

HAIKU STO

WANDER THE WIDE, WEIRD, WONDERFUL WORLD
OF WEBISODES.

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On my cell phone, I watch an installment of the web series *Lost: Missing Pieces* and then catch another on our laptop. The experience was personal and engaging. I wasn't locked in to timeslots and FCC regulations and advertiser mandates, I was in a very real sense experiencing the extension of a story in the way that the writers and other members of the creative team truly wanted to tell it.

This was 21st-century television.

It's no secret that as technology shifts so do television viewing habits, and not always in the best way for the networks. In the past, when broadcast programming would spot dwindling audience numbers, producers and network executives worked overtime to lure viewers back with broadcast stunts and star-studded primetime specials. Now, thanks to emerging technologies, networks don't wait for viewers, instead taking shows to the audi-

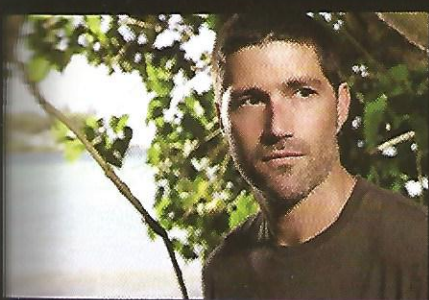
ence through cell phones and computers.

Yule Caise, writer for the *Heroes* webisodes, believes their appeal, for both writers and the viewers, comes from the fact that "on a webisode, characters can exist in a slightly different reality and can move from that across mediums—graphic novels, the main show, trade books, games, and so on." He adds that "webisodes are a great place to play. They embrace creativity. It's nice to be able to say, 'This is a hero I would like to see,' and then write that character." It's a controlled freedom, though Caise admits: "You need to compliment the mothership (the network show), not bump into it."

And that seems to be the key.

Webisodes provide a new opportunity for writers to expand on the universe established by the network show. Jane Espenson is thrilled with this opportunity: "I love stories about secondary or tertiary characters, and I love

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stories that fill in the blanks in the main narrative or explore offshoots. The webisode format is turning out to be really well-suited to this kind of storytelling. In *Battlestar Galactica: The Face of the Enemy*, we reveal a number of things that didn't fit into regular episodes but that help with understanding and enjoying them."

Lost co-creator/executive producer Damon Lindelof and executive producer Carlton Cuse share a similar belief. "The most important thing for us, the thing we spent the most time on, was coming up with the central concept," explains Cuse. "In our case, it was that these webisodes were missing pieces of the *Lost* jigsaw puzzle. They were all scenes we as writers wish we'd seen or wanted to write but that never fit into any of our main series narratives."

Because of the nature of *Lost* (and in the same respect other mythos-heavy shows), the webisodes have to serve a purpose both for the audience and the writers. If the

webisodes and network show aren't in sync with story and style, the entire series suffers. It's obviously critical that each webisode serves the greater good of the story. Cuse explained that they use their webisodes to provide an additional foundation for their series: "For us when we construct a story, it's like building an iceberg. The top 20 percent that's above the water, that's what makes it on TV, but the rest still exists. But that doesn't mean a lot of the rest of the iceberg isn't really interesting. Right now, webisodes are a great way to tell stories that don't fit on the mothership."

Heroes uses webisodes in a similar way, exploring "what happened right off screen during a moment," says Caise. The series also uses the medium to introduce new characters, as with the *Going Postal* series. Caise shared that this format has provided a "great palette to come up with something new and see how it flies."

Digital content delivery has been a point of contention between writers and producers since the heady days of the dotcom bubble. Studios saw the advent of digital content, like webisodes, as an extension of the day-to-day work being done on a program. The Writers Guild believed that these were wholly new storytelling initiatives and as such should be treated as separate contracts.

Employing the web to introduce a new character removes some of the pressure. It is a more concise story environment—you can focus on a single character and not have to worry about the dozens of disparate plot threads hanging in front of the story if it were incorporated directly into the network broadcast.

