

A Day in the Life

Atomic Fridge

AN INSIDE LOOK AT A NEW YORK MULTIMEDIA COMPANY: DUELING DESIGNERS, EXTRATERRESTRIALS, REMOTE-CONTROL CARS, AND A TRIP TO THE PARK

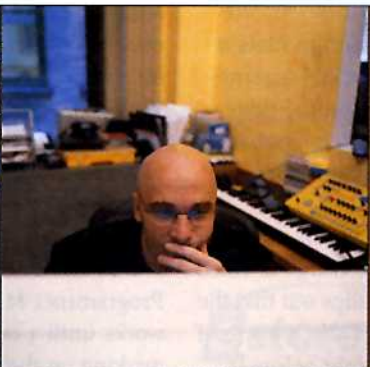
BY ANASTASIA ASHMAN

THE BRASS BULL OUTSIDE ATOMIC FRIDGE'S OFFICE ON lower Broadway in Manhattan doesn't offer a clue. Neither does the dignified lobby of the building, which has some very serious history: Once home to the White Star Shipping Line, the building was

PHOTOS BY ANDRÉA BUCCI

mobbed by anxious relatives of Titanic passengers.

You'd never guess it, but inside awaits a veritable house of games. Atomic Fridge's home-grown Macromedia Flash and Shockwave games, and 3-D animation, to be precise. In the last three and a half years, the seven-per-



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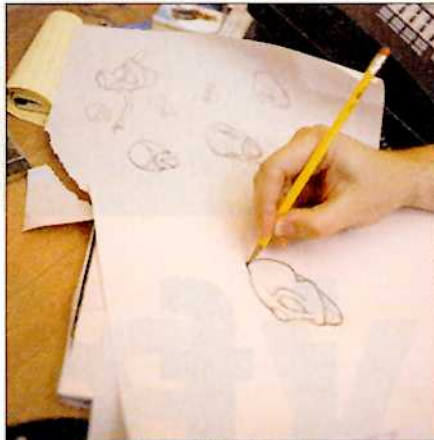
son outfit has delivered everything from broadcast animation to virtual environments and Web design for interactive agencies, fellow Web and multimedia houses, broadcast and post-production studios—and Fortune 100 entertainment and financial corporations. **Atomic Fridge** has a pretty serious list of clients, including America Online, the National Hockey League, Timex, Atlantic Records, and Morgan Stanley Dean Witter.

Originally called StudioVR because of the company's virtual reality work, and still the name of the holding company, "Atomic Fridge" reflects a growing concentration on interactivity and games, as well as the addition in May of an incubation unit, led by Peter Dushkin, a former analyst for Jupiter Communications. "Atomic Fridge sounds wacky and allows us to be flexible at the same time," explains 28-year-old co-founder Jeremy Seitz, his reasoning underscoring the company's playful, sportive attitude.

Games are clearly what Atomic Fridge loves. It is often called upon to produce thematic Web amusements for sites looking to add stickiness. Having cranked out 70 Shockwave games for veteran Web site Nickelodeon.com (based on shows like "Ren and Stimpy," "Rugrats," and "SpongeBob Square Pants"), Atomic Fridge is in the process of refining a basketball game for Nick's Games and Sports (GAS) subsection. With that kind of productivity and expertise, Atomic Fridge has become a favorite farm for "the tricky stuff that isn't cost-effective for full-service shops," says 34-year-old co-founder Gabe Evans.

ATOMIC FRIDGE'S MANHATTAN OFFICE AUGUST 17, 2000

The company plans to relocate to quarters three times larger by the end of the year. For now, the employees have packed their 16 coffee pots, multitudinous Macromedia manuals, X-Files figurines, and a huge rubber-band ball into 1,100 square feet. "We're living out our 'Sanford & Son' fantasy," Seitz jokes. Founders Seitz and Evans, and designers David Schafer and



GABE EVANS sketches and models a character for "Earth Attacks," a game under development at Atomic Fridge. He then digitizes a character not yet designated for any particular game.

Peter Kim, are already at their stations. [For the record, the office fridge is filled with orange juice—but it slips out that the ale that normally occupies the lower half was finished off late the night before.]

10 a.m. CREATING A MARTIAN

Evans, who has a television background (he was broadcast manager for NBC's coverage of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics) and a few life drawing courses under his belt, begins sketching an alien head. The creature will become the Martian general who will address players of Atomic Fridge's in-house multiplayer Shockwave game, which is designed to run on a Web page and is tentatively titled "Earth Attacks." The game will be the flagship product of the company's new business initiative, developed with completely free rein and then licensed to others. Evans deftly forms the core of the head out of aluminum foil, and begins layering on Sculpey polymer clay. After it's baked, it will be photographed, and digitized. "I'm sure my father's surprised all this goofing off would amount to anything," he says.

