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Bigwigs Seek Short-Form Scorseses

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By [Niall McKay](#)  Also by this reporter

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When Keith Thomson's animated film *Anibelle Scoops* logged a million hits online, he had little idea what further success it would bring.

Six months later, the screenwriter and amateur animator landed a deal to write an MTV pilot based on the cartoon about a cute but dumb starlet who used breast implants to augment her talent.


[See photos](#)

"Until then, I probably made about \$1.83 from my cartoons," said Thomson. He estimates that he made between \$5,000 and \$10,000 through online distribution of the 15-minute *Anibelle* series three years ago.

Thomson is one of a new breed of internet video producers creating low-budget, short-form films and animations for websites and web video channels such as AtomFilms and Ifilm.

Short works are also attracting increased attention from big media firms, which are asking grass-roots video enthusiasts to produce films and animations

Next week, Al Gore's new 24-hour internet and cable television network, [Current TV](#), will open its doors, providing a diet of three-to-five-minute news, arts and entertainment videos for young people.

Meanwhile, Canadian Broadcasting's youth arts program [ZeD TV](#) has been pumping out short segments both on television and online for the past year. And Bravo adapted filmmaker Rob Thomas' short comedy *Significant Others* into a TV series.

Now, major internet portals [MSN](#), [Yahoo](#), AOL and [Google](#) are getting into the game as well. They're adding amateur videos and short films to their collections of music videos, TV segments and movie trailers to build out what will no doubt emerge as the internet's answer to cable television.

"The online advertising industry is booming again," said Scott Roesch, vice president and general manager of San Francisco-based [AtomFilms](#). "So now there is a race among the large media companies to create video inventories."

But here's the rub. There's very little quality short-form video available. Outside of the music industry, movie studios and cable channels aren't in the habit of producing short videos, so there isn't much inventory. What's more, creating short formats popular on the

internet isn't a talent many professional TV and film producers have developed, since it's enormously difficult to tell a story in three minutes.

"Established media outlets have too much money invested in existing content so they are unable to pioneer new formats," said Andrew Blau, a strategist with the Global Business Network, a think tank based in Berkeley, California. "The most exciting (content) innovation is produced by people, usually with few financial resources, who have everything to gain and nothing to lose."

So the big internet portals are forging distribution deals with AtomFilms and [Ifilm](#) for video content. The former is working with AOL, Yahoo and MSN while the latter is working with Yahoo and AOL. Both Ifilm and AtomFilms post a steady flow of films ranging from low-quality home video to highly produced short films and animated features.

Filmmakers like Thomson and Andy Schocken, who made a documentary called *Old Glory* about the U.S. flag, have helped pioneer the genre.

After weathering the internet crash in 2001, both Ifilm and AtomFilms have become hot properties, currently drawing between 6 million and 8 million unique visitors per month. In special circumstances, like when the animated political parody *This Land* was posted to AtomFilms' site during the run-up to the presidential election, the sites can reach much larger audiences.

Small wonder then that AtomFilms is launching a section called Reactor, a topical weekly series featuring short-form comedy and documentary films that offer irreverent commentary on the issues of the day. The first film, *Bomb*, takes a look at the absurdity of life in the age of terrorism.

Ifilm, in a similar vein, posts an editor's choice lineup often featuring topical content such as cell-phone video footage from the London subway bombing.

"Viral video represents our biggest content segment by far," said Blair Harrison, CEO of Ifilm in Los Angeles. Viral videos are short clips that people e-mail to each other. "Our focus content-wise has always been a little off-center of the mainstream."

Much of the recent success of internet video is due to the upswing in broadband penetration, which surpassed 58 percent of web users last month, according to [Nielsen/NetRatings](#).

This enables internet users to view online content easily. However, it is just the tip of the iceberg. New media standards such as MPEG-4 promise to increase video quality and make it suitable for viewing on displays the size of the seat-back screens in aircraft entertainment systems.

Furthermore, an increasing number of distribution channels are emerging. Apple Computer is [rumored to be developing](#) a video version of its popular iPod music player. BitTorrent, [video blogging](#), RSS feeds and online communities also provide new distribution options for video.

"We're moving from a text-based internet to multimedia internet," said J.D. Lasica, executive director of [Ourmedia](#), a free site for posting video. "So video is becoming a full-blown phenomenon on the internet."

Rants & Raves

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