

JOSS WHEDON, *DR. HORRIBLE* AND THE FUTURE OF WEB MEDIA? 1

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**Abstract**

In the 2007 Writers Guild of America strike, one of the areas in dispute was the question of residual payments for online material. On the picket line, *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon discussed new ways online media production could be financed. After the strike, Whedon self-funded a web media production, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-along Blog*. Whedon and his collaborators positioned *Dr. Horrible* as an experiment, investigating whether original online media content created outside of studio funding could be financially viable. *Dr. Horrible* was a bigger hit than expected, with a paid version topping the iTunes charts and a DVD release hitting the number two position on Amazon. This article explores which factors most obviously contributed to *Dr. Horrible's* success, whether these factors are replicable by other media creators, the incorporation of fan labor into web media projects, and how web-specific content creation relates to more traditional forms of media production.

*Keywords:* Web Media, Online Distribution, Joss Whedon, Dr. Horrible,  
Paratexts, Social Media, Labor, Fans

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In November 2007, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) began a strike lasting 100 days; amongst the areas in dispute were questions of residual payments for online streaming of previously broadcast material and the even newer and murkier territory of content created specifically for viewing online (M. J. Banks, 2010). Despite several networks testing catch-up streaming for television shows, and a few franchises experimenting with original web-specific content, such as “webisodes” set between seasons of television shows to maintain fan interest (Leaver, 2008), writers were not paid anything for this material appearing online. In part, the striking WGA members argued that the networks were deliberately withholding rightful payment for online content by classifying all of it as promotional work for the “real” television program or film to which they were tied. Amongst the most prominent striking WGA members was Joss Whedon, best known for his work as creator, head writer and executive producer of the acclaimed television series *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). On the picket line, and in the months following, Whedon and others discussed new ways that creators, not networks, could harness online media production, or as Whedon describes it in his own enigmatic terms:

Once upon a time, all the writers in the forest got very mad with the Forest Kings and declared a work-stoppage. . . . During this work-stoppage, many writers tried to form partnerships for outside funding to create new work that circumvented the Forest King system (Whedon, 2008b).

Despite enthusiasm during the WGA strike, after it ended, new funding models failed to emerge, so Whedon decided to self-fund a small-scale web media production, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-along Blog* (2008), a tongue-in-check musical comedy initially released online in three parts during one week in July 2008 (Littleton, 2008). Whedon and his collaborators deliberately positioned *Dr. Horrible* as an experiment exploring whether original media content created specifically and exclusively for online distribution could, in fact, be financially viable. As it turned out, *Dr. Horrible* was a far bigger hit than

anyone expected, with the streaming version attracting a substantial audience, a paid version topping the iTunes charts for several weeks, and an eventual DVD release hitting the number two position on Amazon's overall sales charts during December 2008, and staying in Amazon's charts for more than six months (Walters, 2010). Building on Whedon's stated intention of positioning *Dr. Horrible* as a model for other content creators, this article will explore which factors most obviously contributed to *Dr. Horrible's* success, whether these factors are likely to be replicable for other media creators, and how web-specific content creation relates to more traditional forms and practices of media production, especially television.

### **What is Web Media?**

From the outset it is important to offer a working definition of "web media" since it could easily be argued that in the era of digitisation and networked communication, all commercial media either has become, or is becoming, web media. Rather than this fitting everything under this broad umbrella, for the purposes of this article, I am using the term web media more narrowly as shorthand for the longer and more awkward expression: "linear digital media created specifically for web distribution (at least in the first instance) which has production values comparable to traditional, commercially-funded media forms." In my working definition of web media, I have deliberately avoided the term new media because a significant part of the argument below hinges on web media not being new *per se* but having strong ties to past media forms and franchises. Also, to keep a tight focus, this article is *not* investigating *interactive* web forms, such as websites or platform-specific applications, or apps, such as those available for the iPad, smartphone or other mobile devices. Similarly, while web media may be highly experimental in form, for the purposes of this article, web media is most directly linked to media forms which are derived from traditional television and film production. Finally, while, in part, the argument presented is about lowering financial and other barriers preventing individuals and smaller groups embarking on media production and distribution, web media does not refer to amateur production in the "home video on

*YouTube*” sense of amateur, although it may refer to media creators who are not recognisably part of the traditional commercial industries of media production.

