

Hollywood adds money, talent to made-for-Web shows

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In this photo taken on Monday, Oct. 5, 2009, actors Mark Gantt, left, and co-star Stana Katic, right, star in a new web movie series "The Bannen Way," during its production in downtown Los Angeles. Major movie studios are now getting behind such Internet productions, giving them a lift in budgets and quality _ a far cry from the shaky camerawork and dubious special effects prevalent when Web video became a new phenomenon a few years ago. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

(AP) -- Web sites that buy original video clips often pay so little that "The Bannen Way," a flashy crime thriller debuting online, looked destined to be made poorly if it could be made at all.

Yet budding filmmakers Jesse Warren and Mark Gantt managed to hire 40-odd staff, including a boom operator, camerapeople - yes, more than one - and even production assistants on hand to offer sunscreen and

sandwiches. And the production had actors familiar to some TV and movie audiences, including Michael Ironside, Robert Forster and Vanessa Marcil.

The secret to their success? Treat the Internet run like a TV or movie release, which often loses money on its on-screen debut, but can make healthy profits when issued on DVD or Blu-ray and later sold for reruns on cable or overseas.

With that in mind, major movie studios are now getting behind such productions, giving them a lift in budgets and quality - a far cry from the shaky camerawork and dubious special effects prevalent when [Web](#) video became a new phenomenon a few years ago.

For Warren and Gantt, who wrapped up shooting in October, a snazzy trailer they produced helped snag [Sony Pictures](#) Television as a partner.

"We came up with this idea," said Warren, 31. "There's no limit to how many episodes there can be in a Web series. So why don't we design it as a (feature-length movie) so we can sell it as a DVD feature at the end?"

Sony executives, it turns out, had the same idea.

The studio picked up the project in April and gave it a budget of around \$1 million. That's nowhere near the \$30 million-plus budgets of many [Hollywood](#) movies, but more than the producers were told they could sell it for. Web sites typically pay up to \$5,000 for a short clip of original video; with 16 episodes, other Web sites might have paid around \$100,000 for "The Bannen Way."

"This money buys more lights and more production value," said Gantt, 40.

Warren appeared to bask in the fullness of his crew: "We can afford extras rather than having our friends come in."

One quirk of the Web is that each episode must have a cliffhanger to keep online viewers coming back. In one scene, the audience learns for the first time that Neal Bannen, the title character, had been working for his mob boss uncle. Bannen's father is the chief of police, and viewers realize the son is about to be entangled in a cops-and-robbers struggle between father and uncle.

"It moves pretty well," Warren says, snapping his fingers. "We had breaks that would naturally lend itself to the Web."

Sony Pictures Television hopes the release will gain buzz and a few advertising dollars when it begins to debut in increments in January on the Sony-owned Crackle.com, a site targeted at males aged 18-34. Then, it will stop running for free online and get repackaged for sale to TV outlets, on iTunes and elsewhere.

Editing finished this month on the feature-length project. There's no substantial difference between the whole or spliced versions - just that the Web version has episodic breaks at certain climaxes.

Although the main goal is to drive traffic to Crackle.com, which Sony Corp. acquired when it was called Grouper for nearly \$60 million in 2006, made-for-Web productions are expected to make a profit by themselves.

Thus, studios scrutinize projects before approving them and committing funding - green-lighting in industry speak. In this case, studio input during the production was also part of the process.

"We go through a very similar green-light process as we would for any

piece of content in the studio," said Eric Berger, senior vice president of digital networks for [Sony](#) Pictures Television, which is planning to make 15 Web productions annually. "How and why we make them and where we will make money is conceived with every project."

Paramount Pictures's digital arm is also backing made-for-Web productions that can make additional money in other formats. Paramount spent \$1 million to \$3 million making a horror movie, "Circle of Ei8ht," which began showing on MySpace in installments in October in an initial run through Dec. 8. The series had generated nearly 5 million views online - which would rank it among the most-watched shows if it were on cable TV.

To help pay for production, Viacom Inc.'s Paramount lined up a key product-integration deal with PepsiCo Inc.'s Mountain Dew and sold rental and on-demand rights for one month exclusively to Blockbuster Inc. MySpace, which is owned by News Corp., kicked in marketing support.

"I don't think there's been a more expensive piece of content made for the Web," said Thomas Lesinski, president of Paramount Digital Entertainment, which has two other Web projects in the works.

He added that hiring professional talent and crew and paying for an original score will help sell "Circle of Ei8ht" when it makes it onto other platforms such as iTunes, DVD and video-on-demand.

"The stuff that we're creating could easily play on television," he said.

Brady Brim-DeForest, the co-founder of research and news site Tubefilter.tv, calls the renewed activity "the second coming of original programming online."

He cited the recent success of "Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog," which "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" creator Joss Whedon made during the writers strike last year.

He estimates "Dr. Horrible" cost \$220,000 to make but brought in about \$2.4 million within a year, after sharing advertising revenue on Hulu.com and selling the movie and soundtrack on iTunes, as well as DVDs and merchandise. It went on to win an Emmy.

Internet shows have also made the transition to television. After a one-episode flirtation on NBC, "quarterlife" found a home on the NBC Universal-owned Bravo network last year. Sci-fi Web series "Sanctuary" made it on Syfy, and "Secret Girlfriend" ran on Comedy Central this fall.

Yet for every Web series that is made with a modest budget and high-profile directors such as "The O.C." creator Josh Schwartz - who made "Rockville CA" for The WB's site - there are about 20 made independently on a shoestring, Brim-DeForest said.

"What's so spectacular is they are all drawing an audience, finding a niche," he said. "That's the power of the Internet as a distribution medium. It's very compelling."

In October, Michael Eisner's Web production startup Vuguru got a multimillion-dollar capital injection from a unit of Canada's Rogers Communications Inc. in a deal that gives Rogers the right to use Vuguru content on television, the Web or even its rental video stores in Canada.

Vuguru had already made several sales internationally. Its "Prom Queen" hit from 2007 was translated, recast and reshot for the Web in Japan. A dubbed version ran on cable TV in France and it ran as-is on Yahoo's Australian site.

Rogers' minority investment will ensure Vuguru can ramp up its production to some 15 projects a year, compared with a half dozen over the last two years combined, said Andy Redman, chief operating officer of The Tornante Company LLC, which owns a majority of Vuguru. The plan is to boost the staff to 30 in a few years, up from two people who currently work on Web projects full-time, he said.

Redman compared the growth of the new platform to cable television in the 1980s, when networks like ESPN, CNN and MTV were just getting going, reaching focused audiences at first and then growing.

Today, cable networks like AMC put on some of the most critically acclaimed series on TV, such as its Emmy-winning "Mad Men," and have largely cast off their reputation as being a receptacle for reruns or shows that failed on broadcast TV.

"It was the platform to be joked about," he said. "Five years later, they've realized this whole new medium passed me by."

On the Net:

The Bannen Way: <http://bit.ly/8pI4Ky>

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog: <http://bit.ly/8D6Wjm>

Rockville CA: <http://bit.ly/6HRmCk>

Vuguru: <http://bit.ly/7IE3Ee>

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