

Next Gen Web Workers:



LG15's Industrial Self-Reflexivity on Steroids

By Denise Mann

Figure 1. EQAL's Miles Beckett (from <www.inside.lg15.com/2008/08>).

Abstract: This article examines a new breed of highly entrepreneurial, freelance Web producers, who have emerged on the margins of the heavily bureaucratic and conglomerated television industry. Miles Beckett and Greg Goodfried, the creators of the successful *Lonelygirl15* (LG15) franchise, are staking their futures on a new form of ad-supported entertainment that they have dubbed *social series*. This production study examines the producers' self-reflexive statements about themselves and the state of the industry, which they have embedded in the social series as part of its community-building enterprise.

Keywords: branded extensions, engaged audience, independent Web producers, industrial reflexivity, multiplatform TV, postnetwork TV, production study, producer, social networks, social series, transmedia TV

Introduction

The idea is to sell the “engagement,” or mobilization of a community built around a show. After all, this isn't TV, and the medium of the Web has its own dynamic. EQAL will go this route selling *LG15: The Resistance*. . . . It's a tactic that may help the two [Miles Beckett and Greg Goodfried] amass the type of statistics that advertisers want about user interaction before they turn over their ad dollars. (Abels)

As postnetwork television executives struggle to revitalize traditional production, marketing, and distribution strategies in the face of the Internet, a new breed of highly entrepreneurial, risk-taking, freelance Web producers have emerged on the margins of the heavily bureaucratic and conglomerated television industry. Former plastic surgeon Miles Beckett and former attorney Greg Goodfried are the unlikely

coheads of EQAL, having staked their futures on a new type of entertainment they have dubbed *social entertainment* (figure 1). Based on their early success with the *Lonelygirl15* (LG15) franchise, in April 2008 Beckett and Goodfried raised their first round of \$5 million in investment commitments from venture capitalists, led by Spark Capital and including Conrad Riggs, Ron Conway, Marc Andreessen and Georges Harik (Gannes). Sponsors are looking to the new generation of Web content producers to offer them “multiple contacts between brand and consumer” via branded entertainment—a set of strategies that EQAL has mastered (Jenkins 68–69). Commenting on the something extra that advertisers expect in today's



Figure 2. *Lonelygirl15*'s Bree (from <www.geeksugar.com/497343>).

convergent marketplace, media theorist Henry Jenkins states, “the strength of a connection is measured in terms of its emotional impact” (68–69). EQAL’s social entertainment formats, also known as *social series*, promise all that and more by combining the best of YouTube’s bite-size, low-production value, user-generated content (UGC), scripted TV’s serialization and predictable genres (e.g., soap opera, sci-fi, detective, etc.), and the community-building activities associated with social networks like MySpace and Facebook. In this brief, ethnographic survey of EQAL—which is based on industry and popular press coverage of the *Lonelygirl15* phenomenon, visits to the EQAL production office, interviews with members of the team, and examinations of the team’s self-representation on the *LG15* Web site—it becomes evident that the next generation Web workers are eager to differentiate themselves from the dominant Hollywood culture industry as a way of ingratiating themselves with a young, Web-savvy audience; what becomes equally evident is how many continuities exist between the old and so-called new media practices.

Industrial Self-Reflexivity on Steroids

In his *Production Culture*, John Caldwell challenges media scholars to view Hollywood insiders’ various acts of self-promotion as relevant research documents for ethnographic surveys of this unique community of above-the-line and below-the-line workers. He explains, “As a self-reflexive industry, Hollywood constantly exposes itself and its production processes to the public; workers’ ideas about the industry are embedded in their daily practices and the media they create” (Caldwell back cover). The methodological impetus for

Caldwell’s cultural-industrial examination of the Hollywood community of workers (and likewise for this article) is Clifford Geertz’s ethnographic analyses of “[t]he culture of a people [as] an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (qtd. in Caldwell 5).¹ A pointed example of this methodological deployment is Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” a cultural exposé of a set of cultural practices that:

[draw] on almost every level of Balinese experience, . . . bring together themes—animal savagery, male narcissism, opponent gambling, status rivalry, mass excitement, blood sacrifice—whose main connection is their involvement with rage and the fear of rage, and binding them into a set of rules which at once contains them and allows them play, builds a symbolic structure in which, over and over again, the reality of their inner affiliation can be intelligibly felt. (qtd. in Caldwell)

