

Drawing Talent

A studio audience howls with laughter and applause as God and the Devil, the two cartoon hosts of a new online talk show, cavort with their famous guests: Anthropologist Jane Goodall picks lice from God's hair. Actor John Wayne confesses to the Devil that he is a gay nudist. Physicist Stephen Hawking teaches God a thing or two about the universe. *The God & Devil Show*, a thinly veiled Internet parody of Regis and Kathie Lee (respectively), is the creation of 31-year-old San Francisco animator Aubrey Ankrum. Since its November debut, 400,000 fans have flocked to Ankrum's six-minute weekly parade of celebrity caricatures.

Those are 400,000 more fans than Ankrum, a dropout of San Francisco University, ever imagined he would have. Five years ago the only audience for his cartoons were people who glanced at his work on the wall of the ice cream parlor where he scooped for \$6.50 an hour. "I was such a loser," says Ankrum. Now he earns close to \$80,000 a year, not counting options, at Mondo Media, a San Francisco animation studio planning to go public this year.

Animators have long toiled at the bottom of Hollywood's entertainment hierarchy. They either starved trying to get plum assignments from advertising agencies or worked as slaves inside a studio-owned animation factory.

Today they are in demand like never before and, in many cases, calling the shots over their creative output, (see sidebar). New animation technology has made Web cartoons cheap to create and easy to stream over 56-kilobit modems. Ironically, it is one of the Web's weaknesses--a lack of broadband access necessary to broadcast live-action video--that has given animation a new life.

Internet companies such as Mondo Media, Shockwave, Level13 and Icebox are falling all over themselves to hire animators to design three-to six-minute animated shows. The animators who attract followings on the Web stand a chance of breaking into the big time with film and television deals. For now, at least, the Web is making it possible for any and every obscure artist to attract from 100 to a million fans they could otherwise never have found. "This sure is the animator's time in the sun," says Oscar-nominated animator Bill M. Plympton of New York.

The sun won't shine forever. When high-speed access becomes widespread, live-action video may very well send animators right back into obscurity.

But right now it's haymaking time. Celebrity animators like *South Park* creators Matthew Stone and Trey Parker landed a \$2 million deal to create shows for Shockwave.com. But even lesser-known veterans are benefiting.

Corky Quakenbush recently caused a bidding war between two sites, Pop.com and Z.com, over his new stop-action short. In it a doll named Bibby becomes a phone-sex operator to solve her family's debt woes only to find out her husband's phone sex calls caused all the trouble. "It's like the land rush of the 1800s," says Quakenbush. His Space Bass Films has been around for 25 years.

Atom Films, an online animation studio, recently paid \$50,000 for an 18-month exclusive on Web broadcast rights of Bill Plympton's eight-hour collection of work.

Studios either run the shorts themselves or sell them to portals like Netscape's Netcenter and Time Warner's Entertainment, which see animation as the way to keep visitors. Mondo Media has syndicated shows such as *Thugs on Film* and *Like, News* to 15 different sites that pay \$500 per episode for orders of 13 to 52 episodes. Mondo Media inserts 10-second commercials and splits the revenues with portals. Venture capitalists are getting animated about the business, pumping \$20 million into Mondo Media and \$44 million into Shockwave.

Fueling the spread of quickie animation on the Web is Flash, an ingenious piece of software for creating and viewing Web animation. Since Macromedia introduced Flash in 1996, 220 million copies of the free viewer have been downloaded from Macromedia.com and Flash.com. The company has sold 400,000 copies of the \$300 version used to create shows.

Flash turns painstaking hours of animation into a streamlined computerized process. Instead of taking a pixel-by-pixel approach, Flash uses vector-based graphics, which describe motion, color and images in mathematical recipes that are more compact than pixels. As a result, 30 seconds of animation that once used 4 megabytes of bandwidth now only needs up to 400 kilobytes, and is therefore faster to download and play.

All this has given former starving artists a feast of opportunities. Demand is so good now that animators feel emboldened enough to quit once-prized studio jobs. Michael Dougherty, a 25-year-old from Columbus, Ohio, took the straight-and-narrow route: film school at New York University, then a \$50,000-a-year job drawing for Nickelodeon.

But his office there, once cluttered with sketches and plastic Godzilla dolls, is now vacant. Dougherty quit in March to freelance his own characters. He's working from an apartment in New York and an office in Los Angeles, creating animated shorts for a teen Web portal and, in his spare time, developing animated pets called Pocket Monkeys for handheld devices like PalmPilots.

If Dougherty had stuck it out at Nickelodeon he might have hit \$80,000 management pay. By going it alone he sets himself up for a director's \$120,000 salary. But Dougherty is also open to full-time positions at dot.coms. He is currently developing his own characters at Eruptor.com. "There are millions of places to pitch your ideas," he says.

Some former starving artists can even find themselves the subject of bidding wars. For the past 12 years Homer Reyes has rented a room for \$400 a month in the same house he lived in while an art student in Pasadena. The Web has changed that. In January Reyes joined Entertaindom, lured by the Time Warner division's steady \$60,000 salary and potential stock options. Days after he started the 32-year-old bought a Harley-Davidson XLH Sportster 883.

As quick as he could take the Harley for a spin, Icebox.com came calling. The Santa Monica, Calif. company that produces original animated series offered a high-five-figure salary, several thousand options and a chance to showcase his own creations like Ben the Frog, who struggles with the fact that kisses will never make him a prince. He took the job.

Not every animator is buying into the dot.com gravy train. Freelancer Steven Dovas has worked out of his Brooklyn brownstone for the past eight years. While he couldn't avoid Web work if he tried, Dovas focuses more on traditional commercial work. His second-floor studio is a testament to how traditional tools and Web technology still compete in the industry. The front room is all pencils, pens and paper; the back room is all monitors, mouse pads and modems.

In the front room his art-student assistant, Darcy Vorhees, hunches over a drawing table, carefully inking a bank vault for a 10-second ad that will take two weeks to finish. Meanwhile, in the back room, Dovas is teaching himself Flash. The 37-year-old is no technology newbie. In 1995 he directed the first version of Microsoft Office's pesky animated paper clip.

But, as a seasoned vet, Dovas knows every boom goes bust. "I remember the mid-1980s, when animators were really hungry," he says. That's something young animators have never experienced.

At least, not yet.

Sidebars

[Twisted But Free](#)