### **Joss Whedon: What’s Past is Paratext**

Before looking specifically at *Dr. Horrible*, it is important to analyse the web production in context by examining Joss Whedon’s career up to that point, and the impetus to temporarily shift from commercial to web media. One particularly useful way to situate Whedon, his past work, and his relationship with fans, is through the lens of Jonathan Gray’s work on paratexts. Gray extends existing notions of paratexts beyond literary texts to other media forms, in order to more fully articulate the way related media artifacts can exert what he describes as paratextual influence. Initially, for example, Gray examines trailers, advertising and the associated “hype” these produce, arguing that far from being meaningless, they situate texts in particular ways, building expectations and positioning the viewer in a way which will inevitably be part of the larger viewing experience (Gray, 2008). Moreover, in his recent *Show Sold Separately* (Gray, 2010), Gray extends the notion of paratexts to revive the influence of the author or creator in certain ways, but not in the traditional sense of recognising their authority *per se*. Rather, authors, trailers and other paratexts do particular work, priming and positioning the viewing experience; as Gray defines them, “paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them” (Gray, 2010, p. 6). While Whedon’s previous work – most notably *Buffy* – certainly functions as a paratext in terms of building expectations for his later work, a point explored below, it is Whedon’s groundbreaking relationship to and with his fan base to which I will turn first.

While it is certainly true that in a few specific instances the “symbiotic relationship between fans and producers predates the digital age” (Pearson, 2010, p. 87)—such as the relationship between Gene Roddenberry and fans of the original *Star Trek* (1966-1969) series—it is equally true that the World Wide Web has opened up real-time fan interaction in an unprecedented manner. As

media scholar Henry Jenkins describes it, online digital communication has normalised “communal, rather than individualistic, modes of reception” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 26), with many television series and franchises promoting custom-built online presences encouraging fans to interact with each other and enjoy bonus material and so forth, to form a deeper experience of the franchise in question. Such presences are ubiquitous today, but in 1997 when *Buffy* premiered, they were extremely rare. The Bronze discussion boards—named after the nightclub in *Buffy*—launched shortly after the series premiered, and quickly became an active hub for fan discussion of the show. What really set The Bronze apart, though, was that Whedon and a number of the other staff writers regularly appeared on the discussion boards and engaged with fans as serious participants in the show, not just consumers of it. Moreover, while The Bronze was hosted by the WB Network (later shifting to UPN when *Buffy* moved networks with the commencement of the show’s sixth season), Whedon made it clear that his motivations in engaging with fans were genuine, not just commercial (Consalvo, 2003; Williams, 2004). That said, at times tension existed between Whedon’s engagement with fans and copyright protection by the networks which deliberately, for example, shut down several *Buffy* fan fiction community websites (Johnson, 2007, p. 294). Over time, complex fan communities and hierarchies also emerged on The Bronze, but Whedon was always careful to engage but never dictate terms (Zweerink & Gatson, 2002), letting fan communities establish their own rules and norms. Indeed, Whedon famously demonstrated his loyalty to fans over and above the network when the WB decided to postpone the season finale of *Buffy* since it featured high school violence in the immediate wake of the Columbine school shootings; on the Bronze and elsewhere an angry Whedon made a “notorious public call for Canadian fans to ‘bootleg that puppy’ and distribute it over the web to American viewers” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 164).

Joss Whedon’s dynamic relationship with his fanbase also played a significant role in the dramatic resurrection of his space Western, *Firefly* (2002-2003). The short-lived television series was cancelled after only 11 episodes were aired, but Whedon quite publicly argued that the show was never given a real chance by the Fox network who gave it a challenging timeslot, played the episodes

