



“It’s the Wild West out there”: Can web series destabilise traditional notions of script development?

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Abstract

This paper proposes that the concept of ‘script development’—already an ambiguous and arguably unexamined term—is further complicated by the rise of the ‘webisode’, drawing from existing discourse and scholarship on web series, much of which focuses upon (and/or problematises) an assumed amateur/professional binary that would cast online media as ‘other’. But, as this paper argues, while this distinction is being debated, a space opens up within which web series creators are making their own rules. In other words, ‘the Wild West’ landscape of web series, where ‘both the newbie and the veteran can create their own shows without permission from, or the approval of, traditional electronic media networks and studios which historically served as gatekeepers’ (LA Web Fest Founder Michael Ajakwe, quoted in Liang 2013), might be facilitating new practices of script development which, given the crossover success of many web series creatives, might be infiltrating those of the mainstream.

Acknowledging the multiple meanings attached to the notion of ‘web series’, this paper wonders how previous ideas of script development are challenged when ‘Audiences can now watch what they want, when they want, which, in turn, means that [television] shows no longer have to be packaged in 30- or 60-minute instalments’ (Brown 2011). Ultimately this paper takes an optimistic view of the potential of web series to destabilise established script development practices towards new and more useful processes for screenwriters and their collaborators, even perhaps facilitating more diversity of characters and stories.

Introduction

Discussing the rise of web series on the morning news show of a mainstream television network, Roseanne Liang, writer/director of the New Zealand web series *Flat3* (2013-14), describes the online landscape thusly: ‘It’s the Wild West out there’ (2014). Anna Kerrigan, creator of the award winning web series *The Impossibilities* (2015), would appear to agree, revealing: ‘Though I’ve learned a lot about making narrative for the web, I am probably just scratching the surface. It is an ever-changing landscape, a Wild West for content that is both exciting and intimidating’ (Kerrigan 2015). It is a pervasive analogy, not only among creators but also those contributing to the literature. Marx Pyle asks: ‘Are you ready to become a pioneer, blazing your own trail through the future of entertainment?’ (Pyle 2014, xvi). Ross Brown makes a similar claim, noting: ‘Webisodes are the Wild West of Hollywood, a vast expanse of territory with unlimited potential just begging to be explored and mined’ (Brown 2011, xii). Regardless of the metaphors employed, running through the discourse on web series appears to be the agreement that there are no regulations; Dan Williams describes the phenomenon as ‘an evolving, ever-changing medium. It is a young industry with few templates and even fewer rules’ (Williams 2012, 16).

This paper proposes that the concept of ‘script development’—already an ambiguous and arguably under-examined term—is further troubled by this apparently lawless landscape that has emerged with the rise of the web series. However, this paper must also first acknowledge that its central proposition is already complicated by the question of what defines a web series, given that the sheer range of online narrative content would suggest the same breadth again of attendant script development practices, especially given the increasing involvement of national government funding bodies, major studios, and platforms like Netflix (more on that to come).

It is probably useful to note, however, that although web series with big budgets or mainstream backers have writers that may be required to develop their scripts within the same traditional models that will soon be discussed, these series still share the space with those who are working outside the rules, that is to say, mainstream script development practices do not have a monopoly on the online space as they do, arguably, elsewhere. Moreover, scripts developed within or outside the mainstream structures have the same access to such behemoth distribution platforms as YouTube and thus, theoretically, to an audience. With that in mind, it is from the perspective of screen writing practice that this paper functions as a review of the emerging literature and discourse around web series, particularly as it might pertain to new and evolving cultures of script development. Existing scholarship tends to focus upon and/or problematise an assumed amateur/professional binary that would cast online content as ‘other’. But, as this paper argues, while this distinction is being debated, a space opens up within which web series screenwriters are making their own rules.

This discussion will first attempt to define the concepts of ‘web series’ and ‘script development’ (if only for the purposes of our discussion), before arguing that through practices involving risk taking, audience engagement and subversion of familiar forms, web series writers are contributing to a new culture of script development and creating not only a diversity of practice, but also, perhaps, an accompanying diversity of content.

Web Series – TV or not TV?

Tracking the genesis of what we now call web series is certainly beyond the scope of this paper, but the rise of the web series is variously attributed to the Hollywood writers' strike of 2007 or the hoax-come-phenomenon of fictitious vlogger LonelyGirl15 (2006-08).

