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Free Views to Pay per Views

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Filmmaking has taken on many different forms in the past one hundred and forty years. Many essays have been written about the evolution of narrative filmmaking, the evolution of equipment, and even more essays have been written about the history of filmmaking just for the purpose of record keeping. This is not the purpose of this essay. The purpose of this essay is to analyze the way that popular web series in the past ten years have been bought and adapted into television shows. Using this knowledge, I will then go over the strategy that I think would work best for the web-series I am currently producing called *Thank God for Girls*.

As I previously mentioned filmmaking has changed tremendously since its inception, yet one of the most recent development that relate to it is the advent of web-series. A web-series can be loosely defined as any type of narrative based video released on the internet and that can be viewed on a multiple devices. Web-series are separate from television, yet also similar. Youtube personalities creating lets-plays or skit shows demonstrate something very different from whatever is playing on CBS, however based off this definition technically Netflix and all of its original shows are also classified as web series (Stelter). *Thank God for Girls* does not have the budget of a billion dollar company like Netflix and is not created to expand upon the personality of a single individual, therefore we are going to be examining a specific type of web series that are similar to *Thank God for Girls* structure.

We are going to be examining Independently Created Short Form Narrative Based Web-series. These web series are originally self financed by the original creators and their narratives were either self contained in each episode or within the season. All the web series we will be examining have an episode length of under ten minutes each. The two main web series we are looking at are *Broad City* and *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl.* Both originated as web series but were eventually picked up and adapted into television series. That path, is the path that I hope *Thank God for Girls* follows. I would like it to have a similar level of popularity as a web series in order to gain the attention/financing to make it a television series. But before I get ahead of myself, it is important that I explain what *Thank God for Girls* is. Therefore I've included the one pager I crafted for the series:

Log Line: THANK GOD FOR GIRLS is a half hour comedy about a cleverer than thou' African American high school lesbian whose insecurities causes her to struggle with coming out to her mom, maintaining friendships, and committing to a girl she loves.

In pretending to be someone she isn't, Taylor Morris discovers who she really is.

And who she is, is a lot to handle…

Thank God for Girls is "Mean Girls" meets gay "Insecure" in an all girls Catholic High School.

<u>TAYLOR'S WORLD:</u>

Well, it's actually *my* world-- *I lived it for 20 years. Hi, Summer Plair here, writer, lesbian, my own worst enemy when it comes to girls...still*. At school, Taylor's out, proud, and highly opinionated and has absolutely no problem with talking back against authority figures. With her best friend Devin, Taylor's a nervous, anxiety ridden wreck who always believes her

life is falling apart. At home, she's quiet, in the closet, and extremely defensive to protect herself from her "boy crazy" mother. For 16 years, these three "selves" have always worked in Taylor's benefit. However, when Taylor sees the chance to have a relationship with her lifelong crush, Christine, Taylor must, for the first time in her life, figure out a way for these three selves to coexist and it goes fucking terribly of course. Seems like a mess right? Well, it was exactly that and more.

THE CHARACTERS:

Taylor Morris (16)

At first glance, Taylor is a queer, loud-mouthed, liberal running around in an angsty, black, teenage body. She talks about women 24/7, she dreams about women 24/7, she is obsessed with women...or maybe just the idea of them. But, she has never done anything with a woman. In actuality, Taylor is all talk and no walk. She has always been able to talk back to nuns, teachers, really any authority figure. However, she cannot, for the life of her, talk to girls (hence the whole virgin situation). But when she finally sleeps with a girl (and not just any girl, her life long crush), her life is turned upside down... but of course, not for the better. The sex? Yeah, it was fine for a first time. But the girl? *Just way too into me*, I mean Taylor.

Christine Beatty (16)

She is the cute, artistic friend who in your old age you wish you had asked out in high school. She's quiet around most, but has a strong mind filled with bold, progressive, and even mischievous ideas. She too mature for a high school girl, throwing around terms and ideas far beyond her years. She knows a lot about art, music, politics, social norms. Not only is she fucking hot, she is fucking smart! With all that said, she's still a 16 year old girl. And what do

16 year old girls want? Nothing more than a high school romance that could make the love in the Titanic look like a one night stand. Which I guess it kinda was. Even with her maturity, Christine is still naive enough to fall into the classic mishaps of high school romance and fall way too hard way too quick.

Devin Howard (17)

As Taylor's best friend, Devin has taken on the role as Taylor's emotional caretaker--a job he has been doing for over ten years. And get this, he hasn't complained! Yet, at least. Although Taylor rarely listens to him, Devin's advice is always exactly what Taylor needs to do. While he does give great advice, he spends so much time trying to help Taylor better her life that he has yet to spend time bettering his own. You may wonder, what is Devin actually gaining from this friendship? My Devin still wonders this today.

