

November 15, 2007

Web Sites Cast a Net Over Striking Writers

With No Restraints Under Guild Rules, Upstarts Lure Talent

By SARAH MCBRIDE
November 15, 2007; Page B6

As the television world tries to stave off the effects of a writers' strike, upstart Internet entertainment sites are waiting in the wings hoping to steal viewers -- and, possibly, writers.

A new crop of Web entertainment sites has popped up in recent months, many of them featuring scripted, episodic short-form content known as "webisodes." The online offerings include Web sites that feature video shorts, such as Break.com; scripted original series such as "quarterlife," a 36-episode series from top TV producers Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick, known for the series "thirtysomething"; and "Prom Queen," the Web-only drama produced by former **Walt Disney Co.** Chief Executive Michael Eisner.

Still more are coming down the pike, such as 60Frames.com, a site promising material from luminaries like Joel and Ethan Coen, who directed "No Country for Old Men" and "Fargo." Former United Talent Agency executive Brent Weinstein heads up the company; his old employer incubated it.



"Quarterlife" is part of a new wave of short-form, online scripted series.


Some of these ventures see the current strike as a way to attract attention, much the way cable TV's prominence rose during a writers' strike in the late 1980s. Because the sites generally aren't parties to Writers Guild of America agreements, the guild's strike against film and TV studios is seen as an opportunity to attract talent.

Break.com is actively trying to recruit out-of-work Hollywood scribes. "Striking writers: Strike Gold on Break!" blares a pitch on its homepage, accompanied by a picture of a woman with a mock strike placard. "Check out Break's special Striking Writers contest!" it reads. The site promises \$5,000 to the striking writer who creates the video most watched by Break users. So far, the contest has attracted mostly queries rather than entries, says Break's chief executive, Keith Richman.

Spark Capital Partners LLC, a Boston venture-capital firm with investments that include online entertainment, is heading to Los Angeles this week to meet with a handful of disgruntled writers. "I don't know if it's an opportunity or a defense mechanism, but they want to talk with me about content that doesn't go through the studio system," says Todd Dages, a partner at Spark. He declined to name the writers but said several were "showrunners" -- top writers with producing duties -- on two of the top five network shows. One adjustment for screenwriters: The

budgets for such online work are typically in the tens of thousands of dollars, rather than the millions.

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Some writers are indeed contemplating making the jump to the Web. Striking outside the Disney studio last week, Ed Bernero, chief writer for "Criminal Minds," talked a good game about the online future. "If we can't reach a deal [with the studios], I'll just call Google or Yahoo or one of those companies and make a deal myself," Mr. Bernero says.

The companies may have trouble recruiting Writers Guild of America members, largely because of confusion over what writers may and may not do while on strike. Some writers believe strike rules preclude them from writing for anybody, even if it isn't studio content. But a spokesman for the guild said the rules don't prohibit members from writing for new media for companies that haven't signed agreements with the guild. "We encourage members, however, to consider trying to cover their new-media services by having the employer sign a made-for-new-media agreement," the spokesman said, "and we will continue signing such agreements even during [a strike]."

Online video companies are hungry for more professional material than what typically arrives in over-the-transom videos. Looking ahead a few years, the future of online video could lie more in series of clips, much like episodes of television shows, rather than one-off clips. "Advertisers like buying episodic things because it's predictable," says Mr. Richman of Break, which is aimed at men ages 18 to 35.

One of Break's most popular shows is a series it licensed from **General Electric** Co.'s NBC Universal unit called "Hot Crush" featuring two young women breaking things. A recent two-minute episode features the duo throwing and dropping items frozen with liquid nitrogen, such as watermelons. While that series doesn't run with advertising pre- or post-clip, the site overall is dotted with ads for a coming Sony movie, "Walk Hard," and the TBS show "Frank TV."

A number of sites stress their association with Hollywood bigwigs. Funnyordie.com, created by actor Will Ferrell and writer-director Adam McKay, is already benefiting from the labor action, with several new skits spoofing the strike. Through their publicist, Messrs. Ferrell and McKay declined to comment on how the strike affects traffic or material on their site.

Mydamnchannel.com is running channels created by personalities with Hollywood street cred, like Harry Shearer, who voices several characters on "The Simpsons." Mydamnchannel CEO and former MTV executive Rob Barnett says he supports the writers' demands and hopes the strike will bring in more viewers. "When there is nothing but repeats [on television], people will go searching for alternatives," he says. Mr. Shearer says those who do will notice the difference, both creatively and commercially. "No homogenization due to network and studio interference," he says. "No being bombarded with multiple-minute "pods" of 15-second ads and promos."

Still, much of the content for these sites comes from amateur contributors rather than professional production companies. At **Sony Corp.**'s Crackle.com, Chief Executive Josh Felser calls them "emerging talents." After noticing that a clip about slacker zoo workers was gaining a lot of traction on the site, his team cut a deal with the creators. Now they are creating a five-part series based on the piece, "St. James Zoo," which will start airing on the Internet in January. Mr. Felser says he never asks video uploaders if they are guild members; he assumes the vast majority aren't.

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