

## The Very Model of a Modern Media Mogul

Brooks Barnes



Above, Sandy Huffaker/Getty Images, for the Webby Awards

Michael D. Eisner has produced a new Web show, "The All-For-Nots." It is his second Web series after leaving Disney and beginning a business in digital media.

When Michael D. Eisner left the Walt Disney Company in 2005 and set about remaking himself in new media, investing in a video-sharing Web site and starting a digital studio, some people in Hollywood snickered. Here we go, the whispers went, another fading star who doesn't know when to leave the stage.

Could Mr. Eisner get the last laugh?

Among the Hollywood developers scrambling to create original Internet programs, Mr. Eisner, 65, is one of the very few who can claim early success. "Prom Queen," a murder-mystery series distributed on MySpace and other Web sites, has been viewed by nearly 20 million people since its debut last spring.

He sold a dubbed version in France, peddled remake rights in Japan and made a sequel, "Prom Queen: Summer Heat." The series, which came with commercials, even turned a profit along the way, a spokesman said.

Now, Mr. Eisner's second series, "The All-For-Nots," a comedy that documents the travails of a fictional indie rock band, will make its debut next week on the Internet, mobile devices and the HDNet cable network. The project reflects lessons learned. This time Mr. Eisner is protecting broad foreign syndication sales by restricting foreign access to the series, which will be available in the United States on YouTube and other sites.

With "The All-For-Nots," which is sponsored by Chrysler and Expedia, Mr. Eisner is out to prove there is money to be made in the space between user-generated content and traditional television production.

"I would like to say I have a McKinsey study of a strategy," he said, referring to the management consulting firm. "It doesn't work that way. You just take your history and your education and your instincts and you put them all into a melting pot and out comes something."

There are plenty of people in Hollywood who are rooting for him to fail. Jealousy over the success of "Prom Queen" — and Mr. Eisner's occasional boasting about it — is one reason. He also retains his share of detractors from the Disney days. And while Internet types have overwhelmingly welcomed him, others remain skeptical.

"Just because Eisner is behind something, it doesn't mean it is going to be a success," said Darren Aftahi, a digital media analyst at ThinkEquity Partners in Minneapolis.

Still, the manner in which Mr. Eisner signed up Chrysler goes a long way toward explaining how he has become a leader of the digital media pack.

Most of his rivals — including his former employer, which announced the creation of a digital production studio last week — must labor to woo big-name advertisers to their untested Web content. The Disney-ABC Television Group spent months refining its strategy before Toyota signed on as the inaugural sponsor.

Mr. Eisner just flips through his Rolodex. When you spend 21 years running Disney, your friends are people like Robert L. Nardelli, the chairman of Chrysler. "I needed a car for the show so I called Bob," Mr. Eisner said. (His successor at Disney and the other media kingpins have deep business relationships of their own, of course, but do not have the luxury of devoting their full attention to lining up product placements.)

Vuguru, Mr. Eisner's Web studio, is just one of dozens of players trying to make a business out of Web shows. Many have popped up in recent months, as producers idled by the writers' strike tested the medium. Others, like the producers of "Lonelygirl15," have been tinkering in the area for years.

Studios like Warner Brothers and NBC Universal also have been trying to muscle in to the area. There have been pockets of success, but no studio has proved that it has a workable business model, said Michael Pond, a media analyst at Nielsen Online.

"The big studios have a lot of resources, but fast for them is pretty slow for the Web," he said. "They are focusing harder on creating Web programs, but others are already there."

Like Mr. Eisner. Vuguru, a made-up word he thought sounded hip, is part of a constellation of new-media plays he is making. Through Tornante, the venture capital firm he founded after leaving Disney, Mr. Eisner owns Vuguru; a large stake in Veoh, a site that allows users to download video with the quality of high-definition television; and Team Baby Entertainment, which makes sports-themed DVDs for infants and toddlers.

Most recently, Tornante, which is Italian for "hairpin turn," paid \$385 million for Topps, the longtime maker of trading cards and Bazooka bubble gum.

Mr. Eisner is keeping his ultimate playbook to himself, but drops a few hints.

"With Topps, I was interested in a company that could be a far bigger sports and entertainment media company," he said. Among his ideas are the digital delivery of trading cards and the creation of Topps-branded sports movies or sports channels on cable. As for Bazooka Joe, the gum mascot, he recently told a trade magazine that "it would be foolish of me not to try and build that character into something as much as or more than he ever was."

In some ways, "The All-For-Nots" is comfortable territory for Mr. Eisner. While working at ABC in 1970, he helped develop "The Partridge Family," the series about a musical family that unexpectedly hits it big. "The new show is not that different from that experience of marrying music to story," he said.

The idea for "The All-For-Nots" came last spring when Mr. Eisner saw "The Burg," a Web comedy about the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. "It had real flair," he said. "It was funny." He sought out the creator, a company called Dinosaur Diorama, and asked for ideas.

He passed on "The Burg 2," but a pitch about the hubristic futility of trying to conquer the nation with indie rock sounded fun.

Bebo, the large social networking site, signed on as a distribution partner, along with a half-dozen other sites. "The All-For-Nots" cast members will have Bebo profiles that link to a channel where users can watch the series. David Aufhauser, Bebo's business development director, noted that the site's features would allow users to distribute "All-For-Nots" content among themselves.

Verizon Wireless became the mobile video partner and Mr. Eisner got HDNet on board. Mark Cuban, the founder of HDNet, had been a guest on Mr. Eisner's CNBC talk show. "Michael and I talk ideas all the time," Mr. Cuban wrote in an e-mail message. "The approach we have taken with 'All-For-Nots' gives us three shots at consumers, any of which could take off singularly or in combination. Web exclusivity is too limited."

Like Chrysler, Expedia paid to be woven into the story line. As the band travels to 24 cities in search of fame, it books hotel rooms using Expedia, the online travel agency. Sarah Pynchon, Expedia's vice president for brand marketing, said the company has been looking for product-placement opportunities in Web shows, but has been reluctant because the Internet audience "is going to be much more skeptical" of advertiser integration than television viewers.

Mr. Pond of Nielsen said that Mr. Eisner was smart to focus on music-driven stories, pointing to the success of shows like "Hannah Montana." The concept also provides additional marketing angles. Cast members of "The All-For-Nots" will perform a concert on March 11 at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Tex.

Mr. Eisner is the first to caution that, despite his early success, he has not found the Web video Rosetta Stone. Indeed, the slogan for "The All-For-Nots" could be his own. "The band that will conquer the World Wide Web," the show's Web site reads, "unless they run out of gas."

**Disponível em: <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. Acesso em 3/3/2008.**

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins acadêmicos.