

Animation Nation (Feb 11)

Quickly made computer-generated cartoons are attracting millions of viewers online. Now, corporations, advertisers and Hollywood executives are taking notice.

By ELLEN GAMERMAN

Last fall, television actor Richard Ruccolo sat down to make an animated movie about life in Hollywood. Twenty minutes later, a frustrated actor and a clueless talent agent, played by two cuddly-looking stuffed animals, strolled across his computer screen.



Xtranormal

How do you get nearly 4.2 million people to listen to a dialogue about monetary policy? Put it in the mouths of cartoon animals.

Within two days, people were watching Mr. Ruccolo's cartoon at talent agencies, management firms and TV studios around Los Angeles. A viewing of the short briefly brought work to a halt in the writers' room at ABC's "Desperate Housewives." Mr. Ruccolo said he was introduced at a party to Chuck Lorre, the executive producer of the CBS comedy "Two and a Half Men," as "the guy who made the agent video." In an email, Mr. Lorre said he thought the video was "pretty inside and very funny." Mr. Ruccolo looks at such videos as "electronic business cards."

On the heels of Twitter, blogs and YouTube videos, do-it-yourself animation has emerged as the latest form of self-expression online. These days, anyone looking to make fun of their boss, unleash a rant or comment on the latest news can quickly create a cartoon, thanks to a crop of animation websites. And corporations, advertisers—and Hollywood executives—are beginning to take notice.

Insurance giant Geico is using the lo-fi animation for a series of TV ads. Some of the most successful amateur video-makers are fielding offers from agents and producers. One popular animation site, Xtranormal, has been adapting its technology for smart phones.

COMMERCIALS Geico created a 'Sexy Grandpa' cartoon ad to appeal to the under 35-crowd. It runs on MTV, Comedy Central and Adult Swim.



The graphics in these videos are simplistic, and the voices are typically computerized monotones—it's a long way from the golden age of animation. But TV shows such as "South Park" have refined the art of using crude-looking animated figures to comment on the news of the day. The Taiwanese firm Next Media Animation pumps out animated spoofs online—sometimes in a matter of hours—in response to everything from Tiger Woods's meltdown to Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the U.S. (Mr. Hu tosses the keys to his jet to President Barack Obama, calling over his shoulder, "Don't scratch it.") Now, the masses are getting in on the joke.

Many amateur-designed videos follow a basic pattern: A clueless dolt irritates a jaded insider with an astonishing blend of naiveté and ill-earned self-confidence. In one, entitled, "So You Want to Go to Law School," a prospective law student tells a lawyer, "I love the Constitution," to which he replies: "If you say it's a living, breathing document, I may kill myself." "But it is," she says. "Oh no. You're going to make me orphan my daughter," he responds.

In another video, a would-be writer tells a publishing insider that he just quit his job, bought a laptop and intends to write a novel by the end of the week. "What was the last book you read?" the insider asks. "I saw all of the Harry Potter movies," he smugly replies.

Both of those videos were created by David Kazzie of Richmond, Va., a 37-year-old lawyer and a frustrated author. He had pitched two unsolicited manuscripts to dozens of agents over the last decade, both of which were rejected, and he thought the videos might at least drive readers to his blog.

An Animated Debate

From competitive moms to boastful writers, some popular Web cartoons made in hours—or minutes



- **'So You Want to Write a Novel'**: David Kazzie, author of two unpublished novels, mocks an aspiring writer who boasts about his "awesome" first page—all he has written. The would-be author doesn't worry about finding an agent, either: "I'll just call a few and let them fight over me."



- **'iPhone 4 vs. HTC EVO'**: This video, which has more than 12 million hits on YouTube, helped to popularize Xtranormal. In it, a shopper is in such a frenzy to buy an iPhone 4 that she is deaf to all arguments against it. She wants it because "it is an iPhone," she tells the salesman. "You do realize that doesn't mean anything—it's a brand," he replies. The video's creator, formerly a Best Buy employee, now does work for the site GoAnimate.



- **'How Obama Prepared for the State of the Union'**: In Next Media Animation's take on President Obama's State of the Union address, the president gears up backstage, giving himself

a thumbs-up in the mirror and doing yoga poses to relax. "Eye of the tiger," he says, shadow boxing. "Jobs, jobs, jobs. Every time I say it, college students have to take a drink."



- **'Why I Can't Make Mom Friends':** This video by Valerie Stone Hawthorne, a stay-at-home mom in Grapevine, Texas, has received more than 500,000 hits across various sites. In the short, a competitive mother says, "My children are my hobby. We strive for perfection," noting that her children "speak three languages, including Mandarin, and also sign language."

After watching Mr. Kazzie's novelist video (and posting it to her Facebook page), New York literary agent Ann Rittenberg signed him as a client. The short "was so funny and brilliantly accurate that I thought actually he'd done a Vulcan mind-meld with me," Ms. Rittenberg said.

