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Internal Machine's preshow entertainment

Shelter From the Storm

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To know them is to loathe them. They are ubiquitous, soul sapping, and inane. They celebrate the nadir of pop-culture clutter, and repudiate the zenith of the 20th century's dominant art form. They render choice conversational time into the fatty gristle of captive-audience marketing squalor. I hate them. You hate them. They are the prescreening slide-show trivia wads and infantile advertising pitches that deaden your mind while you sit in the theatre, innocently waiting for the film to unspool.

There's got to be a better way, and Austin-based multimedia company Internal Machine (www.internalmachine.com) thinks they've found one. Sanity, after all, is prone to slippage, and endless shots of pop tart Britney Spears salaciously declaiming the virtues of Pepsi haven't been helping matters one iota. (Unless, of course, you're Bob Dole.)

Internal Machine head Brandon Hudgeons, working with a team of animators and designers (including local animation faves Horseback Salad and Mixer Design), has created the "F31 Interactive Engine," which is to say he's outfitted the seats of one theatre at the four-screen Alamo Draffthouse North with a whole new set of techy, gee-whiz armrests, replete with gadgetry buttons that allow the audience to play along with Internal Machine's first interactive theatre trivia game.

Based on the currently showing *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Internal Machine's *Question Authority* game plays like a multiple-choice final from Geek University, with questions along the lines of "What was the name of Frodo's sword?" digitally projected on the screen and audience members punching in their answers via the armrests. Winners get snazzy prizes like concession-stand freebies, T-shirts, and film passes (although the rumored "all-expenses-paid trip to Middle-earth" never materialized); according to

Alamo co-owner Karrie League, the response has been a mixture of sporting competition among the Tolkien faithful and relief at having something to kill pre-movie time with other than the Macaulay Culkin ephemera you're subjected to at the chain theatres.

Hudgeons says the 3-year-old Internal Machine is "planning on expanding as the Alamo expands" and notes that the fledgling technology can also be used for marginally less exciting pursuits as PowerPoint situations, business and party gatherings, and other multi-user events. "Our thinking was that we wanted to create an Xbox, but we wanted 250 people to be able to play at once. Which is pretty much what we've done."

There aren't any awards for rescuing humble audience members from the usual nonstop barrage of weak, hypey ads that they're usually forced to endure. But there ought to be. And we know who's getting the first one.