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INTERNET FREEDOM

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Wired

Ruth Livier Sings
the Frontier Electric

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How the Web Is Won

How hard can it be to create a web series? All you have to do is come up with a good idea, write a bunch of scripts, find a cast and crew who will work for food, cook the food, make the sets, create the costumes, shoot the episodes, edit the episodes, build a website, post the shows online, and then dance a magical jig to the Internet gods in hopes that somebody somewhere will watch what you post and tell a few thousand other folk to watch it as well. And even better, you get to pay out of your own pocket for the chance to do all this. What could possibly go wrong?

That's the great and terrible truth about New Media: It's frontier territory. A few intrepid souls stake a claim, with no idea what will come of it, but the freedom is so intoxicating, the possibilities so liberating, it's worth the struggle. For such pioneers, the rewards are greater than financial success. And for one, Ruth Livier, an unexpected bonus was becoming the first person to join the WGA solely from writing a self-financed web series.

Her journey, and the experiences of three other Internet storytellers, might serve as either inspiration or cautionary tale, depending on your view of the horizon.





Pioneers of New Media share trail secrets.

Go Web, Young Woman

Livier didn't have groundbreaking plans when she first began writing her series, *Ylse*. Born in Guadalajara, Mexico, raised there and in California, she's been a working actress since age 15. Upon approaching 30, she knew it was only a matter of time before acting jobs became less plentiful. Instead of getting bitter, she got busier. Livier had always wanted to try writing, so after three years on Showtime's *Resurrection Blvd.*, she applied her downtime to learning the craft.

"I went to Writers Bootcamp, UCLA extension courses, and Robert McKee seminars and made my rounds, trying to absorb all of it," she says while ensconced in a booth at Dupar's at the Farmers Market.

Her first intention was to write a television pilot. The script's star, *Ylse*, would be an actress who hosts a tiny cable television

Ruth Livier created Ylse first as a TV pilot but soon realized that her show about a not-so-politically correct Latina journalist didn't stand a chance on network TV. Ylse's second season premiered September 2009 with 3,000 unique views.

talk show. (As explained slyly on the show, Ylse is pronounced *Yl* like illegal, and *Se* like sexy.) Similar to her creator, Ylse is Mexican-American, and both sides of that cultural equation are represented on the series. Instead of writing in stereotypes, Livier wrote in Spanglish. Upon finishing the pilot script, she knew it didn't stand much of a chance getting on a network. So she didn't bother dancing the pitch-and-pilot shuffle.

Having previously assisted some friends by working as a line producer on their web series (*Sub*)*Urban Dating* and after starring on another one, *Haunting Passions*, it wasn't much of a leap for her to reimagine *Ylse* for the Internet.

In going back to rewrite the pilot, she realized the web means never having to say, "Standards & Practices." She didn't have to stay network safe anymore. She could be as outrageous, nay sacrilegious, as she wished. In the series, Ylse dreams of putting on a show worthy of her hero, Oprah. So when she lands a priest as a guest, she's dying to ask him about the church's settlement with victims of molestation, instead of the usual puff-pastry questions her producer attempts to force on her. Not something you can see getting past the network censors on, say, ABC primetime. Nor is the first line of the first episode possible on network (spoken by Ylse in voiceover): "Fuck NAFTA."

Rewriting done, Livier turned to her friends in the business for help. "We call ourselves slashers," she says. "We're all actors-*slash*-directors, writers-*slash*-producers, writers-*slash*-directors." Stephanie Wiand and Joe Camareno, her *Passions* colleagues, signed up to produce the web series alongside Livier, with Camareno also directing. Their skeleton crew included a cinematographer and second-camera-*slash*-editor out of film school, up on au courant technology and hungry for the work. As executive producer, Livier found herself doing everything from steaming costumes to making coffee.

The first season's six episodes ranged from five to eight minutes; now in her second season, Livier sticks with six minutes—just enough to mold a story arc and hook the viewer into coming back. "The length allows it to move really well and tells the

story, and it's still easy for the web audience to sit down and watch it," explains Livier, who also *slash*-stars as Ylse.

The Web (Stories) They Weave

Livier's *Ylse* development story seems to be typical fare for a web series creator. Felicia Day, creator of the popular web series *The Guild*, about an endearing group of obsessive Internet gamers, learned how to manufacture a DVD of the show's first season, then packaged them in her home. She and her producer Kim Evey then filled out 600 customs forms for international orders before shipping their web series DVDs overseas.