out of narrative sequence, and ordered a new pilot episode late in the production schedule. While the story would end there for most shows, Whedon appealed to his many fans, who in turn mounted a widespread campaign to get more of the show, with the most demonstrable outcome being huge sales of the *Firefly* DVD, with over 200,000 copies sold (Chonin, 2005). In this context, it is worth pausing and turning to Henry Jenkins' categorisation of television viewers into three main types: zappers, who wield the remote control continuously, jumping between whatever happens to be on; casuals, who have some connection to certain shows, but can live without them; and loyals who have a strong connection to a particular show or series and will always watch and support it, no matter what. As Jenkins summarises, "Loyals watch series; the zappers watch television" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 74). However, in terms of Whedon's fans, it might be more accurate to say that "loyals watch franchises" because on the back of the fan campaign to save *Firefly*, rather than getting another season, Universal Studios took on the franchise and green lit a feature film, *Serenity* (2005). As part promotion, and part thanks, in the weeks leading up to *Serenity's* premiere, Whedon visited a number of countries and cities and met directly with fans, thanking them for their interest and help in getting the franchise onto the silver screen. While *Serenity* was not a box office hit, the fact that a television series cancelled after less than a season could even get produced is testament to the loyalty of Whedon's fans (Abbott, 2009). As Gray has argued in relation authors and creators, as a paratext they can "create an author figure, surround the text with aura, and insist on its uniqueness, value, and authenticity in an otherwise standardized media environment" (Gray, 2010, p. 82); Whedon's close relationship with his fans is thus a key element of his paratextual aura, something consciously maintained and developed over time to the mutual benefit of fans and Whedon himself.

### **The WGA Strike and a *Horrible* Idea**

Looking through a paratextual lens, the importance of online relationships and promotions are evident, but in November 2007 the Writer's Guild of America (WGA) went on strike specifically

because the networks refused to compensate writers, and others, for this type of work. As Miranda Banks explains, at the outset of the strike, while

TV writer-producers were responsible for steering massive online promotional campaigns and writers of films were being asked to provide blogs and commentary for upcoming films, this additional labor was rarely compensated, and film and television series that were streaming online were never included in residual payments (M. J. Banks, 2010, p. 23).

Given Whedon's long history of engagement with online paratexts, his presence on the picket-line was not unexpected. While striking, Whedon joined other writers in discussing a number of alternative distribution models that might circumvent network funding, including the notion of small-scale web media (Whedon, 2008a, 2008b). Significantly, Whedon also discussed web media with Felicia Day; Day knew Whedon as she had been cast in a minor role in *Buffy's* final season, but more importantly she had recently launched her own web media series, a comedy based on the lives of six online game players, called *The Guild* (2007- ). As Day describes it, she immediately realised that a Whedon online production had potential to be a huge hit, recalling in an interview that "it was obvious to me that Joss + Whedon Fan Base + Amazing Product would be a phenomenon" (Dr. *Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* Official Fan Site, 2009). After the strike ended, only offering "writers meager residuals from streaming media" (M. J. Banks, 2010, p. 30), inspired by Day's work on *The Guild* (Vary, 2008) Whedon decided to self-fund a web media production, and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* was born.

In creating *Dr. Horrible*, Whedon's stated intention was to show not just how creators could make web media work, but also that it could be a boon for writers and actors, too (Whedon, 2008b). Whedon assembled a team of writers, which included himself, his brothers Zack Whedon and Jed Whedon, and Maurissa Tancharoen; and he also enlisted several actors he had worked with before, including Nathan Fillion, who had been the captain in *Firefly* and *Serenity*; Neil Patrick Harris of either *Doogie Howser, M.D.* (1989-1993) or *How I Met Your Mother* (2005- ) fame; and Felicia Day landed the role of Penny. Importantly, in arguing how web media could provide a better deal,



Whedon made sure that all four writers and the three lead actors would receive a percentage of profits, not just a single payment for their services (Knowledge@Wharton, 2009). In order to get a quality crew, Whedon relied on ties he had built up over two decades of industry work, and thus “previous TV work provided him with the goodwill and respect from cast, crew and technicians necessary to elicit their contribution to the project” (Abbott, 2009). Initially Whedon relied on cast and crew working for a minimal amount up front, but he drew up two budgets, one to get *Dr. Horrible* made, and another that would ensure the crew were paid generously if the production was a success (Knowledge@Wharton, 2009); this second budget was eventually paid in full. While *Dr. Horrible* was clearly situated outside of traditional network funding, Whedon’s industry connections, past profits and production history certainly allowed him to leverage an array of connections not available to industry outsiders (Hollis, 2011). Similarly, the star status of the actors made the production far more enticing to viewers in comparison to a web series with an unknown cast; Harris and Fillion are both celebrities in their own right, while Day also enjoys star status in the core fan communities at which *Dr. Horrible* was pitched (Elcessor & Duncan, 2011; Elcessor, 2012). Thus, *Dr. Horrible* was rhetorically and politically situated as working outside the system, and as discussed below achieved significant success, but Whedon’s own industry experience, insider knowledge and the ability to assemble a recognisable cast, all gave the production a head start that most web media creators will not enjoy.