Do-it-yourself animation sites like Xtranormal and GoAnimate are designed to be simple enough for anyone to use: All a person has to do is sit at a computer and type. Users pick out characters, voices, motions, backgrounds and facial expressions. On Xtranormal there are six possible looks, including ones described as "Ooh that makes me happy!" and "Ew. Gross." The site's deadpan voices, occasional mispronunciations of typed words and wide-eyed, nearly expressionless characters add to the comic incongruity of the characters' often outraged rants.

"It's a quick, down-and-dirty way to get smart writing and observational comedy on the Internet," said Richard Appel, a veteran of the Fox TV shows "Family Guy" and "The Simpsons" and a creator and executive producer of "The Cleveland Show." Homemade cartoons can riff off the news easily, he said, unencumbered by the time-consuming production demands of an animated TV show. Mr. Appel doesn't think these low-budget cartoons are about the visuals: "It's a writer's medium that's cleverly found a way to get people to look at their screen and listen to what's being said."

Geico recently created five TV commercials using Xtranormal. One spot features a "sexy grandpa" who gyrates under a cartoon apple tree. The ad's message, delivered by the robot-voiced senior citizen: People can get a rate quote from Geico in 15 minutes, the same time it took to create the cartoon.

Geico's advertising agency, the Richmond, Va.-based Martin Agency (which also created the "gecko" spots), sold the Xtranormal idea to Geico executives based partly on the easy and cheap production. Ad executives were inspired by an Xtranormal cartoon spoof of iPhone 4 buyers, which had gone viral thanks partly to the response of the under-35 crowd, the same group Geico was trying to target with its new commercials.

The iPhone 4 video, which appeared on YouTube last June, was created by Brian Maupin, then an employee at Best Buy in Kansas City, Mo. In it, a clueless customer demands: "iPhone 4. Where is the iPhone 4? I need an iPhone 4." She is unconvinced by his arguments that another phone, the HTC EVO 4G, is better. Finally, he tells her in an increasingly profane diatribe that the rival phone can print money,

fly her to a private island and "grant up to three wishes, even if one of those wishes is for an iPhone." (The customer remains unswayed.) The video has more than 12 million hits on YouTube.

Mr. Maupin, 25 years old, left Best Buy last summer. He's now working on text-to-video animated shorts, including some for Xtranormal's main rival, GoAnimate, which hired him to promote its brand. Alison Small, a creative executive at Paramount studios, contacted him, wanting to see more of his writing. He is sending her his idea for a fully animated series. So far, though, he's not sure he'll be able to turn a video he made in 15 minutes into a career.

To move beyond Internet fad territory, animation companies are trying to tap a new pool of users. GoAnimate's education division has provided 2,500 schools with its animation tools since December, promoting cartoons as a way to make a history lesson more interesting or bring an English student's short story to life.

Corporations such as defense contractor Lockheed Martin are using animated shorts for internal staff videos. "Dan in Cube #5, are you ready to rock?" a cartoon Keith Richards type asks an employee in one such short using GoAnimate's cartoon characters. "I'm your reminder to rock your ethics and business conduct compliance training. Woo-hoo!"

So You Want to Be an Animator

Sites such as Xtranormal.com, GoAnimate.com and Animasher.com let users build their own cartoons. The steps on all three sites are fairly similar:

- **Pick a character.** GoAnimate lets users customize their characters with features like a pot belly, cat-eye glasses, a bouffant hairdo or gorilla hands.
- **Pick a background.** Animasher's options include a lecture hall, a swimming pool and an exploding atom bomb.
- **Add dialogue.** On Xtranormal, users type in their own dialogue and select from a range of available voices. Animasher offers sound effects like fireworks and screams.
- **Direct.** On Xtranormal, users can add pauses, motions and camera angles. GoAnimate's editing features include cuts and zooms.

Xtranormal, which is backed by Boston-based venture capital firm Fairhaven Capital, says its registered users have jumped from 800,000 to nearly 2.4 million in the last six months. In December, the site began charging for cartoon characters that once were free; the average movie costs about \$1 to make. The site says it has seen a steady increase in revenue but has not yet turned a profit. Chief Executive Officer Graham Sharp says the company expects to do so by midyear.

Last week, at the creative offices of Xtranormal located in an industrial loft in Montreal, staffer Geneviève Trottier used a stylus on a computer tablet to fiddle with a Chris Rock character she had created over the previous six days, pushing his mouth into a frown, then a look of surprise. She decided to pose him for a promotional still giving a double thumbs-up, careful work that involved manipulating his hands—each with 30 virtual joints—so all 10 fingers were in the right position. The company is set to release a slate of comedian characters this spring to encourage more users to riff off pop culture. An audio engineer has been integrating two dozen new voices into the site, including some in foreign languages such as Arabic.

