Sneak Peek: A Visit to Reactor Inc.

by Tuncer Deniz

Note: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of Screaming Metal and Virtual Valerie II and are therefore are subject to change. This article is not a review.

IMG recently visited Reactor in Chicago, the company that pioneered the Macintosh CD-ROM entertainment industry with releases like Virtual Valerie and Spaceship Warlock. While Virtual Valerie did raise some eyebrows, it wasn't until Spaceship Warlock's release that Reactor became the front runner in the CD-ROM industry. Since its debut, Warlock has sold over 20,000 copies and is currently the best-selling CD-ROM title on the Macintosh. Quite an accomplishment for former Marvel Comics illustrator and founder of Reactor, Mike Saenz, who in four years has built his company into a multimedia entertainment software giant (by Macintosh game standards, that is). As IMG found out from talking with Saenz, what makes Reactor and his software titles such a success is his uncanny gift for recognizing trends and meeting the needs of the Macintosh gaming enthusiast, like you and me.

The Evolution. Saenz began his love affair with computers in 1983. In 1985, a year after the introduction of the Macintosh, Saenz released the first computer-generated comic book entitled Shatter, which went on to sell over 100,000 copies. While Shatter might have broken all kinds of records, Saenz saw floppy disks as too limited in terms of storage for what he envisioned as a true interactive entertainment experience. He had known about CD-ROMs since 1985, but held back from developing CD-ROM software until, as Saenz explains, "CD ROMs became a reality in the Macintosh industry and there were tools that would allow me to develop them." In the meantime, Saenz worked in multimedia design and development for a few years, where he gained valuable knowledge and experience that he would later use to develop CD-ROM software. In 1989, with one hand on his Mac and the other on his credit cards to finance a CD-ROM project, Saenz developed Virtual Valerie, which became an instant success. With some much-needed cash on hand, he went on to create Reactor and a more sophisticated game, Spaceship Warlock.

Spaceship Warlock was released in 1991. It is a science fiction adventure that has over 125 megabytes of graphics, animation, music, and sound. What was unique about Warlock was that it featured hundreds of scenes, 3D animation, continuous audio, and a "save movie" function. The Macintosh community loved it. It was one of the first interactive movies on CD-ROM for the Macintosh, and it gave Reactor the credibility and fame it enjoys today. Although Saenz gives credit to others for pioneering CD-ROM entertainment, he does admit that Reactor "pioneered very large scale, cinematic graphic adventures on CD-ROM. We do this by, essentially, applying a real solid work ethic that comes from our background in comics." In fact, everyone in the creative development team at Reactor has a background

in comics. With this unique talent they have the creative ability to create unique worlds, interesting characters, rich cinematic storytelling, and do massive of amounts of eye-opening illustrations.