At first glance, a Balinese cockfight appears to have little in common with *LG15*, a social series about a charming, sixteen-year-old girl named Bree, who speaks directly to her community of virtual friends from her laptop camera in the safety and comfort of her bedroom (figure 2). The *LG15* Web-blog’s profound impact on the public’s imagination continued long past the discovery that Bree was not an actual teenaged girl but rather played by a twenty-year-old actress named Jessica Rose. A *Los Angeles Times* journalist traced the origins of Bree’s blog back to Hollywood insider and Creative Artist Agency (CAA) agent Amanda Solomon, the eventual wife and business partner of COO

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Greg Goodfried. Like *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999, the *LG15* Web series (2006–present) has had a special hold over the public, which can be explained in Geertzian terms as a symbolic structure that binds the participants “into a set of rules which at once contains them and allows them [a space of interactive] play” (Geertz 449–50).

Although the film sequel to *The Blair Witch Project*, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000), failed at the box office, the later iterations of the *LG15* franchise continued to provide satisfying outlets for the expression of a specific set of cultural themes—namely, the compulsive urge among a mostly young, relatively affluent, tech-savvy audience to “stay connected” with a virtual community. One explanation for the public’s acceptance of the *LG15* spin-offs may derive from their greater similarity to branded extensions of familiar network series (e.g., *Dawson’s Creek*’s Dawson’s Desktop and *Nip/Tuck*’s Carver MySpace page).²

As the vertically-integrated studio-media network groups (e.g., Disney-ABC) have become increasingly adept at using Web-based, branded extensions to sell their TV series, journalists, scholars, and pundits alike have all begun to explore the social-cultural implications of having social networks become a new form of ad-supported entertainment. For instance, Kathy Brewis of *The Times Online* (United Kingdom) writes, “Facebook is attractive to advertisers because it’s an educated, affluent demographic. And it’s very sticky; it’s a part of people’s day. It had instant viral momentum. Besides a social phenomenon, it is a business—a very viable, ongoing entity.” The statistics associated with MySpace and Facebook are indeed staggering. At this writing, MySpace has outpaced Facebook in terms of online ad sales, but Facebook has outpaced MySpace with twice as many users.³ The number of Facebook users has quadrupled from 62 million to 200 million from February to November in 2008 since Brewis first observed that “[Facebook] is a shop window business can’t ignore. Till then, many people viewed social-networking sites as something their teenage children did—a toy.”

One would have expected users to reject the incursion of advertising and product integration deals into these new social spaces; however, any public outcry appears to have been muted based on audience’s familiarity with ad-supported “free” TV. For example, there was very little negative reaction to NBC’s landmark product integration deal with Nissan, despite its full penetration of NBC.com, the *Heroes*’s online graphic novel, and the series itself, all of which featured Hiro in a brand new Versa (figure 3). In fact, it is surprising how easily the public has adapted to ad-supported online entertainment in contrast to the avalanche of bad press that accompanied an analogous moment of cultural-industrial transition when television first entered the once “sacred” space of the home. In the late 1940s and early 1950, television was blamed for everything from marital discord to juvenile delinquency (Spigel 36–72). The backlash culminated in the mid-1950s when journalist Charles Sinclair of *Sponsor* magazine reported on Walt Disney’s successful foray into network television via *The Wonderful World of Disney*. He wrote, “Every kind of plug imaginable has been used to boost the new Disneyland amusement park, prompting one ABC-TV official in

New York network headquarters to paraphrase Churchill by stating: ‘Never have so many people made so little objection to so much selling’ (102). In hindsight, Sinclair’s prescient article represents a clear assessment of Disney’s entry on the scene as the first fully-operational, multiplatform, convergent version of a modern entertainment conglomerate that prevails today.

Despite the relative ease with which ad-supported social networks have become accepted parts of our collective social fabric, this new past-time is not without its naysayers—even from within the Web producer workforce. Just as the cockfights betray a dark, violent, and rage-filled subtext in the Balinese social system, so too, the growing number of users visiting Facebook and My Space (and, by extension, social series like *Lonelygirl115*) invoke a darker cultural subtext for the Net generation. John DiMinico, one of a new generation of freelance Web producers who is responsible for the branded extensions of a number of FX series (e.g., *Nip/Tuck*, *Rescue Me*, *Damages*, etc.), explained that he and many of his Hollywood counterparts worry that they are capitalizing on an unhealthy trend. He likened the current obsession with social net-

