

## Moviemaking for the Masses

Writers are flocking to Xtranormal, a company whose free text-to-movie technology lets users convert their words into animated video.

BY LUKE O'BRIEN



**ANIMATED SHORTS, DIY-STYLE**  
Users have made more than 9 million projects on Xtranormal.

✦ **THERE'S SOMETHING** hilarious about seeing a cartoon bear cuss like George Carlin in a computerized voice while planning vehicular homicide. For this, the world can thank Xtranormal, an online animation company that plops anyone touched by the muse into the director's seat of his own comedy sketch.

Xtranormal puts simple tools at the disposal of regular people. Choose from a selection of several dozen characters. Enter text (profane or otherwise) for your characters (bears or otherwise) to act out. Set your camera angle. Sprinkle in sound effects. Presto! You have your own mini-movie, ready for its online premiere.

Characters range from critters to sports stars to prominent politicians. They speak in different accents in robotic voices built from the same phonemes that create the tinny automated messages on voice mail. Although Xtranormal is working on making its natural-language processing a little more natural, intonation can be a problem. My attempt to re-create the gun-shop scene from *Terminator* using Sarah Palin (standing in for the murderous cyborg) and Larry King fell flat. More successful are videos that stick to waggish dialogue.

The first Xtranormal clip to go viral—and the one the company is still best known for—was a send-up of slavish iPhone customers. Created by Brian Maupin, a Best Buy employee clearly drawing on personal experience, the “iPhone4 vs HTC Evo” short racked up more than 10 million views on YouTube and launched a meme: two animated characters (usually bears)—one of them a cynical know-it-all, the other a fool—lampooning the clueless and the arrogant. Targets have included

doctors who think they're superior to veterinarians; control-freak moms trying to raise perfect kids; and humankind in general. “We appeal to anybody who's trying to make an inside joke,” says Xtranormal CEO Graham Sharp.

Since Maupin's video made it big this summer, large companies have taken note. After Xtranormal-inspired satire became popular among ad-industry insiders, Geico designed several whimsical TV ads using Xtranormal's free text-to-video application. Most directors, though, are just homespun auteurs with something to say. “We've really simplified animation to the point where anyone can use it,” Sharp says.

This populist approach is new for Xtranormal, which was founded in 2005 in Montreal by screenwriter and animation guru Richard Szalwinski. According to Sharp, the company's original goal was to produce an application to give film studios a storyboarding tool during pre-production. Hollywood loved the idea, but the animation and controls were too basic. Not true for the do-it-yourself crowd.

After a management shake-up that resulted in Szalwinski's exit in May 2010, Xtranormal moved in a different direction. Its revenue now comes from selling special characters and sets to users (a look-alike of President Obama is free, but a replica of Abraham Lincoln costs extra). While the company has yet to make a profit, Sharp anticipates getting into the black during the first half of 2011. With plans to go mobile and allow for collaboration over social networks, the challenge for Sharp and his team will be to keep things simple while giving Joe Public more options to unleash his inner Tarantino. **EC**