### **Deploying *Dr. Horrible***

One of the challenges in creating web media on a shoestring budget is the absence of marketing and advertising money. For Whedon and his collaborators, the lack of funds focused all of their energy on promoting *Dr. Horrible* on free social media platforms. In the months before its release, an official *Dr. Horrible* website was established, as was an official Facebook page (which amassed over 100,000 fans), an official Twitter account, a presence on MySpace and links on Digg. All of these elements of the overall official *Dr. Horrible* web presence were well maintained, not only

releasing news and information, but also engaging in substantial dialogue with fans. As Clay Shirky amongst others has argued, social media has great potential for meaningful interaction and collaboration, but it takes significant work to harness social media to these ends (Shirky, 2009). While the official presence went a long way in making *Dr. Horrible* a social media success, some of the most important engagements were on the unofficial web presences. For example, one month before *Dr. Horrible's* release, Whedon made a direct appeal to fans, outlining both what the production was about in terms of content, but also describing the rationale in terms of production and distribution (Whedon, 2008b). Significantly, Whedon chose to reveal his "master plan" on *Whedonesque.com*, which is not a website run by Whedon, but rather the largest fan website dedicated to Whedon's work. By addressing fans in their territory, by giving their space primacy, Whedon strategically situated fans, positioning them as collaborators in changing the face of media distribution, as much as consumers.

Moreover, in a playful but very carefully constructed post, Whedon deployed his trademark banter, asking fans to support *Dr. Horrible* and consider buying the paid version rather than "getting all piracy", rhetorically charging fans with the future success, or failure, of *Dr. Horrible* and similar online ventures:

Spread the word. Rock some banners, widgets, diggs... let people know who wouldn't ordinarily know. It wouldn't hurt if this really was an event. Good for the business, good for the community – communitIES: Hollywood, internet, artists around the world, comic-book fans, musical fans (and even the rather vocal community of people who hate both but will still dig on this). Proving we can turn *Dr. Horrible* into a viable economic proposition as well as an awesome goof will only inspire more people to lay themselves out in the same way. It's time for the dissemination of the artistic process. Create more for less. You are the ones that can make that happen (Whedon, 2008b).

In the weeks counting down to *Dr. Horrible's* debut, Whedon further reinforced the importance of fan sites, sending the *Dr. Horrible* trailer to a fan site before it appeared anywhere else, and

maintaining a voice on several fan websites, while the official presences were quieter. It is worth noting, too, that the largest specific fan website, *DrHorrible.net*, was set up by fans months before the production was released, with only the title and the first poster to set the initial expectations. Whedon's paratextual aura was enough to rally fan interest with only a minute amount of information about the production available. Along with his collaborators, Whedon managed to corral and crowdsource a wide-ranging niche marketing campaign.

In Whedon's master plan post on *Whedonesque.com* he explained that *Dr. Horrible* would be released as three separate acts, on July 15, 17 and 19 2008, each simultaneously appearing for free as streaming video, with a higher quality paid version available on Apple's iTunes store, costing either \$1.99 per act, or \$3.99 for all three; the free version would disappear on July 20. The staggered release was modelled on the idea of event television, where the gaps would allow speculation and interest to grow, giving fans a chance to digest and discuss *Dr. Horrible* as it initially played out across a week (Lang, 2010). Through the various fan sites, word spread rapidly, as did media articles curious about this new form of web media, so when July 15 arrived, the initial web traffic was huge, with the website registering hundreds of requests per second to access the free stream within the US. However, despite global fan interest and excitement, Whedon and his team had partnered with Hulu.com to deliver the free streaming version, but as Hulu was set up to distribute domestic US television streams, it was only visible to viewers within the US. International fan dismay at not being able to access *Dr. Horrible* was posted in great detail and volume across all the official and unofficial sites. Fans were also upset that they could not even buy it on iTunes, since distribution rights had only been negotiated for the US iTunes store (each national store has its own agreements, something Whedon's team had not initially accounted for). It appeared to international fans that they were on the wrong side of the tyranny of digital distance (Leaver, 2008), where arbitrary, traditional geographic zones of commercial media distribution were being applied to ostensibly global web media. To their credit, the various official sites replied immediately, stating they were working on the unforeseen problem. In the interim, instructions were linked to via the

official *Dr. Horrible* Twitter account on how to circumvent Hulu's geographic restrictions and effectively play Hulu content anywhere in the world. This tweet was similar to Whedon's call on Canadian fans to provide pirated copies of the *Buffy* season finale when its screening was delayed in the US, but was most likely not appreciated by Hulu (the tweet was quietly removed a few days later). In less than a day, Whedon's team were able to negotiate with Hulu to lift the geographic restrictions, and then move *Dr. Horrible* onto larger servers, after the unprecedented demand to view the streaming version overwhelmed the initial dedicated servers (Rosen, 2009; Walters, 2010).