Like Livier, Day is an actress who started out writing a pilot for conventional TV. What proved too much of a niche audience for television has become a phenomenon on the web since it started airing in 2007. The award-winning show has been seen by some 25 million viewers. "I feel like the approach to New Media has to be the opposite of mainstream," with its emphasis on the broadest possible appeal, Day says. "To get through all the doors on the Internet, the thousands of channels that people can go to every day, you have to be able to build out from somewhere. I still think that building out from a niche is the way to launch content like this on the web."

Andrew Miller, creator of *Imaginary Bitches*, which first aired in 2008, agrees wholeheartedly. "I personally never would do a show without a niche built-in audience," he says, calling Day's approach genius. "There's no better example than *The Guild*. If it never goes outside of that audience, it'll still have plenty of viewers [because] it's so specific."

Miller's *Bitches* tapped into a base almost as fervent as gamers: soap opera audiences. Those fans immediately picked up on the show to watch Miller's wife, Emmy-winning actress Eden Riegel (*All My Children*), star as a sweet single woman whose friends have all coupled up. On one particularly lonely day, she imagines friends who aren't too busy to talk to her. Unfortunately, the two women she conjures turn out to be bitches. We don't see or hear them, but Miller's character does, and her interactions with them usually turn hilariously askew. Miller notes that if the show had been on television, "you'd have to see them. But it's the Internet—I can do whatever the hell I want."

Miller's project was inspired by the WGA. (No, not the bitchy part.) "I was marching in circles during the strike, chanting about New Media rights, and had no clue what that even meant," recalls the co-writer (with Andrew Lowery) of the feature films *Boys and Girls* and *Nothing*. So Miller would come home from a hard morning of walking the picket lines, take a nap, and then surf the net. "I started looking at web shows, and I was like, *I could totally do this*."

Unlike a film or television show, here was an entertainment world that was immediately accessible—and quick with validation.

"I said to the people in my picket line," Miller remembers, "If anyone wants to write an episode, I promise you it's going to be finished in a month. There's no long development

process, you can come to the set. All the things we're striking about at the time, none of that applies here. You're part of the process, you're invited to all the same parties, you have full access.' It has to be fun."

Also, Miller was able to call on a wealth of in-law talent. In addition to his wife, there's his sister-in-law Tatiana Riegel, editor of *Lars and the Real Girl* and co-editor of *There Will Be Blood*, who edited the web episodes. "She was with me all day and then would go and do notes with Steven Spielberg because she did the pilot of *The United States of Tara*." Another sister-in-law professional, Quyen Tran, became the cinematographer, and her husband Sam Riegel co-wrote an episode.

Although he's clearly a big web series cheerleader, Miller doesn't hesitate to emphasize the downside. "If you're doing it to make money, don't do it," he says. "If you're doing it because you're sick of people saying 'no' all the time, and you don't want people rewriting your stuff, and you don't want to develop the life out of a project, then yes."

The show was nominated for a daytime Emmy this year (in the New Approaches in Daytime Entertainment category), and although it didn't win, it's been a pretty sweet ride so far. "There's nothing I've done in my young career that has been more creatively satisfying than this," says Miller. "In the olden days—like, two years ago—people would have to write plays or something [as an unfettered creative outlet]. Who the hell wants to do that? The first episode we aired, 150,000 people saw it that weekend. How do you get anything better than this? It's so instant, it has thrills the likes of which you can't experience in any other aspect of the industry."

Riding the Internet Rails

Doug Cheney agrees with Miller. He and his partners started the company Big Fantastic because they wanted to get their work distributed and were tired of the short-film route. "It's [shorts] still a great way to go, but we wanted to reach a larger audience," explains writer-director Cheney.

Their first show was 2006's thriller *Sam Has 7 Friends*. This was before the term *web series* was coined; back then they were called podcasts. *Sam* landed them representation at UTA's newly formed online division. In short order, Michael Eisner and his New Media studio Vuguru funded their next project *Prom Queen*, a mystery set during prom season. Turns out Eisner was already a *Sam* fan. "Our goal was to get anybody to watch our show and to get a reaction from an audience," Cheney says. "We had no idea that among our audience would be the likes of Michael Eisner. That kind of blew us away. It all happened very fast after that."

Although Big Fantastic certainly had fantastic timing, they also had followed some specific principles that Cheney believes helped get them attention and that all-important traction. For starters, their shows were created specifically for the Internet, and weren't films or TV projects cut to size. For *Sam*, they created 80 episodes of about 90 seconds each, put



Felicia Day (above, as *Codex* on the set of *The Guild*) manufactured DVDs of the show's first season, filling 600 overseas orders.

up every weekday. "I noticed there was a bond with the audience that formed if you kept it consistent," Cheney says. "It's the closest thing you can get to appointment viewing." The similarly structured *Prom Queen* received 20 million views in its initial run.