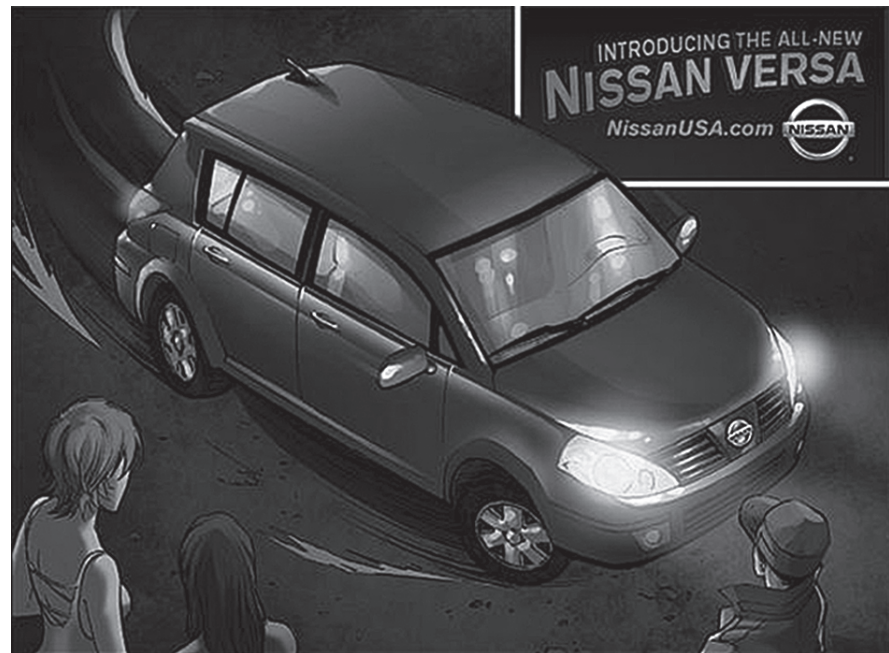


Figure 3. *Heroes*’s 360 (from <<http://www.heroesrevealed.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/nissan.JPG>>).



Figure 4. *LG15: The Resistance*'s Sarah (from <http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3214/2809087039_25f63885a7.jpg>).

works such as Facebook to eating sugary breakfast cereals; in other words, it provides a momentary lift, followed by a profound slump in mood, resulting in the compulsion to consume more, creating a vicious cycle of dependence and urgency (personal communication, interview with John DiMinico, UCLA, October 13, 2009).

***LG15*'s Revolutionary Call to Action! Join the Next Gen Media Consumer**

We as a community can do a lot to change things. So I would like to ask anyone who has an idea for a video addressing this to send in their videos to Op.RespectOnline@gmail.com so they can be uploaded to the Respect Online youtube account. And remember "I'm not a name, I'm a person!" Who's in? (<<http://www.youtube.com/respectonline>>)

EQAL is at the forefront of a cultural-industrial revolution in entertainment by bridging the gap between old and new media practices. The company has accomplished this by combining serialized narratives and casual gaming activities in a way that helps obscure the feelings of emptiness and compulsion at the heart of the social network experience. Furthermore, the EQAL team has learned how to insert additional layers of meaning into their latest installment of the franchise—*LG15: The Resistance*—by inflecting the viewer's engagement with a "revolutionary" urgency (figure 4). By inviting fans to "join the resistance," and by telling them to remember, "I'm not a name, I'm a person!" the Web producers have stumbled on a way of granting their predominantly young, female viewers a sense of purpose and identify that may be lacking in their real lives at home and at school. The implication is that by joining *LG15: The Resistance*'s "call to action," the fans are fighting the dominant order in the series' narrative as represented by the evil pharmaceutical companies that are pursuing young women as guinea pigs for their research. Of course, the subtext of the "call to action!" is an invitation to become more "engaged" with this ad-sponsored entertainment. In an ironic reversal of Stuart Hall's much debated "Encoding/Decoding" article and Hall's three types of reader engagement with the mass media—dominant, mediated, and oppositional—the EQAL team has introduced the superficial impression of an oppositional reading to grant fans an illusory sense of power and potency. Hall's introduction of the "oppositional reader" was originally conceived as an antidote to the Frankfurt School nihilistic vision of mass media as the "merchant of false consciousness" given its commitment to advertising. By inviting fans of *LG15* to "get involved" through creating "mash-up" videos, embedding widgets into fan Web sites, and otherwise engaging with the show, the EQAL team has tapped into a growing *prosumer* culture (loosely defined as nonprofessional, creative producers in an emergent market creating DIY content for the Web) while serving the needs of big business (Bruns 1–2).

The Independents versus the "Verticals": Who Will Survive in the "Wild Wild West" Digital Space?

