TV takes step into 'Afterworld'

The Web series on MySpace is melding different kinds of media.

By Richard Verrier, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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First was lonelygirl15, a fictionalized series of confessional video blogs on YouTube made by an actress posing as a home-schooled girl.

Then came "Prom Queen," a Web teen soap opera backed by former Walt Disney Co. Chief Executive Michael Eisner.

Now there's "Afterworld," an online animated series about a man who wakes up to find most of the world's population has vanished.

Debating on MySpace today, "Afterworld" marks one of the most ambitious Internet shows to date, underscoring the evolution of online entertainment from amateur videos to more polished productions.

Created by Santa Monica-based Electric Farm Entertainment, "Afterworld" spans 130 episodes, each lasting two to three minutes. The show's roughly $3-million budget makes it the most expensive series of its kind to run on News Corp.'s social networking site, which draws more than 115 million active users worldwide each month.

"We're confident this is going to be an enormous success," said Jeff Berman, general manager for MySpace TV, which will release the first 10 episodes today. Starting Monday, new episodes will be released daily over the next several weeks.

The show is free and will be supported by advertising revenue, which will require it to sustain an audience to generate enough revenue to make money.

"It's an interesting new step in the development of online entertainment, but the challenge is that there is so much content out there," said Mike McGuire, a digital media analyst with research firm Gartner Inc.

Nonetheless, "Afterworld" is off to a promising start. Some of the episodes premiered this year on Budweiser's dedicated video site, bud.tv, and on YouTube, where it became a viral hit, drawing more than 1 million views.

"What we're trying to do is create a unique form of entertainment as well as an original business model," said Stan Rogow, former executive producer of Disney Channel's hit show "Lizzie McGuire" and one of the principals in Electric Farm Entertainment.

Rogow launched the digital studio this year. One of his partners is Jeff Sagansky, former head of CBS Entertainment and former co-president of Sony Pictures Entertainment. Another is veteran writer Brent Friedman, whose credits include the "Dark Skies" TV series and the popular video game "Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars."
The partners aim to get in on the ground floor of the new ways entertainment is being delivered and consumed.

For Rogow, the catalyst was observing his 13-year-old son spend hours around the computer with his friends instead of watching the TV shows he had built his career on.

"I realized that's where the future is," said Rogow, whose credits also include Discovery Kids "Darcy's Wild Life."

He approached Friedman, who created a post-apocalyptic story line about a man who travels from New York to Seattle in search of his family while encountering survivors rebuilding society in strange and surprising ways.

Targeting teens to adults in their early 30s, the show has the photo-realistic look of a video game with a mythical universe and plenty of interactive features. A map posted on the show's website allows fans to explore the journey. Fans also can suggest plot lines, solve puzzles and interact with some of the characters, who will have their own blogs on MySpace.

"The idea was to create a new hybrid medium for entertainment using these different forms of technology so that fans can get their daily snack of entertainment when and where they want," Friedman said.

Instead of a traditional licensing fee, Electric Farm gets a cut of the ad revenue MySpace generates from the show. Financial terms weren't disclosed.

The company also has made money by selling international television, Internet, mobile and gaming rights to Sony Pictures International, which helped finance the project. Sony also is developing a mobile game to be released early next year based on the series.

"This is as much about learning what works and what doesn't," said Andy Kaplan, president of Sony Pictures' international TV operation.

The global rollout began this month when the Sci-Fi Channel in Australia began airing the show, which is also available in 13 half-hour episodes.

It also will air on television and mobile phones in several other countries.

In addition to a second season of "Afterworld," Electric Farm will produce two other Web series, including one about Los Angeles zombies called "Woke up Dead" and "The Gemini Division" starring Rosario Dawson as New York cop investigating the bizarre murder of her husband. Both combine animation and live action.

Ultimately, the goal is to use the Internet and other new media to build a loyal fan base for digital properties that can eventually spawn film and TV shows.

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