And the writers were getting email feedback daily, which influenced their work. "It was like having a test screening every day," Cheney says. "We noticed what the audience was reacting to, what they were talking about, and very often it wasn't what we expected. They would pick up on some open-ended question in the middle of the episode, not necessarily our cliffhanger."

Another element of the group's success was focusing on an underserved demographic. At the time, the partners noticed that there wasn't much online content geared toward young women. Nor was there much emphasis on drama in the early web series days. Their shows aimed to remedy that. "I get excited about the idea of serving audiences that aren't currently being served," Cheney says. "If you look at *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, one of the things that makes it so great, beyond Joss and Neil Patrick Harris and all that, is that nobody was ever going to make a sci-fi musical on television. And there you go. That's a big part of the success of that show."

He and partners Chris McCaleb, Ryan Wise, and Chris Hampel have starting working on the second season of *Prom Queen*, also funded by Vuguru. They're kicking the episodes up to five minutes each this time around. The shooting schedule is set up according to location, so sometimes all four directors show up to direct their episodes on the same day, "which sort of makes us like a pack of wolves," Cheney admits. "We might be the world's only part-time directors."

Getting Guided

Ruth Livier doesn't have the luxury of a real budget, but like *Big Fantastic*, her season's shooting schedule proceeds according to location in order to save time and money. Her first season of six episodes was shot in two-and-a-half days. Within two hours of posting the first episode in August 2008, "a journalist from Texas had already written up a story and distributed it on the web," she recalls. Word of mouth about the Latina-starring show began in Texas, then proceeded to Miami and New York. Cinedulce and Generation ñ, Internet venues that offer Latino-generated content, host the show on their sites.

Ylse was a SAG show from the start, a rarity among web series. "I'm a union actress, and I believe in what that means," Livier says emphatically. When the second season began, she wanted to hire Elizabeth Peña to direct an episode. To use a DGA director, however, "I had to do it under the DGA, so why not go do it with the WGA too?" So *Ylse* is a Guild show, and then some. "They were able to take all of my Season One-produced episodes and add them up to my Season Two episodes, and that's how I was able to have enough credits to become a WGA member," she exults, looking out Du-Par's restaurant windows at the WGA building. "So it was thanks to the friggin' web series. That was really unexpected." With her new membership, she can ask other Guild writers to participate, like Herbert Siguenza (*Culture Clash*), who co-wrote the episode that Peña directed.

Now the second season, with another six episodes, is up and running. The episodes air every other week, and in the week between she airs a sub-series, with two-minute episodes, created to keep the site humming. "It's a complementary storyline; we see the moments before and after the main series, but from different characters' points of view."

All web show mavens know they have to constantly feed the beast. "There are several hours a day that I just interact with fans, or maintain our social networking sites, or offer them content and perspective and inside glances," says Day. Unlike TV, "a web show is a living, breathing thing, and you can't think you're going to send it off into the air and then your job is done. It literally lives on the Internet. People are discovering it every single day, and you

Andrew Miller's Emmy-nominated web series *Imaginary Bitches* (left and above) premiered May 2008; its first season comprised of 13 five- to seven-minute webisodes.

4.

EDEN

It's so nice to be around people who remember what a bad date feels like.

JESSALYN

My pleasure. If single people aren't there for each other, who will be?

EDEN

I hear that. With all my friends suddenly in relationships, I went through a *brief* phase where I was so desperate, I made up imaginary friends to hang out with. I laugh at it now. Obviously.

She laughs, but Jessalyn is completely nonplussed.

JESSALYN

I get it.

EDEN

You do?

JESSALYN

Hell, I have sex with myself - it'd be rude not to talk to myself after. I talk to myself about what to wear, how I think a date went. So big deal, you put a face to it.

EDEN

And a name. Names.

JESSALYN

Why not? They were probably nicer than your real friends.

EDEN

(smiles)
Actually, they were pretty bitchy. But thanks.

JESSALYN

We're a persecuted minority. Out there in a relationship dominated world, fighting for respect. We're like the the Black Panthers.

EDEN

Okay... Sure.