10:30 a.m. THINKING VERTICALLY

Dushkin, 30, strategist and resident entrepreneur, arrives and immediately gets started on his "high-level thinking" about Vertical Syndicate, an incubation project. It's a Web-based twist on the print syndication model. He checks in with a former Goldman Sachs analyst to discuss VS's valuation, and starts fine-tuning the business plan. He's not heard from for hours.

10:55 a.m. BRIDGING GAPS

David Doepker, 25, reports for production and design duties and, with his hair secured by bobby pins, assumes a Lotus pose to check his Hotmail account. Soor he's attacking navigation issues for the Vertical Syndicate site, bridging the gap between its functional Smalltalk prototype and a working product.

11 a.m. PUSHING THE LIMITS?

Programmer Mike Hill, who says he often works until 3 or 4 a.m., cruises in to start working on the radar element of Earth At-



ATOMIC FRIDGE'S CREATIVE CREW: Surrounding Gabe Evans in New York's Battery Park are, from left, Peter Dushkin, Jeremy Seitz, Mike Hill, David Schafer, David Doepker, and Peter Kim.

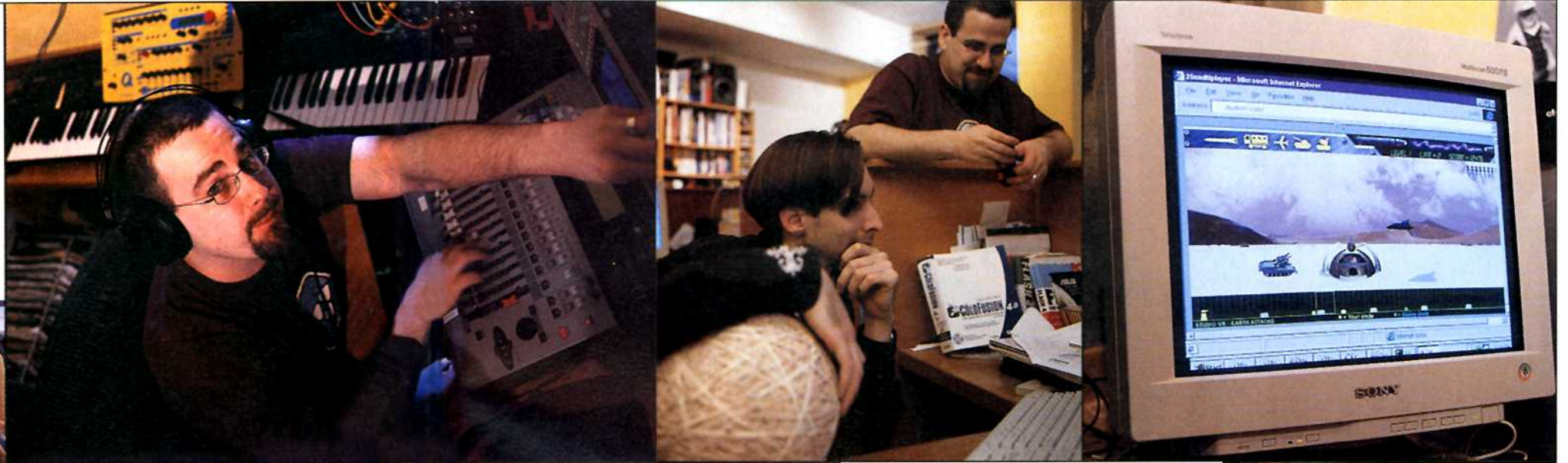


tacks. When he and Seitz were high school classmates in Austin, Texas, they challenged each other to programming contests. The rivalry continues at Atomic Fridge—and seems to have become a company-wide creative tool. “We often have several people working in competi-

tion on the same concept, and eventually the best ideas converge,” Seitz confirms, adding that, even so, Hill has programmed 90 percent of Earth Attacks. Seitz claims the game pushes the limits of current online gaming. “While there are only a few companies really concentrating on online games, no one’s attempted this level of real-time multiplayer gaming on the Web, where you can actually see the other players moving. And look at those shadows!”