With a workgroup of eight extremely talented computer artists, Saenz is readying an assault on the Macintosh game market in 1993 and beyond. In the coming year, Rector plans to release Virtual Valerie: The Director's Cut, Virtual Valerie 2, Screaming Metal, and Spaceship Warlock 2. IMG had the privilege of viewing some of the work in progress.
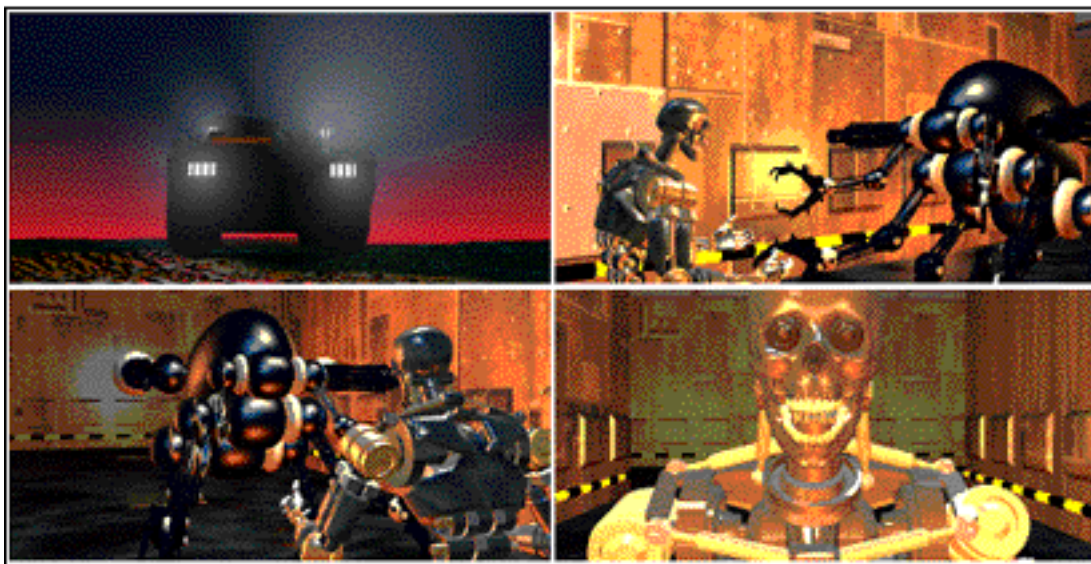
Virtual Valerie 2. Valerie is back, or should we say, on her back. Virtual Valerie is the ultimate in cyberotica entertainment. In this adventure (it's not really a game) you control the action. It uses a point and click interface making you the virtual "sexplorer." We realize much of our audience may not be "of age," so we'll leave out the details. But from what we saw, suffice it to say that Virtual Valerie 2 will surely get some hearts pumping once again.

The graphics are mind-blowing. Valerie is now a totally sophisticated 3D model to give her a more realistic look. Almost every part of her 3-D frame moves in various different directions. The game has been enhanced with great graphics, sizzling animation, digitized sound effects, and an original music score. Virtual Valerie 2 will require a color Macintosh, 12" monitor, 4 MB of free RAM, and a CD-ROM drive. It is scheduled to be released in Spring 1993.

Screaming Metal. Screaming Metal (SM) is the most ambitious project Reactor has ever undertaken. It will feature tons of detailed scenes, fluid animation, and photo-realistic rendering to make it one of the highest quality 3D modeled, graphic, and animation interactive movie ever seen on the Macintosh platform. To achieve this the Reactor development team is using almost every program imaginable to make this their finest offering yet. "We use a lot of different programs," Saenz explains.

"In fact, it sometimes looks like it's a test of how many different programs we could possibly use. We use, among others, Photoshop, Swivel 3D, Studio 8, Illustrator, Macromedia Director, Electric Image, Morph, and the list goes on." But as the end result will show, the quality of the game will not be determined by the number of programs they use, but rather the very talented team Saenz has put together to work on this project.

The graphics in Screaming Metal are beautifully rendered.

The perennial theme in Screaming Metal is derived from some contemporary science fiction films. Screaming Metal will be a gothic, horror, space interactive movie much in the same tradition as movies like Terminator, Alien, and Blade Runner. But to add a little twist, Reactor is making it a spoof by making fun, lively characters. Take, for example, navigator and space cowboy, Slim. He's the comedian of the bunch. Slim acts like a real cow-poke, but he's really a Jewish kid from New Jersey who idolizes Elvis Presley. And what would a science fiction story be without a character like Stone, the Sarge. He's black, he's bad, and he chews on cigars just to put himself in a foul mood (he hates cigars). He also hates space travel and having to mother-hen greenhorns like you, but he hates Spaces Vampires more. Other characters include Ace, the female pilot; Deguello, the communications officer; Roadkill, the medical officer; Brutus, a gung-ho Marine; Herc, the Commander-in-Chief; and Admiral Wiley, the "old man" and top boss. He's never been in close combat with the enemy and it's a good thing too, otherwise he'd give up and head home.