Thank God for Girls is unlike anything currently on the air either on cable or on youtube. First, there are very few LGBTQ stories in production. Second, when there are LGBTQ stories they are often done from a white male perspective. Therefore *Thank God for Girls* is a truly unique story due to the fact that the protagonist is an African American Lesbian. Now after reading the one pager, you may have noticed that the pitch is for a half hour comedy, not a web series. That is because web series are not profitable, or at least not to the extent that it interests financiers. Therefore the one pager's purpose is to incite excitement for the future television adaptation. The web series version of *Thank God for Girls,* is five episodes long and each episode is six to eight minutes long. One of my mentors, the creative producer Maggie Murphy, recommended that we create the series 'accordion style' for the flexibility this production style

offers us in distribution. Accordion style production allows us to either showcase five episodes of a web series format, combine all five episodes into a forty minute pilot, or we could split the series into two episodes that fit the half hour format. This maximizes the potential areas that the series could be financed.

In order to even get in the situation where we *could* be financed, we need to have established that *Thank God for Girls* brings something to the table. When I met with Ben Haig, who is the director of acquisitions at Shore Z productions he gave me some very good advice on this front. He stated that when thinking about studios or individual financiers, to not think of them as artists or storytellers. He recommended that I look at them as if they were bankers. They were people who had a good amount of money but also wanted more. They do not want to take that big of a risk though, so the more I can assure investors that the web series is 'guaranteed ' to make money-keeping in mind that there are no guarantees in life let alone in the filmmaking industry-the more likely they are to invest in *Thank God for Girls*.

So how do I go about making *Thank God for Girls* appear as if it is a guaranteed money maker? One big avenue is attaching talent to the project. At big blockbuster levels it involves having A-list directors, producers, writers, and actors guaranteed to participate in the project. We do not have the budget nor the notoriety to get attention that way, but we can still use the idea of attaching talent to our advantage. There is currently more media being created in the United States this year then every before (Shaw). While this means that audiences have more choices in programming, this thus leads into networks and producers trying to figure out the best way to make their show *the show.* Usually the goto method would be to attach the A-list talent I mentioned previously, yet with so much media being created those regular A-list stars are

becoming increasing harder to book. Therefore, the networks are in dire need for new blood. If they see a project that appears to have a new actress that could turn into a star, they may secure the rights to the show just so they can have first rights to casting the potential star in future projects. If we are able to secure talent like this for the principal roles in the production, I would see it really benefitting our film.

The second avenue that we could attempt would be to gain a following for the web series prior to attempting to sell the series. If there is already a large audience for the web series-a large audience being defined as a committed group of consumers watching the episodes and interacting with it on social media-then financiers are more likely to see that there is a demand for this specific content and a consumer base ready to pay for it. Before doing research my own plan involved creating a website to house the series and having a strong social media presence, but I did not know of many specifics. Therefore I used this as an opportunity to study what other web series did to their own success.

But before I go into the specific web series I am analyzing, which are outliers in their success, what happens to the majority of web series? Most, stay on the internet distribution hubs like Youtube and Vimeo without much acclaim. Some get bought with the intention of being made into a production, as I learned from Maggie Murphy, but then are never created due to multiple potential reasons. Some are not made because they become too financially expensive. If the series was bought because of attached talent then the project can be shelved due to the if talent losing popularity or being engulfed in scandal. If the project was bought due to it catering to a very specific demographic then if another project ends up being created before the original

adaptation can be viewed then the financiers may feel that they weren't quick enough in appealing to that niche audience and may just give up.

Maggie Murphy was the main source of this information and was instrumental in helping me figure out the best way to pitch my web series due to her immense experience in pitching and packaging web series turned television shows. One of the most helpful things I asked her was her opinion on my first one pager. She was very blunt about it, stating that it did not make my series seem unique. I originally copied a format of a one pager that got a project sold, but in paralleling their style my narrative lose its own vibrancy. I tried to be professional to the point where is seemed like I was pitching to people without creativity. Maggie's advice was simple but sorely needed to be heard, "You are pitching a comedy, your pitch should be funny. If you pitch isn't funny, then how am I going to believe that the series is funny?" Taking in stride I realized that in everything I do with the web-series I need the core tenants to be present. The story needs to be funny and truthful in the pitch, in the show, in the social media, and in every potential portrayal we can think of. The best way to do that is to look at two shows that I believe consistently showcased their values and simultaneously were great pieces of narrative storytelling. I will also analyze how they ensured that they were approachable for investors through the two previously mentioned avenues.

The first Web-Series turned television show I am going to analyze is *Broad City.* As a web-series it had one seasons of twelve episodes. Each episode is less than three minutes long. Most episodes only have between two to four speaking characters and some episodes have as few as three shots encompassing the entire narrative. In essence, the narrative is focused on the

relationship between the two main characters. It showcases this by having each episode essentially focusing on a single skit/interaction they have with each other or with someone else.