At its peak, the free version of *Dr. Horrible* was receiving 1000 hits per second, which means that across the five days it was available for free, millions of people watched at least one of the acts. In business terms, though, it was the success of the paid version on the Apple iTunes store that was the big story: in its first week, *Dr. Horrible* went to the top of the iTunes chart, and stayed there for five weeks. Similarly, when the *Dr. Horrible* soundtrack was released it also climbed to the number two position in the iTunes store and even "entered the Billboard Top 200 at No. 39, which was incredible considering that it was only available as a download" (Rosen, 2009). While the dollar value of any position on iTunes charts is not known, Jeffrey McManus posted some educated speculations about the likely profits involved, which suggested that if around 100,000 iTunes sales occurred, then the actors and other writers would probably take home a few thousand dollars each, and Whedon himself about \$US85,000, but if the sales went as high as a million iTunes sales, then each actor and writer would be getting closer to \$US100,000, with Whedon making well over a million dollars himself (McManus, 2008). McManus estimated that a lot more than 100,000 sales were made, but probably not quite a million. While no concrete sales or profit data has been released, these estimates have some legitimacy since Joss Whedon commented on these figures, saying that as far as he could see, the "guestimates were not far off" (Whedon, 2008c), which indicates a potentially very significant return on Whedon's initial investment of \$US200,000 (Walters, 2010). Based on those rough numbers alone, *Dr. Horrible* certainly demonstrates that this instance of web media was a commercial success.

Beyond the profit margins, *Dr. Horrible* was initially positioned and promoted as an example of what was possible in terms of web media production outside of the traditional studio funding channels. The responses of media scholars suggest that *Dr. Horrible* succeeded as an icon of change, too, with Rhonda Wilcox arguing, for example:

*Dr. Horrible* illustrates the use of the internet as a way to get around socially established business and distribution networks—television networks; and the idea of repudiating the socioeconomic status quo is expressed in both the form and content of the musical (Wilcox, 2009).

Moreover, Alyson Buckman argues that in resisting the imperatives of network funding and distribution, *Dr. Horrible* works as a contemporary metaphor for resistant politics more broadly (Buckman, 2010). At an aesthetic level, *Dr. Horrible* demonstrates alliances with fans and producers at the same time, mixing the high production values of commercial television, with framing scenes featuring the central character lamenting his lot in front of a webcam, in a knowing nod to more amateur web production (Abbott, 2009). While *Dr. Horrible* does conclude with the controversial death of one of the main characters, understanding and interpreting this demise largely took place in light of the paratextual influence of Whedon's past work as both *Buffy* and *Serenity* feature the untimely and unexpected deaths of central characters (Lang, 2010). As Wilcox argues, if nothing else, at both narrative and production levels, *Dr. Horrible* is "remarkable for the consciousness of its own textual form" (Wilcox, 2009).

At the first "Streamy Awards", the tongue-in-cheek web-specific equivalent to the Academy Awards, held in March 2009, *Dr. Horrible* won the Audience Choice Award for Best Web Series; Best Directing for a Comedy Web Series; Best Writing for a Comedy Web Series; Best Male Actor in a Comedy Web Series; Best Editing; Best Cinematography; and Best Original Music (Hustvedt, 2009). While there may not have been a huge amount of competition for these first "Streamies", *Dr. Horrible* nevertheless functions as a benchmark against which future web media productions will be measured. In more traditional realms, *Dr. Horrible* also won a 2009 Hugo award for the Best Drama

Presentation, Short Form; and took home a 2009 Primetime Emmy for a newly invented award category, “Outstanding Special Class – Special Short-format live-action Entertainment program”.<sup>1</sup> Finally, returning to more traditional media forms, the DVD release of *Dr. Horrible* came out in December 2008 and by Christmas that year it was the number two selling DVD on Amazon’s charts (Walters, 2010), sandwiched between *The Dark Knight* (2008) and the Disney/Pixar animation *Wall-E* (2008), staying in Amazon’s Top 100 DVD chart for six months thereafter. Unlike conventional DVD releases, the commentary tracks actually featured more original songs than the initial release of *Dr. Horrible* and were, in themselves, laden with ironic commentary both about the industry, and their own attempts to circumvent it in this one small but notable instance (Nadkarni, 2010).