JESSALYN

Now let's go screw some white guys. You're the guest, you choose.



somebody in a comfortable couch with a remote in their hand. Usually with someone who's watching a web series, they have their finger on the mouse button looking for a reason to click on the next million links that are in front of them...you have to constantly be giving them a reason not to click away."

If all that interaction isn't enough of a timesuck for the writers, there's always marketing. "What people underestimate is not the amount of time it takes to shoot and edit," says Miller. "It's the other time that kills you. Where you need the money and time is in promotion. When we did episodes, I would spend days and days and days emailing like crazy," to places like the *Gossip Girl* and *Sex and the City* fan pages, bugging them to link to his show. The work paid off; subsequent episodes average around 250,000 views.

Like *Ylse*, Miller's show is self-financed. And although he is raring to start work on a second season, he admits that he probably won't be able to do it if he can't secure funding. Fortunately, the show has attracted some old-media attention; he's been asked to develop it into a feature. (There's also a book in the offing and even an iPhone app.) As exciting a prospect as the film is, he doesn't plan to give up on the web work, "because it's so freeing and liberating and fun to do—I want the Internet to always be part of the property overall." So if a movie does materialize, he plans to siphon off some of the budget to fund the web series. (Don't tell anyone.)

have to be very engaged with your audience...they want to live in your world, in a sense, and make it a more rich experience than just passively watching a show."

Miller built the *Bitches* site, having never built a website before: "But I got into it. You have to like it because otherwise you'll blow your brains out. The issue I always came back to: I wish I could pay someone to do some of this stuff, but I don't have any money to pay them, so I might as well do it myself." During the show's run, he also sent out daily tweets as the *Bitches*. When he and Riegel went to Europe for a few weeks during the season to attend some weddings, those imaginary actresses went on strike and followed Riegel to Europe too. All this activity was recorded in vlogs uploaded to the site. After the show's Emmy nomination, NATAS asked Miller if he would shoot an episode at the event. (That helped him finagle tickets for all his actresses, real and imaginary; he couldn't afford them on a webster's budget.) The resulting show, which he calls *A Very Special Imaginary Bitches Emmy Special*, "speaks out to the rights of imaginary actors and imaginary equality"—and was online within a week.

Big Fantastic likewise creates a metaverse around their shows that includes character blogs, fake websites that can be hacked into, and all manner of clever interactivity. Cheney was always aware that the Internet viewer is fundamentally different "than

Love's Labors Last

Also self-financed, Day realized by the end of her first episode that she couldn't continue without help. So she posted a Paypal donation button on the site. "After that we were completely supported by fans to get us through one episode a month through episode 10. That's literally people donating a dollar or \$5." This year, she signed a deal with Microsoft to distribute the show on their Xbox platform exclusively for the run of her third season. Though she had received offers from a number of companies, Microsoft was the only one that agreed to let her keep her intellectual property rights.

Day, who also stars on the show, had initially hoped that it would lead to more acting work, "which absolutely has not happened. Or writing deals. But people aren't knocking down my door from the mainstream media companies." Then again, when she shows up at fan conventions, the lines are out the door to see her and her costars. "It's very divided, the New Media and the old media, and it continues to be, although I think those barriers are going down a little bit as companies see the advantage of having a loyal fan base and building up the experience for the viewer."

To this day, she has never spent a penny on marketing. As a gamer—her addiction to the online game *World of Warcraft* provided the idea for her series—she knew how to reach out

to her audience online. Her starring role on the Internet sci-fi musical sensation *Dr. Horrible* boosted the series' viewership, as did a recent promotional *Guild* music video that's already had 4 million hits. Xbox is exposing the show to millions of subscribers who can download it to their televisions. "The fact is that my show can be on the same footing on Xbox as Netflix professional movies, and buying an episode of *The Office* or *30 Rock* is huge for independent people. I hope that other people are inspired to do that after me too and do it better."

Day is still making a living from her day job as a commercial actress, but hopes this is the year that the show turns a profit, thanks to the recent release of a DVD compilation of seasons one and two. "It's definitely an emerging marketplace. You have to take a lot of risks and work for free for a really long time." She still works on the show from home, and each performer provides their own costumes. "You have to make sure it's your passion and that you're telling a story that you'd tell, even if nobody's paying you for it."