One of the ways that EQAL has ingratiated itself with the *LG15* community of fans is by positioning itself as a group of "independent" Web creators, operating outside the dominant media industries. In spite of deals with Viacom, Google, and other major media conglomerates, the EQAL team has been able to position themselves as underdogs, operating outside of the Hollywood mainstream. This is accomplished in part by maintaining a low overhead and low-budget production aesthetic. One Web producer explained viewers' preference for low-production values online, claiming, "When people are consuming information online, there is definitely a charisma and a charm to the bare-bones approach" (Steinberg 4). However, "these are still early days for Web-based entertainment," the *Advertising Age* journalist observed, and online viewers may start to demand higher production values in the near future. For the moment, advertisers are still willing to speculate in this burgeoning market, with advertisers "expected to spend about \$505 million on online-video advertising in 2008, according to eMarketer, a 55.9% jump from the \$324 million they spent in 2007" (Steinberg 4). Despite the gains, another *Advertising Age* journalist observed that:

Raising money for an ad-supported business is going to be tough for anyone who can't demonstrate a clear, relatively quick path to profitability, and advertisers are about to get a lot more conservative than they've been for the past three years. . . . [looking] to justify it and show results, which means a flight to search and proven sites and less experimentation with social media and new platforms such as Meebo, Twitter, FriendFeed, Drop.io and even YouTube. (Learmonth 1)

The EQAL team has survived the recent boom-and-bust cycle in online video production in large part because of their early success with *Lonelygirl15*, which was followed by *KateModern* in the United Kingdom (set in London and

THEY HAVE MAINTAINED THEIR “STREET CRED” AS CREATORS BY WRITING AND PRODUCING THE CONTENT FOR ALL THEIR SOCIAL SHOWS, AND IN SOME CASES, EVEN PERFORMING AS CHARACTERS, BOTH “IN-GAME” (INSIDE THE NARRATIVE WEBISODE) AND “OUT OF GAME” (BY WRITING BLOGS AS THEMSELVES ON THE LG15 SITE).

primarily aimed at Bebo’s U.K.-centric audience), *Nickola* (a Polish spin-off that started in January 2009), and *LG15: The Resistance* (its new sci-fi iteration). EQAL also has a deal in the works to start a new series in Japan and another in Italy. Notably, the traction achieved by the *Lonelygirl15* franchise did not go unnoticed by the TV networks. At the 2008 network upfronts, CBS hired EQAL to create *Harper’s Globe* (*HG*), an online social show designed to send young viewers to CBS’s new thirteen-part TV series, *Harper’s Island*. Although the fate of *Harper’s Globe* remains in the balance (ever since the May 2009 up-fronts when CBS announced that the low-performing *Harper’s Island* will not be re-upped in the 2009–10 season), the CBS-funded “branded extension” to a network TV series allowed EQAL a means to further expand both their business model and their learning curve beyond what they have already achieved in the three years since *Lonelygirl15* first appeared on the Web.

Despite their relatively brief history, network-generated “branded extensions” to traditional media formats (e.g., *The Lost Experience* ARG, *Heroes*’s online graphic novels, etc.), have nonetheless come under fire recently as the talent guilds—Writers Guild of America (WGA), Screen Actors Guild of America (SAG), and Directors Guild of America (DGA)—and studio-network management debate whether these webisodes,

alternate reality games, and other online formats constitute content or promotions. EQAL has managed to stay out of the fray in large part because they function simultaneously as management and talent *and* because their nonunion productions tend to stay below the radar of the feuding factions. They are able to make these claims despite the fact that they function like a mini-studio, forging financing deals with venture capitalists, negotiating product integration deals with sponsors, providing statistics on viewer demographics to advertisers, managing their own publicity, and overseeing their own digital distribution deals with YouTube, Bebo and others. They have maintained their “street cred” as creators by writing and producing the content for all their social series, and in some cases, even performing as characters, both “in-game” (inside the narrative webisode) and “out of game” (by writing blogs as themselves on the *LG15* site). Notably, whenever viewers react to blatant product-integration deals, EQAL CEO Beckett tends to jump online, reasserting his status as a show creator.