More useful, perhaps, is to review how those writing about and/or creating web series delineate the term. Brown defines the concept of 'web series' by breaking it down to its component parts: 'A webisode (or web episode) is an individual instalment of an ongoing premise with recurring characters' (Brown 2011, 1). Brown's how-to guide, *Byte-sized Television: Create Your Own TV Series for the Internet* (2011), appears to assume the online component of web series begins and ends with its distribution method. Although acknowledging differences in episode length and audience engagement, and referencing some web series in the first two chapters, the guide otherwise charts a course through developing a traditional television series, using examples of the same.

Pyle likewise subsumes television into his definition, but not because of its seriality, which he suggests has evolved separately. 'Web television' he writes, is 'Original television content produced for broadcast via the Internet. Part of this recently emerging medium are web series, a series of videos often in episodic form' (Pyle 2014, xvi).

Williams has a different view, and disputes the use of the term web television:

'...what is 'television' if it is not being watched on a TV? These new online programmes are broken into episodes and feel relatively like abbreviated versions of traditional television shows. However, many of them feature subject matter, use production techniques, and are uniquely structured in ways that differ greatly from their TV equivalents. Watching 'web television' is a very different viewing experience than simply watching a TV show on your computer' (Williams 2012, 12).

Others believe the web series is still evolving into its medium. Liang acknowledges the potential of this sort of online content but believes it is not yet being fully realised, telling an interviewer:

'I think the web series is still trying to find its form; namely the modes of storytelling that can only be done in a web series. There's already been lots of innovation, but for example Flat3 is still a little like short episodic TV. I wonder if there's something we can be doing that can only be done in a web series?' (Liang 2013).

Pioneer One (2010) web series co-creator Josh Bernard has likewise said, 'I think there's an attitude that web content is a "less-than" form, and people limit their thinking' (Williams 2012, 66). By contrast, Williams elaborates that:

'Many web series find success because of how different they are from traditional TV shows. They can feature choppy editing and over-the-top acting, deal with topical subjects almost instantaneously, and are usually forgiven for mediocre production quality - aspects that usually are not acceptable in traditional media' (Williams 2012, 25-6).

This notion of low production value in web series is one that is disputed by other commentators, including Mike Jones who, in his web log, argues against assumptions that online content falls easily within the categories of 'short, comic, amateur and simple', and disputes hard distinctions made between computer and television screens (Jones 2011). Dee Majek agrees, noting:

“much of the discussion surrounding online video production is based on vague or weakly defined notions of ‘amateur’ and ‘professional.’ This amateur/professional dichotomy tends to hinge on the unfortunate assumption that content produced for online viewing is by nature ‘amateur,’ because ‘professional’ content is produced for the television set and movie theatre” (Majek 2012, 2).

These assumptions are unfounded according to Marseille Web Fest founder and president Jean Michel Albert who points out that ‘a web series has much more of a chance to be seen by [an international audience] than a classic TV series. The writers will tend to act as real professionals as the critique is more cutting on social networks’ (Williams 2012, 17). Interestingly, for our purposes, Albert has thus drawn a direct line between, on the one hand, the ways in which online audiences might engage with content differently (and more directly) than their television-watching counterparts and, on the other, practices of script development for web series writers.

As previously mentioned, a discussion of web series must necessarily acknowledge the scope of web productions, which might range from ‘a one-person show all done with selfies’ (Pyle 2014, 93) to big budget productions funded by the likes of, for instance, Screen Australia Multiplatform Drama program funding, where ‘applications may be for any amount up to \$500,000 per project’ for ‘a fiction storytelling project intended for public access on a screen-based device’ (Screen Australia 2015). As Elliot Grove puts it, ‘Everyone want in: the hedge funds, the studios, the television networks and the websites themselves’ (Grove 2009, 117).

Such a discussion must also incorporate online platforms such as Netflix, which are, by definition, distributors of web series.

To use Netflix, then, as an example, we might be tempted to compare the shows delivered by this streaming service to those broadcast on network television, in that the creators are still commissioned to deliver a certain number of episodes of a pre-determined length, albeit a length not bound by commercial breaks. By implication, this might suggest their script development practices likely remain aligned with the traditional processes discussed later. However, there is some evidence to suggest that, in this regard, Netflix shows might have more in common with other types of online content, such as the sorts of independent web series previously mentioned.