Livier has no doubts. "I couldn't sit around waiting for someone else to figure out my vision," she says of *Ylse*. And her vision is expanding. This season, her shows air in their original Spanglish and then subtitled versions in both English and Spanish will be posted. (The first season will likewise be revisited.) "There's this huge market, but I don't want to lose another audience that I might have access to who is curious

Doug Cheney (opposite page) caught Michael Eisner's attention with his 2006 web thriller *Sam Has 7 Friends*, which landed Cheney representation at UTA's newly formed online division. Soon after, Eisner's New Media studio Vuguru funded the next project, *Prom Queen* (right), a mystery set during prom season.

and who likes the show but doesn't want to lose the jokes." She wants her friends in Argentina and Mexico to be able to follow everything. After all, two of those three *W*s stand for *World Wide*. Livier says she was motivated to make the subtitled editions after noticing that *The Guild* was translated into Portuguese.

Day credits Dani, a viewer in Brazil, for that idea. "She's a huge superfan and coordinates all the people who volunteer to subtitle," she says of Dani. This season, Xbox is translating *Guild* into nine languages. "I don't think there's another

("PROM QUEEN EPISODE 1: THE LONG WALK" DOUGLAS CHENEY)

EXT. HOLLAND HOUSE - BACKYARD - DAWN

From OVERHEAD we see a girl's body among dirt and leaves. It's DANICA ASHBY (18), wearing panties and a camisole, face smudged with mud and grass, bare legs twisting into the morning light.

Her eyes open suddenly. Not dead, just disoriented. Sitting up, glancing around, she finds herself at the edge of the neighborhood, where dirt and brush meet manicured lawn. She has no idea how she got here.

EXT. HOLLAND HOUSE - BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

We follow her across the grass to a house in a modest SoCal neighborhood. The sliding glass door is ajar. She slips through undetected.

INT. HOLLAND HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Danica tiptoes through the quiet home, leaving faint mud prints on the floor as she goes, careful not to wake anyone.

INT. HOLLAND HOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

She darts into her bedroom, closing the door just as LAUREN HOLLAND (18), groggy and unaware, appears from an adjacent room and stumbles down the hall.

INT. HOLLAND HOUSE - DANICA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

She takes a deep breath. Safe now.

INT. HOLLAND HOUSE - DANICA'S BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Danica pulls a bottle of prescription pills from the medicine cabinet and quickly dumps a dose in her hand. A reflex that can only come with great repetition.

But today is different. Before she can shoot the pills back, Danica takes a long look in the mirror, studies her mud-covered face and dewy hair. This can't continue.

show that does that,” Day adds.

Livier doesn't have the viewing numbers that these other web creators have acquired, at least not yet. She notes that *Ylse*'s first season garnered about 25,000 hits, while the second season premiere had almost 3,000 unique views on her site.

Cheney believes that sounds just fine for now. “The best web series are ones that feel like they never would have gotten made as a TV show,” he says. “It doesn't sound as sexy to talk about smaller audiences, but a big part of what makes this work is redefining success. Smaller, more targeted audiences will be a big part of what makes web series work in the future, and it also happens to be the very thing that Big Media conglomerates aren't going to be very interested in. So I feel like

***Ylse* was a SAG show from the start, a rarity among web series. “I'm a union actress, and I believe in what that means,” Livier says emphatically. To use a preferred director, “I had to do it under the DGA, so why not do it with the WGA too?” So *Ylse* is an all-Guild web series. Imagine that!**



this is the way forward. The opportunity lies in knowing what your audience is.”

Depending on the scope of the idea, Cheney asserts that there's no reason not to start small, with whatever resources are available. “Team up with other people, if possible—it was a godsend that the four of us found each other because none of us could have done it on our own. Then just get it out there, and don't be afraid to wait and let the audience find the show. I don't think everybody has to go in with a brand attached.”

Although Livier has some Google ads running on her own website, there's been no money so far. “That's the next step: How do we monetize?” She won't reveal the show's costs but does admit that her initial budget of \$6,000 was quickly surpassed. “I know my accountant and a lot of people are like, ‘Don't do it, don't spend your money.’ But at some point you have to invest in yourself,” she insists. “To me this is going to friggin' college. You learn through the process.”

Livier's hoping to find sponsorship, but in the meantime, friends and colleagues don't seem to care about the money; they're lining up to work on the show. “In bridging the world of Latino talent from both sides of the border, I have Judy Reyes (*Scrubs*) playing my best friend this season, and Alma Delfina, a huge soap opera star in Mexico, plays my mom.”

She still can't believe her own mother ever let her move to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career at age 18, by herself and knowing nobody. Coming north from Escondido, “I had never been to L.A. I had been to Disneyland,” she says. “Sometimes it's good when you don't know, when you jump in and do it. Same thing with the web series: It's good that I don't know that I can't do it.” **WB**