New York's East Village with "not much money, a fat cat, and plenty of attitude." The 10-minute pilot is up at www.cyberslacker.com while Levy negotiates for a net distribution deal. Developed in Flash, the pilot broke ground as the first full-screen, long-format toon on the Web. Levy was determined to produce the project with a dense, high quality audio track (featuring music from Bad Religion), so the company pushed hard at

An apartment broker shows the star of *Cyberslacker* one of his deluxe offerings. Courtesy of Electronic Hollywood.

the limits of RealPlayer technology to enable a smooth, synced streaming in both Flash (for the animation) and Real (for the audio file). "We have a total commitment to enhancing the viewer's online experience," she says, "whether doing paid work for clients or our own cool stuff."

There have been a lot of industry firsts in Levy's career. After graduating from San Francisco State University in video and film studies, she came east to attend NYU's ITP (Interactive Telecommunications Program), where she still teaches today. "They had tons of amusing MACs and I had them at my disposal to play around with," she remembers, "so I used Macromedia's Director and HyperCard to create my master thesis *Cyber Rag,* which was the first disc-based e-magazine around." Publishing two more issues and distributing them out of her East Village loft and through independent bookstores, she caught the attention of Billy Idol. In 1993, he commissioned her to create what became the world's first interactive electronic press kit for his "Cyberpunk" album. Levy went on to produce the first-ever high-density `disc-novel' entitled *Ambulance* (using art from Jaime Hernandez's noirish comics *Love and Rockets*). She then took on interface design in corporate gigs with IBM and Viacom, as well as working independently with clients including Warner Bros., HBO and Sony Music. The advent of the Internet suited Levy's talents beautifully and, in 1996, she co-created WORD.com, a pop-culture Web `zine full of quirky essays and digitized art.

The first incarnation of the `Electronic Hollywood' name was as Levy's second e-`zine disc series published in the mid-'90s; but the moniker morphed into titling her present-day animation studio when she received investment backing in April 1998. Running a full facility in digital production is great, however Levy maintains, "Basically, I'm a storyteller." And

The fat cat of *Cyberslacker* shows off its prize possession. Courtesy of Electronic Hollywood.

that's why *Cyberslacker* is taking a lot of her attention. Basing the series on her own experiences of daily New York life, Levy is now working with co-writers to flush out the series' progression. The company has similar projects in development and plans more Web pilot productions in order to get the exposure necessary in attracting co-production and/or distribution alliances. Her advice to beginning net animators is simply, "Make it!" Although she doesn't believe in limiting oneself to any single venue, she sees the Internet as "a really great medium of delivery" and encourages all artists to "find your own voice and exploit it. Have fun. If you're not doing something that's fun and you're spending all your time doing it, then what's the point?"

In each new phase of Internet expansion, we have visionariesbright minds working out on the edge of emerging technologies with the age-old dreams of entertaining new audiences by unconventional means. As profiled in the companies above, Silicon Alley is, indeed, nurturing its share of fanciful "right brain/left brain" talent. It's the Manhattan `mind-set' of curious and energetic artists expressing new-fashioned animation across the Web and beyond.

Lee Dannacher is an animation producer/sound track director of over 300 half hours of television films, as well as numerous network and video holiday specials. Currently based in New York, she is freelancing in audio, project development and new media productions.

Note: Readers may contact any *Animation World Magazine* contributor by sending an e-mail to editor@awn.com.