SEARCHING FOR ALIENS

Lending a certain credence to the company’s space-geek persona, all screen savers are running red-and-blue SETI computations, looking for anomalies in data—from Puerto Rico’s Arecibo Radio Observatory. Atomic Fridge’s employees have logged 37,478 hours of volunteered computer time in the search for extraterrestrials, and there’s a ripple of excitement when the Internet World photographer reveals that her brother works for



SETI. (They wonder aloud if she can arrange to kick up their ranking.)

11:10 a.m. THROWING DOWN A GAUNTLET

Walt McGraw, senior producer at Space.com, phones about a game modeled on a future NASA mission that Atomic Fridge is producing for him. First, though, he issues a Sega Dreamcast Soul Calibur challenge to Evans, treading in dangerous territory since it’s Atomic Fridge’s favorite pastime. “He was cocky in a meeting yesterday, but he’ll have to be seriously obsessed to beat us,” Evans explains. McGraw is undaunted by AF’s expertise and promises: “You will be vanquished!” The exchange is key: Avid players are in a good position to make the best games.

There is a lot of play time at Atomic Fridge. The founders believe that doing production all day saps the creative spirit—and that intriguing, useful material often results from experimenting with concepts. “Being debt-free and self-funded allows us to have this culture,” Evans says. Lead designer David Schafer, whose station is plastered with spoofed “Think Different” Apple ads, unveils an image of programmer Mike Hill smoking a cigarette, spirals of smoke controlled by the mouse. Every-



one laughs, but Hill thinks his head is too big. Schafer fixes it.

12:50 p.m. HUNTING FOR FUNDS

Dushkin resurfaces, storyboarding a design for a Vertical Syndicate presentation. He’s still looking for the first round of funding for the startup. Blue Media Ventures, publisher of Blue magazine, has already agreed to provide content, and adventure travel site Amisto.com has signed on to use it.

2 p.m. ‘SKULLUNKING’

Evans mounts and photographs a polymer skull on a stand that rotates five de-

grees for each shot. The resulting compilation will go into the eye-candy Sandbox area of the company Web site—where everyone tries to wow each other. (Later, he will digitize the piece with a microscribe. By touching its articulated arm to a grid drawn onto the figurine, the microscribe identifies exact points in three-dimensional space, which then appear on a 3-D grid in the computer.)

2:50 p.m. HARNESSING HANDY SOUNDS

Seitz has become attracted to the shutter sound of the Internet World photographer’s Hasselblad camera. He breaks out a condenser microphone to record it through his mixing board directly into a computer (while Evans plays on a unicycle). He adds filters, drops the pitch and suddenly it’s eerily futuristic. He produces all the music and sound effects for the games and finds that his vintage analog keyboard makes strange noises that work well with computer games.

3 p.m. CONTEMPLATING RISK

There’s a brief discussion about attaching a \$2,500 digital camera to a remote-controlled car to see what images result, whether the potential material is worth



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'WE OFTEN HAVE SEVERAL PEOPLE WORKING IN COMPETITION ON THE SAME CONCEPT,' ATOMIC FRIDGE CO-FOUNDER JEREMY SEITZ SAYS OF HIS DESIGN TEAM, **'AND EVENTUALLY THE BEST IDEAS CONVERGE.'**

the risk of destroying the camera. No decision is made.

3:50 p.m. **BEING NEIGHBORLY**

Paolo Bertoia, VP of data networks at Network Plus/Infohouse, an ISP down the hall, drops by and receives friendly ribbing. Atomic Fridge is in the process of building a site for him, with artistic photos of massive cable drums and server cages actually making the colocation business look exciting.

3:55 p.m. **GETTING CONNECTED**

Designer Peter Kim wraps up the look-and-feel of Vertical Syndicate's site:

clean-looking shades of blue, with a magazine-like layout designed to appeal to its magazine publisher market. He's also been connecting the design to the database and all the other functionalities.

4 p.m. **BREATHING!**

It's a gorgeous day, so the company convenes to Battery Park for an afternoon meeting, Seitz with a remote-controlled car, Evans planning to juggle a few torches if law enforcement permits. (It does not.) The discussion there includes deliverables, schedules, and the work being performed for many "under-the-radar companies" whose names are not mentioned.

5:45 p.m. **MIXING ALE AND COMBAT**

As Internet World's reporting team departs, the crew breaks out Sam Adams Summer Ale and the Dreamcast console for a few brutal rounds of Soul Calibur.

After 6 p.m. **PULLING AN ALL-NIGHTER**

A client calls with "a desperate need for a Flash demo for an investor presentation at 10 a.m. the next day," Evans relays later. Most work until 6 a.m., then the founders and strategist make the presentation. To most, that would be called hard work. But to Atomic Fridge, that's just part of the fun. **IW**