At its start, Xtranormal was meant to be a movie-industry tool, designed to help filmmakers quickly storyboard their ideas, says Mr. Sharp, who took over the company last year. The site failed to catch on with Hollywood insiders, who found the images too simple and unsophisticated for their purposes, he said. Changing direction, Mr. Sharp began emailing journalists and political bloggers.

The site proved particularly popular with people in professions like journalism, law and medicine. Xtranormal executives say many users seem to be making the videos while at work—traffic on the site drops dramatically on weekends and holidays.

SELF-MOCKERY A lawyer's parody of his profession has more than a million hits on YouTube. A literary agent recently signed him as a client.



Omid Malekan, a 30-year-old former futures trader from Syosset, N.Y., thought a few friends who didn't understand monetary policy might like his cartoon take on quantitative easing; that video now has nearly 4.2 million hits on YouTube. "Why do they call it 'the quantitative easing'? Why don't they just call it 'the printing money'?" one animal asks another. "Because 'the printing money' is the last refuge of failed economic empires and banana republics."

It's always difficult to predict what will be a passing fad on the Internet and what will have more lasting impact. Some comedy professionals say the challenge for any computer-generated trend is to sustain itself beyond the initial joke.

The fast-cartoon phenomenon took off online in late 2009, when Taiwan's Next Media Animation released a video depicting Tiger Woods fleeing his enraged wife. Since then, the company has spoofed a range of current events, with videos like a rap battle between Presidents Obama and Hu over the appreciation of the yuan. (One Next Media video parodied competition between The Wall Street Journal and the New York Times.)

The company's 300-person animation team, based in Taipei, prides itself on being able to turn out new videos quickly in response to the news cycle, producing more than 50 animated clips a day. In its two-story newsroom, projects move from concept to storyboard to fully edited pieces in less than three hours.

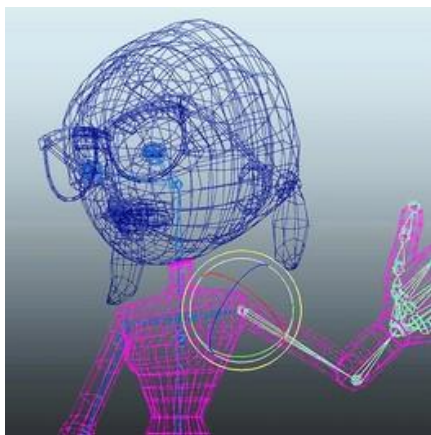
POLITICAL SATIRE Taiwan's Next Media Animation spoofs events like President Hu's U.S. visit. Here, he measures the drapes in the Oval Office.



The site's directors, writers, modelers and animators hold up to 14 meetings a day, packing into a conference room where storyboard artists present their sketches. Actors then head to the firm's motion-capture studio. Specialized cameras pick up their movements, which are used to help bring digital characters to life.

While some of the pieces target foreign audiences and are purely satirical, many others are designed as more conventional news clips tailored for Next Media's regular news outlets in Asia, including a TV station and a newspaper called Apple Daily. The company plans to launch a wire service to provide straight-news animated clips that can be integrated into video broadcasts in the U.S.

Individuals creating animated shorts at home are as likely to comment on their own lives as they are to address current events. Valerie Stone Hawthorne, a 31-year-old mother of twins, felt lonely last September at the playground in Grapevine, Texas. To express her frustration, she created a video featuring a mother desperately one-upping another mom about her children's achievements.



An Xtranormal character in development. Characters are sculpted onscreen in the company's Montreal offices.

The video, whose script she wrote in an hour, has since received 500,000 hits on various sites. Ms. Hawthorne was approached by an independent film and television producer, Melanie Elin, who wanted to discuss possibly developing an animated series, but Ms. Hawthorne passed on the idea and instead is working on a new cartoon every week on her new blog, TheMompotion.

April Lamb, an aspiring producer, was surprised to get an email from the Sundance Institute in September inviting her to submit a feature script to a competitive screenwriter's workshop. The attention came in response to a video she'd made to mock producer Gavin Polone, her boss on the shoot of a film called "Premium Rush." Mr. Polone himself read the script and added a few comic tweaks, posting the video on his Facebook page.

"We were looking for new comedic voices and even in that short little segment, you could tell she had a voice," said Cullen Conly, coordinator of the Sundance Institute's feature-film program, who later met with Ms. Lamb in Beverly Hills.

Mr. Polone and Ms. Lamb said Mr. Polone's dialogue was taken from real life, including this gem: "Get me an egg-white omelet when I get back.... Have them use spray instead of oil. If they must use oil, make sure it is light oil. Watch them while they cook it to make sure it is right."

The video quickly circulated around the film industry and was posted by the website Deadline Hollywood. "People figured out it was an inside joke," Ms. Lamb said, "when they figured out I had not been fired."

—*Paul Mozur contributed to this article.*

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