A new Web world with character

Warner plans a site where fans can adopt personas from Looney Tunes, Hanna-Barbera and DC Comics.

By Dawn C. Chmielewski, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
September 7, 2007

Holy virtual worlds, Batman!

Seeking to capitalize on children's attraction to virtual worlds such as Webkinz and Club Penguin, Warner Bros. Entertainment plans to create an online hangout called T-Works, where animation fans can adopt the personas of their favorite Looney Tunes, Hanna-Barbera and DC Comics characters.

When the site launches in April, cartoon aficionados will be able to create their own versions of such classic characters as Bugs Bunny, Scooby-Doo and Batman, interact with other characters online and create their own cartoon remixes.

"Our research has clearly shown us our fans already do interact with our characters around the broadband and wireless space," said Bruce Rosenblum, president of Warner Bros. Television Group. "We decided it would be best for us to build as diverse and immersive an environment as we could for all the characters."

Such sites as Webkinz and Club Penguin attract millions of kids and tweens with animated characters that can be dressed up and paraded around three-dimensional environments.

Walt Disney Co. agreed in August to pay as much as $700 million to acquire Club Penguin, which has 12 million active users. The MTV Networks unit of Viacom Inc. bought Neopets Inc. for $160 million in June 2005, using the site where kids create virtual pets to augment a television programming slate that includes "SpongeBob SquarePants."

"There's a real gold rush on these kid-centered sites," Forrester Research analyst Josh Bernoff said. "I'm sure that any company that's got its claws into that demographic, like Warner, has got to be looking at this and saying, 'How do we get our piece?'"

Warner said the proposed virtual world would provide an outlet for an avid fan base that can be dressed up and paraded around three-dimensional environments.

Social networking around the Dark Knight

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Scooby-Doo and friends. Warner Bros. plans to enable aficionados to create a Web persona, or avatar, based on the cartoon hound and other characters.

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Warner said the proposed virtual world would provide an outlet for an avid fan base that is already going online to discuss and reinvent their favorite characters. They'll be able to create their own version of, say, Bugs Bunny or a DC Comics hero like Superman, and use it as an avatar on other social networks, such as MySpace and Facebook.
Rosenblum said he also would like to give fans the freedom to post their own animated mashups or amalgams elsewhere online, but added, "All the rules haven't been written yet."

The site would also serve as a virtual screening room, where fans could watch old animated shorts and original programs, such as an untitled "Batman" short-form series and a project based on "The Wizard of Oz."

Henry Jenkins, founder and director of the comparative media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has studied fan culture, said comic book fans had sought one another out to share their impressions of Batman, Superman and other characters since the 1930s. They connected through fan letters published in magazines.

"The idea of a social network around Batman is not that strange if you think about the whole history," Jenkins said. "This sort of thing was done through the post office before it was done through the Internet."

What's new is a sanctioned forum where fans are welcome to share their comic-book-inspired fantasies and role play, he said.

"DC is historically very protective of its characters, the unauthorized use of its characters," Jenkins said. "It sounds to me like it's lowering barriers to people's ability to participate and fully interact in the world of DC Comics."

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