

I.D.

ARTS

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Branding Disaster

Fresh Graphics
from London



David Rockwell's

Microsoft's Comic
Strip Community

Loaded

A Cold Hard Look at
Designs for Killing

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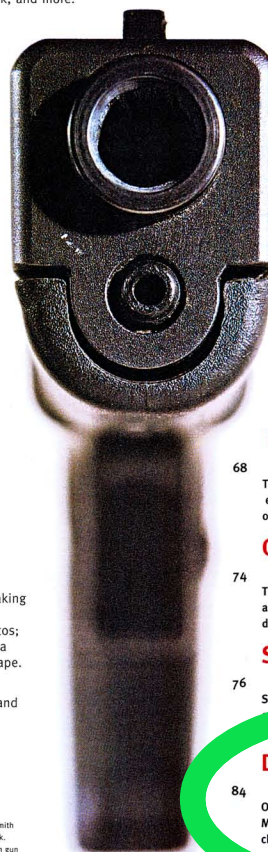
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Cover: the "ergonomically correct" Sigma .380 from Smith
& Wesson (see page 54). Photography by James Wojcik.
This page: the Glock 17 9mm, which triggered a shift in gun
design. Photography by James Wojcik.



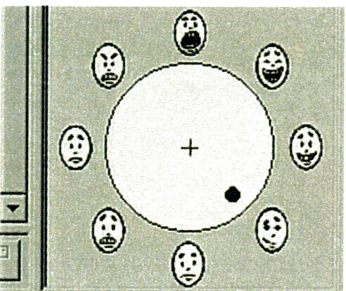
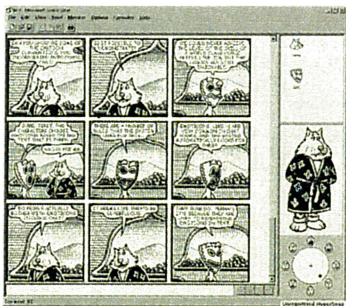
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Digital Gods

Microsoft's Comic Chat puts Net surfers in the funny pages.

By Karrie Jacobs



An emotion wheel (above) allows Comic Chatters to select their character's expression; online conversation then appears in comic form in real time (top).

Understand that serious conversations in cyberspace rarely take place in chat rooms, the electronic settings where people can make idle conversation with invisible strangers. Chat rooms, which used to consist of nothing but scrolling text, are about as profound as Happy Hours, so it's particularly apt that text-only "rooms" are being replaced by graphical environments that are the virtual equivalent of theme restaurants.

In Time Warner's Palace, for example, chat participants are represented by disembodied heads that spout lines of dialogue and float through a two-dimensional representation of a handsomely furnished chateau. By contrast, the "avatars" — as these representations are commonly called — in the Microsoft Network's Comic Chat possess full bodies and have a wide range of facial expressions and gestures at their disposal. These characters (created by Seattle-based cartoonist Jim Woodring) inhabit a world that unfolds, panel by panel, exactly like a comic strip.

David Kurlander, a Microsoft researcher whose mandate is to dream up new ideas for user interfaces, developed Comic Chat. Kurlander has a passion for comics and harbors the idea that chat environments need to amass a "history." In other words, people may chat for a while, go away, and come back wanting to know what transpired during their absence — in words *and* pictures. Kurlander's colleague, Linda Stone, who heads Microsoft's virtual worlds development group, argues that electronic environments such as Comic Chat serve a serious societal purpose.

They provide a forum, she says, where people can work out issues regarding their own identities, what Stone dubs the interaction between "person and self."

The cartoon panels that follow are a documentation of what occurred when I tried — like a good citizen of the late twentieth century — to conduct business in cyberspace. I assumed the form of Hugh the Cat and interviewed David Kurlander; he's the one in the Tiki mask. Then I entered a comic chat room geared toward "newbies," novice users of the software, and read an essay out loud, as if I were standing on a soapbox.

What I learned during my stay in Comic Chat is that deep questions about identity — or weighty matters of any sort — quickly turn absurd. The space and what takes place inside it are inescapably silly, and the history that piles up in the form of frames is not one that you can refer to in order to find your place in linear, reasoned narrative. As Hugh the Cat did my bidding among the virtual aliens and beatniks, I sat on the reality side of the computer screen and giggled. The fact that Microsoft has invested its technological capital in a virtual world that is literally a joke — a good joke — makes me think that the megalith has a sense of humor. Comic Chat makes Microsoft seem . . . human. And that's probably the point. ★

Karrie Jacobs, a contributing editor of I.D. Magazine and New York magazine, is the author of "Electronic Youth," which appeared in our May/June issue.

SPECIAL THANKS TO GONG SZETO AND IO/360 FOR TECHNICAL SUPPORT.

The following is an excerpt of a conversation between Microsoft Comic Chat developer David Kurlander and I.D. Magazine contributing editor Karrie Jacobs.

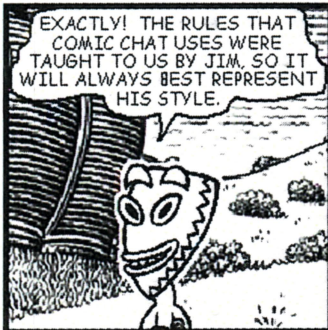
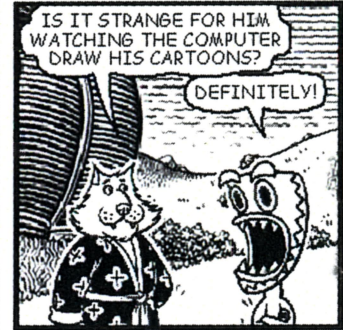
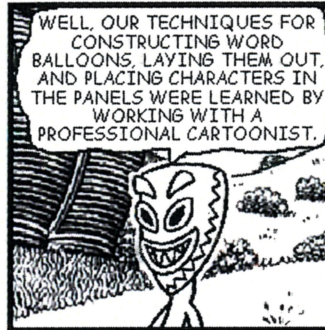
COMIC CHAT INTERVIEW

STARRING



Karrie Jacobs





David Kurlander



The panels below document what happened when Karrie Jacobs delivered a "talk" live within Microsoft's Comic Chat.

SIGHTED IN CYBERSPACE

STARRING

-  Karrie
-  Tim
-  Mark
-  Scarlett