At the moment, indie Web producers like EQAL “can breathe a sigh of relief because networks appear to be focused on full episodes, short series related to their shows and, in some cases, acquiring Web series” (Whitney 1). However, the networks are quickly positioning themselves to become the leaders in the

digital arena as well. The argument for bringing independent shops in-house is a pragmatic one; the networks are eager to buy up the competition. As Paul Condolora, senior vice president of Digital for Turner Animation, states, “Rather than position them as competitors for the same audience, the smarter move is to consolidate the two brands to create a richer, stronger platform” (qtd. in Whitney 1). NBC has been the most proactive of the networks and cables by buying out independent Web production companies and harnessing forty-plus employees to oversee the branded extensions for their series: *Heroes*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, and so forth. In contrast, the senior vice president and general manager of entertainment for CBS Interactive, Anthony Soohoo, explains why they partnered with EQAL on *Harper’s Globe*. He states, “If someone has already been successful with the concept, it makes a lot more sense to partner with them than to re-create the wheel” (qtd. in Whitney 1). EQAL partners Beckett and Goodfried have been equally vocal about wanting to maintain their independent status. Beckett explained that he and Goodfried each have gambled their futures—leaving lucrative positions outside the entertainment industry—to become successful Web producers during this “wild, wild West” moment in entertainment when the traditional rules of engagement no longer apply. Neither Beckett nor Goodman wants to start over at the bottom or join a network dot.com division, thereby becoming mere cogs in the network bureaucracy. Additionally, an unspoken fear may be that they will alienate their fans if they align themselves too closely with a major media corporation.

To help preserve their independence and continue to operate as full-service content providers for the Web, the two men have become adept at self-promotion both on the Web and off. On the one hand, Beckett and Goodfried are engaged in traditional forms of self-promotion by steadily appearing on the talking circuit—delivering PowerPoint lectures at industry events like NAPTE, appearing on panels at local universities, meeting fans at Comi-con and other public

arenas; however, what is novel and new about their self-promotional activities is that they have also carefully knitted information about their company and its practices into the social series via the *LG15 Insider.com* link. In other words, the team has taken industrial self-reflexivity to new heights by marrying more conventional self-promotional activities to the “engagement” and “community-building” associated with their social series. The *LG15 Insider.com* page provides a forum for EQAL to warehouse their positive press (from both industry trade articles and nonprofessional blogs), making these documents readily available to fans who are eager to know more about the benevolent creators of a favorite interactive show; however, the documents are equally available to prospective investors—that is, venture capitalists, advertisers, and studio-network “verticals.” This constantly updated pool of self-promotional information about EQAL exposes the increasingly fluid line dividing content from self-promotion in today’s still evolving broadband environment. The flagrant self-promotion and appearances online by Beckett and Goodfried are comparable, in many respects, to uber-independent producer Walt Disney’s decision fifty years earlier to facilitate his entry into the Hollywood mainstream by hosting *The Wonderful World of Disney*. Much like *LG15*’s *Insider.com* Web page, the ABC series contained a potpourri of self-promotional, behind-the-scenes content devoted to selling Disney’s theme park, movies, and vast array of Disney-related merchandise. As we have seen in the preceding pages, the EQAL team has succeeded in blurring other lines in the sand: between professional and prosumer production quality; between scripted, completed productions and real-time Web exchanges after a *LG15* webisode is aired; and between on-screen and “behind-the-scenes” information that now doubles as entertainment. As a result, we have seen a number of important continuities between old media and new that helped soften the future shock associated with EQAL’s so-called new media revolution.

Concluding Remarks

As these preliminary findings indicate, EQAL has taught other industry insiders how to create a powerful emotional alignment with fans by creating an illusion of full transparency, which, paradoxically, serves the company’s inherently capitalist enterprise by delivering online viewers to advertisers. Whereas members of the network TV industry have worked studiously over the past four decades to preserve the “fourth wall” in their scripted series to hide product-integration deals, DVD profits, video-streaming partnerships, or any other tangible evidence of corporate, “hard-sell” techniques—today’s social shows are foregrounding their behind-the-scenes operations as part of their community-building enterprise. In doing so, the EQAL team has discovered an ingenious means of making viewers feel as if they are opposing the dominant media industry (without any of the unpleasant alienation effect that Brecht prescribes as an antidote to its ideological effects). They have accomplished all this while adhering to their rather modest (and inherently traditional mass media) goal of “amas[sing] the type of statistics that advertisers want about user interaction before they turn over their ad dollars” (Abels).

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NOTES

1. For additional information, see also <<http://ssr1.uchicago.edu/NEWPRE/CULT98/Geertz1.html>>.

2. For Dawson’s Desktop, see <<http://www.sonypictures.com/tv/shows/dawson/desktop>>. For *Nip/Tuck*’s Carver MySpace page, see <<http://www.myspace.com/thecarver>>.

3. Brewis writes, “. . . MySpace continues to dominate the U.S. market—where the bulk of online advertising revenues reside—both in terms of monetization and user engagement with more than 76 million unique users and a 40% spike in engagement year over year.”

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