Webisodes have taken a foothold because they don't play by a strict set of rules... yet. Their purpose and structure vary from show to show. In the traditional broadcast model, writers have to be economical with their scripts because they have a finite amount of time to get their story told. This can lead to audience frustration, as viewers clamor to learn more about this character or wonder what was happening just off screen. On the web, these smaller moments become the star.

And they *are* receiving the star treatment. In 2007, the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences recognized the format and began awarding Emmys for online programming through the category of Outstanding Special Class, Short-Format Live-Action Entertainment Programs. Webisodes have recently been nominated for, and won, other awards (i.e. the Nebula Award) traditionally given to broadcast programming.

A Start

In 1997, NBC took a bold first step and added to their fledgling website a series of webisodes set in an unlikely universe—the realistically gritty world of the critically acclaimed *Homicide: Life on the Street*. A police procedural might not appear to be the most likely choice to build a web series off of, but writers and producers saw the opportunity to do more than just place video online and create a unique story experience.

The action in *Homicide: Second Shift* takes place in the evening and, as written by Sara Charno and Ayelet Sela, the webisode stories feature their own set of characters and situations occurring independently of the network show. With its own identity firmly set, the worlds of broadcast and online collided through a story arc that saw the detectives on both “shows” collaborate on solving a murder case which had as its center point (in a nice tie-in) a killer who “worked” over the Internet. It was forward thinking storytelling and helped to showcase, early on, the way TV and the web could work together. Ultimately, the series overstepped the technical limitations of the time, but its mark was long lasting. Tom Hjelm, NBC's then-director of Interactive Programming, saw this as a first-step opportunity for expandable programming options. “In my perfect world,” he says, “every show would have producers from the online side sitting down at the same table with the rest of the creative team.”

Because in a way most webisodes today are extensions of the network program, the collaboration that Hjelm envisioned has not exactly come about. What tends to happen today is that webisode writers and network series writers are one and the same. In some ways this works as it maintains a level of story consistency and voice across the network and web shows. How the writers are assigned to the show can vary based on availability and “complexity.”

After careful discussions, the writers of the *Lost* webisodes were chosen based on their attachment to a particular webisode story arc, while over at *The Office* a different approach was used. The webisode series *The Accountants* was written by Michael Schur and Paul Lieberstein primarily because they had the time.

Under Contract

Digital content delivery has been a point of contention between writers and producers since the heady days of the dot-com bubble. Studios saw the advent of digital content, like webisodes, as an extension of the day-to-day work being done on a program—it was considered advertising promotion. The Writers Guild believed that these were wholly new storytelling initiatives and as such should be treated as separate contracts. At the heart of the disagreement was potential—the potential for webisodes to become a larger content delivery component and, in doing so, the potential for them to make money. This disagreement was a key positioning point in the 2007/2008 WGA contract negotiations. After the strike negotiations, the issue was seemingly resolved, with writers to be paid for initial work on a webisode, then placed under a residual formula if the webisode was used for extended use across alternative platforms. (However, this past November the Guild declared that the AMPTP members were not making payments as agreed for web content, and as of this writing no payments had been received.)

For example, if a writer creates a webisode that is first “broadcast” to cell phones, there is to be an initial payment for that. If that webisode is then placed online, the writer can receive a percentage of the licensing fees. It's an agreement that meets the current use payments while at the same time seeks to remain flexible

enough to cover the content needs of emerging technologies.

Despite their current popularity, webisodes are not likely to replace broadcast television anytime soon. Even with DVR and TiVo, you can be certain that when you watch a network show in real time, there is at least one other person watching it with you. Watching a webisode is a singular experience and, by its nature, creates a sense of isolation.

On *Lost*, Cuse, Lindelof, and their team of writers give a lot of thought to the final viewing platform as it directly informs the action of each webisode: "This intimate viewing model in which the stories are usually viewed alone on a small screen seemed to us to call out for more intimate, diary-like storytelling. We purposely avoided the more epic action type scenes that fill the network show and used the webisodes to focus more tightly on the characters."