The basic storyline in Screaming Metal is in the same spirit as Spaceship Warlock. As the story begins, the United Space Forces has just launched a massive assault against an evil race of Space Vampires who have plagued the star colonies for some time now. But these Space Vampires aren't your typical blood-sucking vampires. They are a weird, robotic, alien race which have been constructed and unleashed by a supreme alien. Their diabolical mission is to suck human brains out and bring them back to their master, who uses them in very mysterious ways (Saenz didn't want to give the surprise away). However, the assault was a failure and the Space Forces have been forced to return to Earth. In defeat, The Admiral of the forces has switched his flagship over to the SS Annihilator, which has been transformed into a morgue carrying back the dead from the lost battle. However, the Admiral sees a window of opportunity to strike at the alien home world, which had previously been a secret. Your mission is to launch a last desperate attack on the evil aliens. Should you win, you still face the final challenge of going back home in the ship carrying all the dead, or should I say. . . the undead [macabre laughter].

What would a Reactor space game be without incredibly detailed ships?

In Screaming Metal, you are one of the principal characters, a commando space marine. As Saenz appropriately puts it, "You are you." Using your mouse you navigate in the direction you desire. At your disposal, you have an array of powerful weapons to fight off the brain-sucking vampires and other evil nasties. The game play itself will be very much like your classic shoot'em-up arcade game, with enemies you have to kill. In many ways, it has the interactive movie aspect of Spaceship Warlock, but the arcade aspect of it will give it mass appeal to audiences who love shoot 'em-up type games.

The graphics and animations in Screaming Metal are no less than stunning. In one of the demos Reactor showed us, we witnessed a wonderful high-speed ride around a futuristic city. The cityscape was so realistic and beautiful, it would probably even make George Lucas drool with amazement. To achieve these spectacular cinematic sequences, Reactor uses a program like Electric Image to animate a camera that "flies" around a 3D modeled city. The overall rendering quality has drastically improved over Spaceship Warlock. The graphics in Screaming Metal feature true-phong shading, shadow casting, texture mapping, and bump mapping, all used to make it a truly photo-realistic graphic adventure. And unlike the painted characters in Spaceship Warlock, all the characters in Screaming Metal will be 3D modeled and animated to make them more realistic. All in all the game will be truly cinematic, have very high quality graphics, and be full of rich, lively characters. Quite a tall order for the team at Reactor, which is why this game has taken a long a time develop. Screaming Metal is scheduled to be released in Fall 1993. Stay tuned!

At the Core of the Reactor. In the past year, Reactor has been growing and expanding rapidly. They have reorganized the company to meet marketing, distribution, and customer service demands, and have also begun publishing a newsletter geared for their customers. Reactor also recently started working on a new comic book label. In addition, due to the great success it has had on the Mac, Spaceship Warlock is being converted to the PC platform.

As the company has grown, their image as a "nasty, sex-oriented" software company has somewhat dissipated and they are now regarded as one of the premier CD-ROM entertainment companies in the world. As you would expect, that suits Saenz just fine. "We don't want to be known as the adult-oriented entertainment company," Saenz explains. "We have a lot of ideas, creativity, imagination, and a lot of ability to create great science fiction entertainment products." So while their

image may have somewhat changed over the years, their goal of producing unique and innovative Macintosh products hasn't. Many describe Saenz as an innovator, CD ROM guru, and visionary, but the one word that probably describes him best is that of creator. As Saenz points out, "I am a creator. I want to create."

It's true that the majority of Macintosh users don't have a CD-ROM yet, which Saenz generally blames on the lack of software titles available on CD-ROM. After all, why buy a CD-ROM drive if there are little or no titles that appeal the Macintosh gaming enthusiast? However, as CD-ROM drive prices drop and speeds improve, Saenz sees the future of the CD-ROM industry as a strong and viable component in the Macintosh entertainment industry. With similar products like The Journeyman Project and Iron Helix in the pipeline, the future of CD-ROM is alive and kicking. So, if that won't convince you to get a CD-ROM drive soon, maybe seeing a game like Screaming Metal will. I know it convinced me!

—Tuncer Deniz

I would like to thank everyone at Reactor for taking the time to show us around. I would especially like to thank Norm Dwyer, who set up the visit and got me all those wonderful screen shots. Finally, I'd like to thank Mike Saenz for giving us a very enlightening tour and a wonderful interview.