Mini-Porn Could Be Mega-Business
Video IPods, Cell Phones Provide New Vehicles for Adult Industry

By Mike Musgrove
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, November 15, 2005; D01

Apple Computer Inc. took 20 days to reach 1 million downloads of video files from its online store; the Web site SuicideGirls, offering free videos of unclothed models, hit the mark in about a week.

One of the quickest industries to take advantage of the new video iPod, and other new gadgets, is one that has often been at the forefront of other technological innovations: porn.

Pornography is spreading from the computer desktop to the small screen, to pocket-sized devices such as cell phones, digital music players and portable game players. The phenomenon is being pushed not only by alternative-culture sites such as SuicideGirls but also by old-school skin traders such as Playboy and Penthouse, which this month announced plans to offer movies for viewing on portable devices.

Almost as quickly, a trade group for wireless carriers has responded with a plan for a rating system, such as that used in the movie industry, to help prevent children from seeing inappropriate content on mobile phones. The Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association last week announced that member companies agreeing to the voluntary proposal will not offer adult-oriented images or programming until such a system is in place, though they cannot prevent users from getting material on the Internet.

The sale of adult entertainment for downloading to cell phones is a multimillion-dollar business in Europe already. In Japan, adult film companies released movies to watch on Sony's PlayStation Portable within weeks of the gadget's debut this spring. Though still in its infancy in the United States, the portable porn market could grow to nearly $200 million a year here by 2009, according to Boston-based research firm Yankee Group.

Stock of Playboy Enterprises Inc. rose this month after a Wall Street analyst said the company is headed for an upturn because of its entry into such new media businesses.

Harvey Kaplan, an Internet porn industry veteran, said sales are growing "fast and furious" for his new company, called Xobile, which focuses exclusively on selling porn for cell phones and handheld computers.

"The adult Internet marketplace hit a ceiling about two years back," he said. "I started looking for alternate ways to reach the same market -- this seemed the logical place to go."
The proliferation has caught some off-guard. Parry Aftab, the director of WiredSafety.org, an organization devoted to helping parents keep porn away from their kids online, said the mobilization of digital porn is something even most plugged-in parents generally are not aware of yet.

"Even parents who are watching their kids' computers are clueless that they've put a [cell phone] in their kid's hands that can be used to trade this stuff around," she said. Aftab added that she sees the problem as one that requires parental education, not new laws.

A more fundamental issue might be whether people even want to see adult entertainment on tiny, two-inch video screens?

Ralph Whittington, a former curator at the Library of Congress dubbed "the king of porn" for amassing a carefully catalogued collection of adult magazines, videos and DVDs, said in a phone interview that he does not get the trend.

"I can't see anybody wanting to watch while they're sitting at the airport," Whittington said. "I just don't see how it's going to be all that popular."

Proponents argue that the anonymity and privacy offered by a mobile gadget could be a major selling point.

Sex columnist Regina Lynn, who writes for Wired.com, thinks cell phones and iPods could find a niche among viewers who are reluctant to download X-rated video clips on their desktop or laptop computer's hard drive.

"When I first heard about this, I thought it was a novelty, but I've changed my mind," she said. "I think that the porn industry will probably be pretty quick to figure out what works and sells for mobile devices."

Few mobile devices are hotter than Apple's new iPod, of course, so entrepreneurs are trying especially hard to find a way to associate their products with the phenomenally selling product.

The founders of one explicit site said they bought their "pod"-related domain name the same day Apple Chairman Steve Jobs took the stage in San Jose and introduced the video iPod to the world. The site offers adult films specially made for the device, shot from the point of view of the male actor.

Last week, gay porn media company Lucas Entertainment Inc. announced that it would make trailers for its films available on the iPod. Founder Michael Lucas, who also acts in his company's films, said he sees the move as a key way to build awareness of his company's products in the gay community -- a community that especially prizes the iPod.

"I don't have one gay friend who would not have the new iPod," he said. "Gay people are much more technologically advanced."

A still-open question for the adult entertainment business is whether gadget makers and cell phone carriers will help or stand in the way of their business plans.

Steven Hirsch, chief executive at adult media company Vivid Entertainment Group, said mobile porn has not sparked as a business in the United States yet because carriers have not figured out a reliable way to make sure only adults are able to view explicit content. He said he expects that situation to change in the
next year.

"I don't think the carriers see themselves as censors," said Hirsch, whose roster of porn stars includes big names such as Jenna Jameson. "I think they see themselves as content providers. I don't see why they'd be opposed to it."

Hirsch said he has had productive chats on the matter with carriers in the United States, but he declined to identify them.

A spokeswoman for Sprint Nextel Corp. said the carrier does not have plans for any content racier than what is on prime-time television. A spokeswoman for Virgin Mobile USA LLC said the company has no such plans and declined further comment.

Kaplan, the founder of Xobile, said he assumes cell phone companies will not want to associate with the sort of hard-core titles his business offers. But with Web-enabled phones becoming more prevalent, he said, Xobile does not need to cut a deal with a carrier. Videos can go straight to the consumer via the Internet.

iTunes has so far resisted putting SuicideGirls' adult videos on its site, and Apple declined to comment on the topic.

But a non-video Suicide Girls "podcast," or Internet radio show, is regularly one of the most popular downloads on the iTunes site, beating out rival podcasts such as a movie chat show with critics Roger Ebert and Richard Roeper.

© 2005 The Washington Post Company