### **The Horrible Question of Free Labor**

In terms of fan interaction, the release of *Dr. Horrible* was only the tip of the iceberg. In the weeks following, hundreds of fans posted their own sing-along videos and other creative work responding to the narrative world Whedon and his team created. As Gray notes, many media firms have created “policed playgrounds for fans”, encouraging fan creativity and media production, but under very strict rules, usually ensuring that the media firm owns outright any fan production (Gray, 2010, p. 165). Whedon and his collaborators, in contrast, went out of their way to promote fan works, posting them on Facebook and highlighting them via Twitter and other social media, without claiming ownership. However, after *Dr. Horrible’s* initial release, another website was established, calling for videos of fan auditions for entry into the “Evil League of Evil”, the main organisation of villains in *Dr. Horrible*; the ten best fan productions were included as an extra feature on the official *Dr. Horrible* DVD. This explicit solicitation of unpaid fan-created material, or crowdsourcing, raises

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<sup>1</sup> A more cynical interpretation of the Emmy Award would be that the industry was using the recognition to highlight the fact that Joss Whedon was indeed an industry insider. Such a message would situate the success of *Dr. Horrible* as an online experiment by someone already entrenched in television production, rather than a success replicable by others unconnected to the industry.

more complex questions about the relationship between commercially produced web media and the (usually free) creative work of fans (see Russo, 2009).

In a case study of television fans and online forums, Mark Andrejevic has convincingly argued that in terms of fan labor, “creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy” (2008, p. 25). Andrejevic and similar studies including Banks and Humphries (2008) are careful not to suggest that fans are duped into their activities, and acknowledge that each and every fan has exercised their own agency in deciding to contribute their efforts in promoting, commenting on, or creatively contributing to *Dr. Horrible* in some fashion, but this activity simultaneously also “doubles as a form of labour” (Andrejevic, 2008, p. 43). Moreover, any investment of fan time and engagement will result in a form of “affective attachment”, making fans more likely not only to view *Dr. Horrible* but also purchase this web media in any and all forms available (2008, p. 43). Indeed, as Banks and Humphries argue further, the parameters and ethics of the emerging but still unclear relationships between traditional media creators and what they term “user co-creators” are far from concrete. As more and more fan and user contributions drive, advertise and enhance media products, these new dynamics will continue to evolve. Conversely, if a group who are contributing to a crowdsourcing effort feel that the media creators they are assisting are becoming exploitative or unfair, the crowd can be equally effective as a force for criticism, a process Brabham labels “crowdslapping” (2008, p. 79). Indeed, Brabham continues that most crowdsourcing provides an opportunity to make a useful contribution, to enhance something you care about, and potentially to feel part of a community. However, it is possible that each of these opportunities can also be exploited and the tension in all crowdsourcing efforts is a continual careful balancing between exploitation and opportunity that must be addressed by both the crowd and the owners/creators of the effort to which they are contributing (Brabham, 2008). As Tizianna Terranova argued more than a decade ago, “Free labor ... is not necessarily exploited labor” but by its very nature it has that potential (2000, p. 48). Whedon’s fans who promoted, contributed to, and remixed *Dr. Horrible* are clearly participating voluntarily and deriving

pleasure from that participation. Simultaneously, Whedon and the *Dr. Horrible* team had their commercial product advertised, promoted and enhanced by an online army of enthusiasts. If that promotional process had been done through traditional, paid advertising strategies, then the advertising costs would almost certainly have outweighed the entire *Dr. Horrible* production budget.

