

MOVIES HIT THE M

Hollywood is eyeing the Internet as the gigaplex of the future

By JOSHUA QUITTNER and DAVID E. THIGPEN

THE WORDS FROM THE MOVIE TRAILER flicker across the small screen with quietly creepy menace: "Six miners lost in the wilds of Colorado in the 1870s," reads the first line, which dissolves as a suspenseful, subtonic noise rumbles from the sound track. "Five half-eaten corpses. One survivor and ..."

"... seven great songs!"

Yes, moviegoers, it's *Cannibal! The Musical*. You know—the cult-hit comedy that the creators of *South Park* made when they were in film school. Want to see it? Forget the video store. Simply mouse on over to *SightSound.com* and download a copy. You can rent the 211-megabyte film for \$2.95 a day (before it digitally disappears), or buy it for \$59.98. In fact, you can buy or rent it anytime, day or night—the Internet is always open.

It's so much cheaper to distribute movies digitally, rather than printing film and shipping it to movie theaters, that both Hollywood studios and independent filmmakers view the Net as the grandest gigaplex of them all—though they haven't sorted out who will benefit the most. Last week Adam Sandler's people said the funnyman would be doing the main voice for a free, Net-only animation, *The Peeper*, due out next month at *WarnerBros.com*. And Metafilmics, producer of Robin Williams' \$100 million-grossing 1998 film *What Dreams May Come*, revealed plans to produce a movie, *The Quantum Project*, which will be initially distributed to paying customers at *SightSound.com*.

The announcement that *Quantum* would become the first large-budget film to go straight to the Net raises some crucial questions. Will people still go to theaters, or even rent videos from stores? What will happen to the big studios and distributors, especially given the success of *The Blair Witch Project*, which formed its core

audience on the Net before catapulting its way—through theatrical release—to a box-office bonanza? Will the Net open new markets for independents?

The answer to that last question, at least, is a no-brainer. Virtually everyone agrees that the advent of Net movies will certainly be a boon for independent filmmakers, who, thanks to the plunging cost of digital video cameras, powerful PCs and editing software, are already making decent films on modest budgets. Metafilmics producer Barnett Bain expects *Quantum* to cost around \$3 million to shoot—way below the Hollywood average of \$50 million a picture. That will enable the company to finance the project privately.

And the Net, in theory anyway, is the answer to the distribution dilemma that vexes every small filmmaker. Bain estimates that there are some 35 million people in the U.S. with access to Windows Media—a free software program that not only allows you to see videos but also permits the makers to protect their movies from piracy. If Bain is able to reach 5% of that potential audience, he could easily recover his costs and turn a handsome profit. From there, the film could travel the traditional distribution route: video, pay-per-view, HBO and finally free TV. Says Bain: "This reverses the distribution chain. We can be in

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