Marta Kauffman, co-creator of NBC’s enormously successful series *Friends* (1994-2004) suggests some sort of departure from previous experiences of script development in the process of creating *Grace and Frankie* (2015) for Netflix. She says, ‘Going straight to 13 episodes allowed us to conceive this as a series, not just as a pilot. This is the place to be, because we don’t have to worry about development hell’ (de Moraes 2015). Moreover both Kauffmann and the creator of Netflix’s original series *House of Cards* (2013-) Beau Willimon, have spoken in interviews about Netflix’s reluctance-slash-refusal to release viewership data and demographics, and how this is liberating from a development point of view. Willimon has said:

‘I have friends who run shows at networks and are having those ratings pour in each week and getting a lot of this data and feeling a great deal of pressure because of it. I don’t envy that in the least think it’s amazing that they’re able to keep their creative integrity despite all of that information” (Travers 2014).

However, irrespective of the differences and similarities we might draw between the different sorts of online content that may be included in the category ‘web series’, the sorts of shows inspiring the optimism around subversive script development practices that this paper assumes are those described by scholar Aymar Jean Christian, ‘Short form and low budget [...] not quite

television but is still filmed and episodic' (Christian 2011, 1.5).

This paper proposes that webisodes designed to be watched on devices of many sizes have somehow brought with them the same ambivalence to standardised durations' because (as will later be discussed) it is not necessarily the brevity of these shows that challenges some aspects of traditional script development. Rather, it is accepted by creators and consumers alike, that webisodes are generally of no fixed length. With the screenwriting models, upon which script development practices are built, usually having a formula driven approach to duration—right down to, say, the ideal page number for an inciting incident—there may be an interesting connection.

Script Development

A comprehensive overview of script development across different screenwriting practices is beyond this discussion and, indeed, this paper is (in part) hopeful of raising questions and prompting discussion around the different, sometimes conflicting and even nebulous notions of the concept.

Certainly the practices of 'story development' and 'script development' are often used synonymously or, at least, conflated by the latter term. The widespread use of the word 'development' should be understood not as a mere shortening of the phrase 'script development', but rather as an overarching term collating the various processes deemed necessary to bring a particular script or idea to the screen—a practical understanding that might vary significantly between networks, studios, collaborations and individual practitioners. Often notions of development are tied up with funding imperatives, as suggested by this definition from Peter Bloore (constructed for independent film development but useful for our purposes nonetheless):

Screenplay development is the creative and industrial collaborative process in which a story idea (either an original idea or an adaptation of an existing idea, such as a play, novel, or real life event) is turned into a 'script' and is then repeatedly rewritten to reach a stage when it is attractive to a suitable director, actors and relevant film production funders; so that enough money can be raised to get the film made (Bloore 2012, 9).

From the perspective of screenwriting practice, script development might include the various preparatory processes of bringing an idea to the page (creating memorable, believable characters, building a world, and so on); it no doubt includes the writing and rewriting of drafts and, in most professional instances, the incorporation, by the screenwriter, of ideas, notes and changes from those in various executive or production roles. But, depending on the circumstances by which the screenwriter comes to the script (for example, independently; optioned or by commission) and the procedures that follow in bringing the script to the screen (that is to say, how the script might continue to change in the production process), it can be difficult to define where script development begins and ends.

This paper suggests that the rise of the web series further blurs those boundaries (for reasons both touched upon in the previous section and to be later explored), perhaps usefully complicating erstwhile unproblematised practices of script development in mainstream screen production; practices that might be historically ingrained. Bridget Conor's research into screenwriting in the context of creative labour traces the separation of writers and directors in Hollywood studio structures. She notes that by the 1930s:

‘...industrial practices inherited from Hollywood were “rationalizing” the dominance of the director as the principal author of a film. The theme of separation of conception from execution comes to serve as an intelligible device, ensuring a wrenching historical account of the newly minted screenwriter as almost immediately alienated from her/his own labour’ (Conor 2013, 44).

Contemporary script development processes might, for example, involve an excess of collaborators, a production hierarchy that perhaps excludes or marginalises the screenwriter, and conflicting agendas for the outcome. As Yvonne Grace notes:

‘...there is a reason why the phrase “development hell” is often heard in television drama circles. It is hell to wait, to not be in control of what happens to [...] this entity that you really believe in; it’s got a great storyline and you are proud of the characters. But it’s not your call anymore. It’s theirs’ (Grace 2014, 76).