In doing so, however, one must always keep in mind that while some viewers will watch the network and online series, others will not and they shouldn't be penalized (in a story sense) for this. Caise says that for *Heroes* (and this is true for most programs with a webisode component), "If you watch just the main show, you'll get a fully satisfying experience, but for those fans who want an extension of the storyline they can turn to the web."

But what about that audience? The needs of viewers seem to be segmented across show types. Fans of *Lost* and *Heroes* look to those webisodes for detail and background that will help them better understand the mythology surrounding those stories. Others look to a webisode simply as a way to have an extended experience with a favorite group of characters. Jennie Tan of *The Office* website is happy to have *The Office* webisodes because they, in essence, fill a void: "I watch because the webisodes are usually run during times when no new episodes are airing (like the summer), so it's a great way of tiding us over."

For her part, Espenson is fully aware of her audience because she counts herself a fan too. "Like the *Star Trek* novels that I devoured when I was a kid, and the *Buffy* comic books that I both read and write now, they help flesh out a world in a way that's really satisfying for fans."

Writers need to understand that this medium is not just "tiny television," that the webisodes have a distinct language in terms of scripting. While the story themes and characters in a webisode are familiar, their presentation is not, as Espenson discovered: "Finding an act-break-worthy moment every three pages is really hard."

There are also production considerations that need to be taken into account. Writers discover that the webisodes can be a second-tier production item due strictly to the demands the weekly production of a network series take on. On *Battlestar Gallactica*, that left the production team to adopt a DIY mentality. Espenson explains that "...you sometimes have to work with whatever resources (sets, props, even cameras) you have available, often working around what's missing (say, nine-tenths of the hangar deck)." For her the production struggle does not end there, either—due to a shifting schedule, the availability of actors and crew changes from day to day, which leads to some furious rewriting.

The same is true over at *The Office*, which shot its initial web series around who and what was, or was not, being used in the broadcast shooting schedule. In a way, such "let's put on a show" ethos is one of the elements that make a webisode so engrossing. Viewers don't expect to see high-end graphics and effects, but everyone seems okay with that. In place of big set pieces, the more successful webisodes have tightly constructed character vignettes and intimate action sequences that give the show a strong tactile feel and the viewer a viscerally engaged experience. It pulls a viewer into the story in a way that cannot occur during a network broadcast.

Sanctuary!

It was only a matter of time before producers realized that 80 million people were online watching an amateur video of a man attempting to showcase a martial arts move but accidentally giving himself a concussion. If they could harness just a third of that audience for a network program, producers calculated they would have one of the top-rated programs on TV. And that is where the story of *Sanctuary* starts.

Currently showing on the Sci-Fi Channel, *Sanctuary* (created and co-written by Damian Kindler) is a science-fiction/supernatural mashup, a perfect setting for a web-series, which is where the show opened. An extensive use of green screen allowed the production to be funded and helped provide the series a quirky, semi-futuristic look.

The series ran online for eight-episodes and quickly garnered a strong following. With this energy, the Sci-Fi channel brought the series across the great broadcast divide. As star Amanda Tapping states, "The webisodes became our greatest selling tool ever." Part of the success of *Sanctuary* (and the allure to the network) is that it came with a prepackaged online fan base—a group ready to blog, post, chat, and share thoughts and feelings on each episode. In effect, the marketing launch of the show was in the hands of an excited, knowledgeable fanbase.

Proof of the popularity of webisodes and their pliability can be found at NBC, again at the forefront of webisode work, which is taking an innovative approach to integrating online and broadcast programming in the 2008-2009 season. It all starts with *30 Rock*, where online viewers are introduced to a character, a talk show host played by Jennifer Aniston, on the network show and then continue her story arc on the *30 Rock* webisodes. Those stories will send her back to the network where she'll make several guest appearances on other NBC primetime shows. It's a complicated stunt but also a great example of how a webisode can reward viewers who are looking for a more fully realized storytelling experience; it creates, in a way, a form of interactive network programming.

"Prior to the Internet, the only game in town was the networks," writer Marc Scott Zicree, a writer for *Star Trek New Voyages*, believes. "If you wanted to make a television show and you wanted to reach millions of viewers, you had to be on a network. Now, that's not the case." 