

## John Strausbaugh MAKING BOOK

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### In Mac World, Publishing a Book's Like Making a Movie

I READ A GRAPHIC NOVEL THE OTHER DAY sitting here at my desk at work. Graphic novels are comic books for adults, longer and more literary than the kid stuff, with the illustrations and the printed text getting pretty much equal weight.

This one, Monica Moran's *Ambulance*, is a *very* graphic novel. At one point I had to turn down the volume because the music was getting on my colleague's nerves.

To be truthful, I didn't like the novel, an amateur gore thing about a serial killer type from someone who writes like she's seen way too many *Friday the 13th* movies. But I loved being able to turn the music up and down, and all the different ways the pages flip, scroll and dissolve.

*Ambulance* is an "electronic novel." It comes on a floppy disk that can be played on any Macintosh that can handle a 1.4MB disk. You don't need any other hardware or software; it plays itself. When you start it up you get music and title credits, like the opening of a black and white animated movie for your computer. Using your mouse, you point and click to turn the pages—that is, scroll from one screen to the next. Some screens are just text. More often, there's an illustration from adult comics god Jaime Hernandez of *Love and Rockets*. Sometimes the illo moves—spiders crawl down the side of the screen, headlights draw near, a big tongue licks the paper of a half-rolled joint. Sometimes the text moves, too. At one point, the huge words *SUCK MY DICK!* sidle onto the screen.

A big part of the entertainment is simply watching all the different ways the pages turn as you're clicking through it. The 235 screens scroll left or right, up or down; a page dissolves into the next, or seems to be sucked down a drainhole in the center of the screen, or does a striped venetian-blind fade-out.

The music is sequenced and sampled loops of bass-slapping and plucking by Mike Watt of FIREHOSE, clipped in brief and repetitive rumble-riffs that have the mean percussive insistence of a pounding headache. If



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"You had better pray that I don't get loose! If I do, I'm gonna kick your ass you bastard!"

"Ooh, I'm real scared!"

### MONICA MORAN'S MAC NOVEL IS VERY GRAPHIC.

you're reading *Ambulance* at work and don't want to be caught fucking off, you can turn the music off.

Jaime Levy, the 27-year-old producer/publisher of *Ambulance*, believes it's the first electronic novel on disk. There are electronic books that require CD-ROM or Hypercard hardware, and there are electronic magazines on disk, but nothing she's aware of is quite like *Ambulance's* combination of animated graphics and floppy fiction. She calls it "hyper-comics."

Levy has been based in L.A. for a few years, working up to an electronic novel by putting out *Electronic Hollywood*, an animated Mac-magazine on disk for West Coast hipsters. Generally, she only publishes work that isn't available in print. She says she isn't interested in doing the print/audio/CD-ROM sort of multi-format publishing tie-ins that are quickly becoming industry standard. "If you want to read it on the disk, fine. If not, you'll never see it." She tells me that she's just read an *L.A. Times* story about "Interactive Hollywood" and how movies will now be released simultaneously with computer games based on them. That's fine, she says, "but games are for kids. I'm publishing for adults."

In Mac World, she says, publishing is analogous to producing a movie or digitally editing video. She takes a story like *Ambulance* and "develops" it, sort of the way a movie producer develops a script, only she's developing it for the computer screen, figur-

ing out how to make it interactive, how to animate, what music to use and so on. For *Ambulance*, she scanned six years' worth of Hernandez' *Love and Rockets* and sampled Watt's riffs off FIREHOSE CDs. She finagled a bit to get the rights: she sold Hernandez on the project when she told him she had Watt's music, and then sold Watt on it when she told him she had Hernandez' graphics. I guess her trade name isn't Electronic Hollywood for nothing. She then spent about 1000 hours over

six months producing and, in effect, directing the thing.

Borrowing a little from hypertext thinking, she added a gimmick to Moran's text. Occasionally, clicking on a graphic drops you into a kind of footnote or sidebar screen: a page from one character's high school yearbook, a page from the *PDR*. Levy says she market-tested a version that was much more hypertextual, with lots of sub-plots you could click your way into. "What I got back was a lot of confusion," she laughs. She likens it to the interactive movies they've been testing to bad audience reactions. "I don't think people want to control their narrative experiences that way."

Considering how high-tech and computery the finished product is, I was surprised to hear that Levy isn't a programmer or a techno-whiz. She does all her work "at home, alone, on a piece of shit Mac I bought in the paper for \$3000." She uses commercially available software, Macromedia Director, which she tells me is "a high level authoring language," meaning "a language I can speak which doesn't sound too different from English." It offers menus of options to choose from, like 50 different ways to turn the pages.

With that kind of software, she says, producing something like *Ambulance* is really more about making artistic choices than having much technical know-how. Anybody could do it, she says, with the software "and



about a year of experience."

In fact, she says she's "trying to encourage other people to do it." She thinks it would be better for her if you could walk into a bookstore and see a whole rack of novels on disk instead of just hers.

Levy got into electronic publishing as her Master's project at the Interactive Telecommunications Program in the film school at NYU in 1990. She'd come to it "from making bad video art." Other students were also working on electronic publishing, she says, but most were working the high end of the street, developing product that required CD-ROM or Hypercard or QuickTime display. "I was dead certain that I wanted to publish on floppy disk, to reach the person with just any Mac," she says.

Her Masters project and first publication was *Cyber Rag*, an "electronic fanzine" on disk that was in black and white and ran three issues. That was followed by *Electronic Hollywood*, "the grown-up version of *Cyber Rag*," a full-color, full-fledged electronic magazine. The third issue is due out within the month.

It may be the last issue. Levy's moving back to New York this month, maybe permanently, though she'll keep her car in L.A. for a while just in case. She says partly it's to be near all the publishing activity here at a time when the big publishers are developing in-house electronic publishing divisions. Putting her near more writers won't hurt, either. And, she cracks, she wants to be near "cute boys with goatees."

In July she returns to NYU to teach a six-week course in electronic publishing. Students will make their own disk-based book projects, corporate presentations, digital portfolios, whatever.

She expects to have *Ambulance* at a few bookstores like St. Mark's and See/Hear by the end of April. Meanwhile, it can be mail-ordered for \$17 postpaid from Electronic Hollywood, POB 2966, Hollywood 90078.