This might seem in contradiction to received wisdom suggesting that since ‘the ascendancy of the all-powerful writer-showrunner’ (Martin 2013, 8) even more credence has been given to the apparent ‘truism that “in TV, the writer is king,” accustomed to power and influence unheard of in the director-dominated film industry’ (Martin 2013, 8). However, as screenwriter Eric Haywood reminds us, ‘when they say, “TV is a writer’s medium,” what they really mean is, “TV is the head writer’s medium”’ (Haywood 2014) and, moreover, outside of the US, being the creator of a television series is no guarantee of becoming a writer-producer. In any case, if you are a screenwriter and your concept is optioned for television, ‘from now on, you are under contract to the company to develop your idea in collaboration with the development executive as they essentially see fit’ (Grace 2014, 75). Moreover, interviewing contemporary writers working in a variety of media, Conor likewise notes the ubiquity of ‘professional horror stories’ around development, mainly centred around issues of multiplicity around authorship, rewrites and collaborators (Conor 2013, 52-5).

I have written elsewhere of screenwriters turned directors, specifically those for whom this recourse seemed the only way to avoid the disappointing disconnect between their screenplay and the resulting film or broadcast (Taylor 2014, 3). Marsha McCreadie’s interviews have likewise documented such a trend, for example, screenwriter Robin Swicord (Little Women 1994, Matilda 1996, Practical Magic 1998), turned producer-director ‘in order to keep control over a project, maintain the vision she has for her films, and be happy with the final product’ (McCreadie 2006, 11).

Less prevalent than accounts of screenwriters expanding their roles (of which there are many more instances than those touched upon here) are reports of where developmental practices themselves have adjusted to perhaps incorporate the input and vision of all of the key participants. After all, few screenwriters would dispute that script development should be collaborative. As Bloore puts it:

‘Strictly speaking development can be done by a single writer working entirely on his (sic) own, but since it is an industrial process it is usually a collaborative team activity (involving maybe more than one writer and incorporating the feedback of a script editor, director and other stakeholders), and managed by a producer (and possibly a development executive) who is responsible for the money-raising element’ (Bloore 2012, 11).

Considering this industrial element to script development collaborations, it may then follow that scripts are developed according to models that are considered tried and true, resulting in processes unlikely to embrace whimsy or risk. As Margot Nash points out, ‘The pressure to follow a market-driven development process has led many aspiring screenwriters to embrace

the script rules and structural templates without question, rather than embrace a discovery driven uncertain process, in search of originality, story and meaning' (Nash 2014, 99). Perhaps we might consider that it is not only aspiring screenwriters falling prey to these apparently safe methodologies, but also those in development roles in studios and networks. The next section proposes that writers developing scripts for web series may be free of such agendas, and thus be engaged in more innovative practices of script development.

Developing scripts for web series

The appetite for online content is apparently immense, and web series tap into that audience. Williams cites a report that reveals '1.2 billion people worldwide watched over 200 billion online videos during the month of October 2011' (Williams 2012, 216). He notes also that as connections become faster, viewing increases and so do opportunities to share material online. Meanwhile production costs (at least in terms of the cameras and software needed to upload content) are decreasing (2012, 11) thus, I propose, reversing the conditions endured by independent filmmakers and broadcasters. And it is for these reasons, as writer and LAWebfest founder Michael Ajakwe has said, that, 'both the newbie and the veteran can create their own shows without permission from, or the approval of, traditional electronic media networks and studios which historically served as gatekeepers' (Liang 2013). This might be particularly significant for screenwriters whose practice stands to be liberated within this unrestricted medium. As Williams puts it, 'What better way to showcase your abilities as a writer [...] than creating a mini-TV show? Without the burden of reporting to any network executives, you have the ability to demonstrate your unique creative voice' (Williams 2012, 24).

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out the creative freedom that comes from working within an independently produced and distributed form. It is an element of web series development, however, that dominates the emerging discourse and, as will later be discussed, might make for diversity of content as well as diversity of practice. The specific factors that seem to be reiterated through accounts and analyses of web series (as pertains to script development) are audience, episode length and (as mentioned already) absence of production hierarchies. What might be useful is to make a sample comparison of the types of recommendation and instruction given in traditional screenwriting guides with those in the three web series guides referenced in this paper (i.e. Brown 2011, Pyle 2014, Williams 2012).