The question of copyright and ownership also plays a role in evaluating the role of fan efforts and crowdsourced promotion in relation to *Dr. Horrible*. Whedon and his collaborators encouraged fans to freely reuse and remix elements of *Dr. Horrible* in various vids, trailers, remixes, sing-alongs and other material that has been shared publicly. Legally this fan creative work exists in something of a grey area: Whedon owns the copyright for *Dr. Horrible*, but has an implicit social understanding with fans that they can use this material (as opposed to a strict legal understanding since Whedon has not technically given away any rights, simply chosen not to exercise copyright to prevent fan creations and distribution). In instances where copyright permission has been sought from Whedon, he appears to have given others permission to reuse *Dr. Horrible* material for free including, for example, several high school musical productions (Gannes, 2009). However, the official *Dr. Horrible* website currently contains a notification that no further licensing is available at this time. In terms of *Dr. Horrible*, Whedon's paratextual aura, his history of engagement with fans, and his strategic and rhetorical positioning of the web media production, created conditions where fans were all too happy to promote, celebrate, remix and reuse *Dr. Horrible*. In terms of the fan-created material included on the *Dr. Horrible* DVD, Whedon and his team no doubt sought permission from those fans although it is likely that the value these fan creators received in return was social and personal rather than any explicit payment, leaving lasting questions about similar relationships around other web media productions (Russo, 2009).

### ***Dr. Horrible* as a Model for Web Media Creators?**

One of the clearest lessons from *Dr. Horrible* is that web media creators need to be aware that their creations will not exist in a vacuum. A large part of *Dr. Horrible's* success was due to the power



of Joss Whedon as a paratextual figure; his past work and past interactions with fans positioned the web media production in important ways, priming viewer expectations and capitalising on existing loyalties. Indeed, as Jonathan Gray argues:

Joss Whedon is one of a brand of television authors who have realized the importance of engaging with their fan bases, and *Buffy's* success arguably was all the greater for this realization, and for his eagerness to at least partly, in Barthesian terms, kills himself as an author. As is only fitting for the author of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon was an undead author (Gray, 2010, p. 113).

As an “undead author”, Whedon has built a phenomenal following, who embraced *Dr. Horrible*, contributed to its success, and would almost certainly embrace any future web media productions by the same creative team. While new and emerging web media creators are unlikely to have fan followings comparable with Whedon’s, it is nevertheless important to recognise that each new production is important both on its own terms, and as a potential paratext for future work as well. Creating engaging content and using this to build loyalty with fans, and nurturing those relationships, is one of the strongest ways to ensure future productions have a receptive audience, who already, in part, have their interest primed. Even a small but vocal fanbase can be enough to make the difference in ensuring web media with smaller budgets can eventually break even or make a respectable profit.<sup>2</sup>

As a trailblazer, the release of *Dr. Horrible* included some very notable mistakes which other web media creators can learn from. Probably the most important lesson was that if a potential audience is spread across the globe, to maximise the impact of web media, it should aim to be available in all territories regardless of whether the release is in a free or paid format (or both). If the product is released as streaming media, utilising a platform that is not geographically restricted is

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Kelly (2008), for example, has argued that for a single artist one thousand dedicated fans may be enough to sustain a creative career. While the exact number may differ, the importance of fan loyalty to a creator, and the power of social media to sustain such loyalty, is vitally important. For more on the importance of dedicated fans in spreading awareness and interest in web media also see the white paper *If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead* (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf, & Green, 2008).

important, for example. Now that YouTube supports high definition formats, this makes the Google-owned video-sharing service a more likely option given its global reach which only has geographic restrictions enabled at the request of partners, not by default. Similarly, ensuring that any paid versions are widely available is also significant, such as negotiating rights for all international versions of the iTunes store, rather than just the default US or UK instance. Digital media has the potential to be released globally across the internet, but the existing geographically based boundaries and media distribution regions need to be taken into account. As more and more independent content is released online, many creators are taking the time to document lessons learnt, such as the processes for listing material in multiple regional online stores. Over time, this collective wisdom will be extremely valuable for new web media creators, circumventing the global release issues with assailed the launch of *Dr. Horrible*.

While an ongoing issue across the creative industries, the role of copyright is also an important one. From Whedon and his *Dr. Horrible* collaborators, Whedon's history of fan engagement, and the explicit nods towards related fan production built an implicit social understanding regarding the fan use of material from *Dr. Horrible*. A social understanding, though, is not without its own challenges. If Whedon ever sold the copyright to *Dr. Horrible*, for example, this implicit social understanding could quickly be superseded by stricter copyright enforcement, especially since the length of copyright in most cases lasts well over a century in duration. For new web media creators, looking at other copyright models may be important. For example, utilising the "some rights reserved" model of certain Creative Commons licenses may allow a free version of a web media product to be distributed without charge, but could be customised to ensure that any commercial profit remained the sole domain of the web media creator (Lessig, 2008). Other models may emerge, and experiments are needed to find the best balance, but copyright remains one of the thorniest issues in balancing the distribution and profitability of web media.