The tv show version goes much more in depth with the characters. Each episode is around thirty minutes in length. The start of the pilot dedicates the first six minutes of the episode to world building. It showcases establishing shots, non-dialogue scenes of both lead characters interacting with their world, and then establishing where they are in life. (What their jobs are, what their relationships are like, and how they approach each day.) Because of the format of television, they are able to afford the time to go into this world. Yet is my belief that the reason they were able to get to the position to have the tv show and have the time to dedicate to the world building is because of the web-series. The web-series introduced the internet to the wild and spunky protagonists and their humor. They were given bite size portions that left the audience wanting more. This is easily seen in how many views the series has on youtube. The first episode of the season has almost one million views and every other episode either has half a million views or at least a quarter million views.

The amount of views associated with each episode will be noticed by producers and investors, as it did for the creators of *Broad City.* Amy Poehler of SNL fame actually noticed the series due to its popularity and came on as an executive producer so they could adapt the series for Comedy Central as a television series (Framke). Having millions of views on their channel made convincing the investors and network executives that the series would garner profits if invested in properly. Simultaneously the series acted as a vehicle to promote the acting and comedic talents of the show's creators: Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson. Without proof that they could command the camera and make the audience laugh, producers would feel unsafe

about taking the risk to cast them as the stars of a series. Yet the web series proved to be a proof of concept for their own talents and therefore the producers felt comfortable having them star in a show on their network. Broad City also managed to stay relevant with its audience by continually making gifs of their content that could be used by fans for humorous purposes. This gives fans ownership over the content and more likely to spread awareness of the series.

The second series I am going to analyze is *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl*. It was created by Issa Rae, who also wrote and starred in the web-series. The series was later adapted into the television show *Insecure* on HBO. The web-series format itself is a very far cry from its premium channel adaptation. *Awkward Black Girl*, as it is known short hand, consisted of two twelve episode seasons. Many of the scenes in the early episodes consist of only three shots. There are multiple characters in the series but besides the acting and writing for Issa Rae's character, the other performances are really sub-par. In fact I would argue that it is Issa Rae's inner monologues and the scenes where she is by herself that truly make the show watchable. Her acting and her heartfelt dialogue truly appears sincere and engaging.

It should come as no surprise that when *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl* became *Insecure* it kept many of solo scenes with Issa Rae and her monologues. It did not keep any of the other elements of the web series though. It entirely scrapped the main narrative and adopted new conflicts and cast of characters, what stayed the same was Issa Rae. Thus, attached talent can be seen as one of the major driving forces for the purchase of and the adaptation of the series. Secondarily, *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl* was heavily talked about by at the time. The series was very popular with African American viewers and at award shows, with the series winning the "Shorty" award (Martinez). As Martinez points out, many black

vloggers, groups, and publications highlighted Issa's work which had the unfortunate side effect of bringing the show to the attention of racists who would troll the series online. Yet this just caused the fans of the show to publicize it even more and gave Issa more opportunities to talk to the press about the show. The articles about her, the show, and its audience allowed Issa to make her series an ever-present conversation while she was shopping the series around for adaptation.

Through the analysis of these two shows and their eventual adaptation, I believe that I have learned some ways to ensure that the *Thank God For Girls* stands out as a web-series and is seen as a solid investment for adaptation into a television series. Like *Broad City* and *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl* my series caters to an under serviced audience, African American Women and people who identify as part of the LGBTQ community. The scripts comedy both in dialogue and inner monologue revolves are a titular protagonist. If we are able to find a lead actor who really personifies the role then this project can be seen as an actor vehicle for a rising star. Distribution would occur on Youtube and Facebook in order to maximize outreach to the audience. Social media would include engaging content from the series, like gifs, that would allow the fan base to reference/promote the show even when they are not actively intending to do so.

I believe it is also important to note that these series were created almost ten years ago. The media landscape has changed tremendously in the past few years and that while they themselves had very simple shot composition and got away with a poorly directed supporting cast, I do not think the same could be done now. As stated before, there more media currently created now than in the past. Because of that, the web-series needs to encapsulate all the positives of the other series while also adhering to a higher production quality. I believe that is

possible as long as I work with a collaborative and respectful production team. The two thesis I produced this semester had rather uncompromising directors and writers. Their scripts had fundamental flaws that when pointed out and given notes on, they overall did not remedy fully. Simultaneously feedback was ignored at times when it could have significantly benefited the project if it had been listened to. Right now I am very happy with the relationship I have with the writer and I have the luxury of interviewing directors to make the project. Because of that, I believe I can learn from my experiences this semester to produce and distribute *Thank God For Girls* efficiently and hopefully have a good chance at selling the concept for adaptation.

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