Screenwriting models, in the traditional sense, are all about producing a script, whereby the web series guides assume delivery of the finished webisodes. While this may seem an obvious distinction, it does have a subtle implication for script development in that the screenwriting practice in web series guides is automatically included as a part of the whole. The separation of the writer (and screenplay) from production is not only implied in the traditional guides (as the book, and process taught within, usually finish with the final script), it is oftentimes explicitly stated with closing chapters on how to sell the resulting screenplay to those who will execute it, perhaps alongside strategies for negotiating notes and rewrites and/or advice and urgings around 'letting go'. Much has been written on debates about whether a screenplay is a valid object in itself or merely a means to an end, but what I am interested in here are the contrasting recommended approaches to screenwriting in the web series guides.

Williams discourages risk aversion, with many variations on statements like this one, 'without any executives to report to, you have the opportunity to be as creative as you like [...] Be outrageous. Be bold' (Williams 2012, 20). This is opposed to, for example, the advice from Goldberg and Rabkin in their book, *Successful Television Writing*, 'we've said before (and will say again and again), every television series is a business, you also have to understand how the realities of production and the demands of the network shape the stories you are going to tell' (Goldberg and Rabkin 2003, 14). Being free of these realities and demands makes

for bolder storytelling, according to *Anyone but Me* creator Susan Miller who lists among the many benefits of making a web series, ‘Being at the beginning of something new—risky as that is—where the work isn’t driven by the marketplace or inhibited by conventional thinking. Having a voice which can’t be diminished by consensus’ (Williams 2012, 179). Her co-creator Tina Cesa Ward agrees, ‘you have freedom creatively, which helps to keep the intention of the story and the point of view of the scenes firm and intact’ (Williams 2012, 179). Kerrigan likewise believes her work benefits from being free of intervention:

‘The glory of self-producing on the web is that you don’t have to answer to anyone but yourself and your collaborators. We didn’t have to trot into any meetings with executives to sell the idea, justify casting choices, or do rewrites based on network notes. You have the freedom to stick to your pure, unadulterated vision of the project’ (Kerrigan 2015).

As touched upon previously, episode length is perhaps one of the most subversive elements of the web series, with its refusal to standardise both within the form and within individual series themselves. This has a significant impact on script development processes, which in commercial television production, for example, are hinged upon arcs both serial and episodic to develop story and character and episode durations (and act durations, between commercial breaks) dictating the turning points and story peaks that drive the structure and tone of the scripts. Goldberg and Rabkin insist that ‘all TV dramas are exactly the same’ (Goldberg and Rabkin 2003, 19) and devote a short chapter to laying out the four-act structure (2003, 19-21). This is because, as they remind us, ‘An episode is a product made every week in a specified number of days for a certain price and delivered at a guaranteed running time on an inflexible deadline’ (2003, 7). Interestingly Brown, who later recommends quite traditional screenwriting methods for developing a web series, celebrates the fact that “Audiences can now watch what they want, when they want, which, in turn means that shows no longer have to be packaged in 30- or 60-minute instalments” (Brown 2011, p. 2). He describes the phenomenon as:

‘...a revolution that has fed on itself [...] Maybe a show is two minutes and thirty-seven seconds long one time, maybe it runs six minutes and forty-one seconds the next. Each episode can be however long it deserves to be’ (Brown 2011, 2).

Pyle likewise notes, ‘You have strict format guidelines for traditional television (commercial breaks, 30- or 60-minute time slots, etc.) and still some guidelines or expectations from traditional movie formats. But on the Internet there are no rules’ (Pyle 2014, 16). President of the International Academy of Web Television, and *Super Knocked Up* (2012-) writer and creator Jeff Burns, agrees:

‘From a storytelling aspect, it’s incredibly freeing to be able to make however [many] episodes I feel is right for a season and make each episode however long I think it should be. I can really tell the story the way I feel is best for the characters and the audience’ (Norris 2014).

Williams likewise advises, ‘You are under no obligations to stretch your episode’s length in order to fill time, so you have the freedom to tell the best story you can in the perfect amount of time’ (Williams 2012, 45).