The commercial success of the *Dr. Horrible* DVD demonstrates that web-specific content has the potential to compete with more traditional media forms, such as film and television, when

repackaged for the home retail and rental markets. The trail from streaming web media to a DVD format also reinforces the point that web media is not necessarily antagonistic with traditional media, with all commercial media existing in a spectrum which see the lines between the two continually blurring. While Joss Whedon's past industry experience would have clearly informed the DVD production, is it also the case that online creation and distribution tools make the conversion to DVD a relatively straight forward proposition for other web media creators. Notably, though, while it is clear that audiences are spending more and more of their time watching online, web-specific content is suddenly competing with a tidal wave of traditional media migrating to the web, both in unauthorised forms via peer to peer filesharing networks such as Bit Torrent, and in authorised streaming formats, via Netflix, Hulu and its various network-specific clones. Internationally, public broadcasters have also risen to the challenge, and are fulfilling their charters online with platforms such as the BBC's iPlayer or the Australian Broadcasting Service's iView. As commercial television content finally starts to capitalise on online viewing, including the rapidly growing mobile web markets, web-specific media content will have a harder job standing out amongst the increasingly recognisable crowd. Such a challenge is not insurmountable, but it is formidable for future web media creators looking to work outside traditional production networks.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

*Dr. Horrible* was pitched as a bold experiment in creating quality entertainment content outside of the traditional funding networks of the studio system, born out of industrial action by the WGA who were concerned that as their work became increasingly consumed online, as writers they would not receive a cent for these new distribution opportunities. Joss Whedon and his collaborators harnessed this disquiet and created a tongue-in-cheek online musical comedy which was far more

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<sup>3</sup> It is also notable that the practices of independent web media creators increasingly appear to parallel traditional industry trajectories. For example, Felicia Day, one of the stars of *Dr. Horrible* and web media creator in her own right has recently expanded to a production role, managing six web media productions organised under a new YouTube channel (Goldberg, 2012).

successful than anyone could have foreseen, not only making a healthy profit, but eventually getting industry recognition usually reserved for traditionally funded media.<sup>4</sup> As a model for future web media creators looking to release material outside of the studio system *Dr. Horrible* is both an almost mythical success story, but also one which was founded in part on Whedon's past work created for network television. However, even a fraction of *Dr. Horrible's* success would be enough to see future web media productions make at least a minimal profit, and as Whedon commented himself, *Dr. Horrible* can serve as inspiration on this front:

All that rhetoric about the future of entertainment that flew about during the Strike is still entirely true. We need to find our own way of producing entertainment. A lot of people are watching *Dr. Horrible* to see if it's any kind of model—way more people than I expected—and it means everything to me to help pave the way for artists to start working and making a living from the ground up (Whedon, 2008d).

That said, Whedon has also acknowledged, that without a lot of future development and hard work, the success of *Dr. Horrible* may be less of a model and more of a myth in that it “could just stand out as Camelot and disappear” (Knowledge@Wharton, 2009). For now, Whedon has returned to Hollywood and as director has helmed the *Avengers* (2012) film, which at the time of writing was the third most successful film in history in terms of global gross box office revenue. Nevertheless, for those without studio connections to fall back on, web media remains a fertile realm for future efforts and releases. Felicia Day's *The Guild* web series, for example, is now into its sixth season thanks in part to a sponsorship deal with Microsoft (O'Rourke, 2008), while an emerging group of YouTube micro-celebrities are making a decent living off regular short clips supported by Google's advertising partnerships (Moses, 2010). There are still many challenges for potential web media creators who want to harness online distribution and social networks to create work outside of

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<sup>4</sup> A number of other experiments in online distribution and content creation, also initially conceived on the WGA picket line, have been less successful on their own terms, often having to partner with existing industry players to become sustainable networks rather than one-off events (Christian, 2012).

traditional funding channels, but learning from the success and mistakes of *Dr. Horrible* can only assist in exploring new, creative production and distribution models.

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