This culture of development (unique perhaps to web series) that is ambivalent to regulatory durations also raises interesting questions as to what constitutes a script. For example, is there a minimum of content as to what can be considered ‘developed’? What if a web series is comprised of webisodes that are variations on one joke? This is something that *Script Cops* creator Scott Rice has put some thought into. ‘The web series I chose to make was less story-driven and more sketch comedy (repetition/variation of a joke), which was new to me. Rather than the gag being a part of the story, the gag became the story’ (Williams

2012, 166). Conventional ideas of what might constitute ‘story’ is arguably further troubled by shows such as *Artistically Challenged* (2014-) which, due to the constraints of being distributed by Instagram, has episodes of no longer than fifteen seconds. In keeping with those previously mentioned discovery driven processes, co-creator Michael Delmara said in an interview that, ‘We had no idea if it would actually work, so we kept it in the mindset of a fun experiment’ (Colosimo 2015). At the same time, he does not suggest its development lacked rigour, revealing, ‘We wanted every episode to feel complete, so it took a lot of writing and specificity to get to a place where we felt it all worked’ (Colosimo 2015). This challenge to the notion of story, that for television should consist of ‘multiple layers and many beats’ (Grace 2014, 38) is but one of the ways in which web series might be turning script development on its head. Another is the impact of audience engagement.

Web series - script developing in conjunction with their online audiences

In her screenwriting guide, Grace contends that while ‘Storytelling is at the root of everything we do [...] in television, so is commercialism [...] writing for the television can be compared [...] to making a product—making stuff—within an industrial setting’ (Grace 2014, 30). Likewise Goldberg and Rabkin remind us that, ‘A television series is a business [...]. There is a customer, the television network, that expects the product it is paying for to satisfy its needs and desires’ (Goldberg and Rabkin 2003, 7).

While guides such as these outline the realities of keeping the market in mind, Williams again encourages web series creators to take an opposing view:

‘Do not develop an idea that you do not particularly care about just because you feel it might have marketing potential. If there is one thing internet users do well (and seem to take pleasure in), it is sniffing out phonies. The best thing to engage an audience is to speak to them as a peer about a common interest’ (Williams 2012, 34).

In developing the web series *The Real Girl’s Guide to Everything Else*, writer Carmen Elena Mitchell notes:

‘Guys in the industry, they think about the market first and the content secondly...We kind of went the opposite way, which I think made our series really successful, because we focused on story, and we focused on interesting characters and we focused on going beyond traditional demographics’ (Christian 2011, 4.6).

Transcending those traditional demographics is something that lends web series a greater diversity of content and characters, as shall be later discussed. But what I want to draw attention to here is that while it might appear from these observations that scripts for web series are developed with an ambivalence to notions of ‘the market’, I propose that what are actually being avoided are projections—or second-guessing—of the same, given the prevalence of commentary suggesting that web series are directly influenced by their own markets by plugging straight into the source. As founder of CJP Digital Media, Wilson Cleveland puts it, “The beauty of creating for the web is that you can produce a series centred around your interests, whereas, on TV, the goal is to make shows as broadly appealing as possible” (Williams 2012, 147).

From a script development perspective, what is of significance here is that ‘More than any other medium, web series allows content creators to receive feedback from, and interact with, their viewers almost instantaneously’(Williams 2012, 143). When asked if he writes all the episodes for a season at once, creator, writer and star of the award winning web series *Jack In a Box* (2009-) Michael Cyril Creighton insists, ‘No, not at all. I would write as many as I could and then build from there. I also like to

know what the audience reaction is to new characters, and then build from there' (Williams 2012, 30). Pioneer One co-creator Bracey Smith agrees:

'The web is the world's greatest test bed for ideas. Instead of spending a lot of time and a lot of money refining an idea that may or may not work, you can just try it out and make adjustments along the way. And, as it grows, your audience will grow with it. So instead of having this refined piece with no audience, you'll have something that grew organically with fans proud to be a part of it' (Williams 2012, 67).

The drawback to this mode of development is that it can be at odds with the imperative to maintain momentum by delivering new episodes according to the appetite of that audience (or, it should be noted, those release strategies that involve launching entire seasons in one go, a practice employed by both platforms such as Netflix and independent producers). Of course, unlike television network situations, there is no commercial consequence to delaying delivery, and *Blood and Bone China* (2011-) creator and director Chris Stone reveals he posted new episodes 'when they were ready. I'd rather compromise on the release schedule than on quality' (Williams 2012, 54). He is torn, however, between the benefits of stock piling episodes in order to maintain a regular schedule, and delaying the production of new episodes so as to benefit from audience response:

'If I had to do this again, I might shoot seven or eight and finish those first before releasing any online. But it's still good to be producing while episodes are online, because people see them and might offer their services. You can tweak the episodes, too, based on feedback' (Williams 2012, 54).

Bernhard expresses a similar dilemma, "Probably we should have shot half a season's worth of episodes before launching the series. Although you also learn a great deal when you put an episode out there and see the response before you make the next one" (Williams 2012, 68).

Thus we might consider the script development of web series as more akin to stand-up comedy or other types of live theatre, whereby content is shaped and honed according to audience response. However, in the case of web series, the feedback comes in the form of notes; the kinds of notes perhaps that come from studios or networks in the traditional sense, from those assuming the role of audience proxy.

Diversity - of content and practice

Though skewed towards film, Ian Christie's work on audiences, particularly his commitment to 'challeng[ing] any sense of undifferentiated "mass audience"' (Christie 2013, 16) may be useful to consider in this discussion, particularly his reports of studies revealing 'the role that films plays in shaping a sense of personal, and perhaps social, identity' (2013, 231). Cesa Ward believes:

'...that series with a niche or minority audience thrive online because, often, that audience is not being served by traditional media. The web is a great place for those that feel like they're stuck on the outside as an audience to find stories about them. And to finally feel included' (Williams 2012, 180).

Given what we now know about how audiences might directly contribute to web series' script development, it perhaps makes sense that diversity of practice may influence diversity of content and vice versa. Mitchell laments that:

‘The movies that we see that are marketed towards women, they tend to be white, all this retail therapy: “you’re sad so you go out and buy shoes”. It’s just very consumer-driven. Story tends to be secondary. There are a lot of familiar plots that we see again and again’ (Christian 2011, 3.4).

Actor Nikki Brown (The Real Girls Guide to Everything Else) has said she ‘liked that Carmen [Elena Mitchell] wrote diverse characters where that wasn’t the focal point’ (Christian 2011, 3.6).

If it is true that, as Williams believes, ‘Web series have given voices to those left out of traditional entertainment and provided new opportunities for independent artists’ (Williams 2012, 12), then perhaps it follows that not only do new voices flourish, but so do practices and likewise diversity of representation.

Conclusion

Screenwriting practice and script development is often absent or, at least, rarely the main focus in the emerging literature and discourse around web series. Indeed, despite a growing and potentially subversive culture of script development among those creating web series, some early contributions to the web series how-to market appear to endorse dominant screenwriting methods and models, if they address the writing aspect at all. But this paper proposes that the new methods of script development practised by web series creators can be considered a welcome challenge to those employed by the mainstream, and suggests these practices are in part legitimised by those works that attract significant numbers of hits, shares, fans and even get ‘picked up’ by those same mainstream, corporate institutions that would arguably be unlikely to risk such a free range approach to script development within their own commissions.

New York Television Festival founder Terence Gray believes:

‘...expensive set pieces and special effects mean nothing if it’s not rooted in character or strong voices [...] Of course, we’ve seen web series that are incredibly well-produced, shot and edited, but what stands out are the characters and the ability of the creator to tell a story’ (Williams 2012, 177).

This discussion proposes that strong voices and storytelling practices are robust within the form, despite (and even because of) their liberation from traditional models of script development. There would seem to even be an optimism around the inevitable and increasing participation of mainstream studios and networks, with Williams pointing out that ‘As established studios, television networks and large brands begin to produce more original web content, there will increasingly be more opportunities for filmmakers with experience in the space’ (Williams 2012, 24), filmmakers that have also, perhaps, proved that innovations in script development make for diverse, interesting content.

The next step for this research is to investigate whether there is any evidence to suggest these new script development practices are infiltrating the mainstream, whether via the opportunities Williams anticipates, or through the migration of web series to more traditional platforms.

Bloore makes a case for increased participation by screenwriters in the production processes, but suggests this would involve a cultural shift (Bloore 2013, 269).

It is not this paper’s intention to disparage collaborative practice; but rather to point out that the histories and accounts of

disappointing (and, at times, demoralising) processes and outcomes experienced by screenwriters—and the recourses taken to avoid those instances, resulting in a shift or change of role—might suggest that this is an area worth interrogating. Development, one might say, could use some development and it is perhaps writers of web series that might show us the way.

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