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■ Viewers' Appetite For Webisode Serials Opens Doors To Commercial Success

March 13, 2007

By WILLIAM WEIR, The Hartford Courant

When Francis Stokes showed his movie "Harold Buttleman: Daredevil Stuntman" at film festivals a few years ago, he was grateful for an audience of 30.

But when Stokes uploaded a more recent creation, a comedy series called "God, Inc.," onto [YouTube](#) this year, he had considerably better luck. The first episode has been viewed more than a million times. Now there's talk of pitching it as a TV series. He figures the six-episode series cost about \$80 to make.

"It's led to a lot of meetings, which is exciting for me," says Stokes, 34. "I'm an independent filmmaker, so I didn't try to work my way up through the Hollywood system."

Until recently, episodic comedy had pretty much been the exclusive domain of television - and breaking in was a mysterious and tough nut to crack. But a generation of YouTube auteurs are making names for themselves writing, directing and performing their own serial comedy shows. Many of these endeavors - if they'd been made at all - would likely have languished on local cable access TV a few years ago. Now they're reaching audiences around the world.

Episodes usually last no more than five or six minutes, and the time lag between episodes can vary

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'Chad Vader'
(BLAME SOCIETY PRODUCTIONS)

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greatly. Many of these Web comedies ("webisodes"? "webodies"?) have that slapdash "Let's make a home video!" feel about them. But others boast clever writing and surprisingly polished (though very low-budget) productions.

Take, for instance, "[Chad Vader: Dayshift Manager](#)."

It's the story of Darth Vader's less charismatic brother and his grocery-store job. It sounds like an idea that would wear thin quickly, but the Wisconsin team of Aaron Yonda and Matt Sloan have mapped out the hapless Vader's professional ups and downs and romantic foibles over six episodes so far.

In the pre-YouTube era, the chances of a bookstore employee (Sloan) and metal-shop worker (Yonda) breaking into showbiz would be slim. But the two have been meeting regularly with network bigwigs and are represented by the William Morris Agency.

Yonda and Sloan, both 34, spend about \$800 to make each episode. A grocery store in Madison lets them film on location, and their friends lend their acting skills for free. Soon they expect to be in a position to hire their friends and pay them real money.

They share the writing and directing duties. Yonda wears the Vader suit, while Sloan does an impressive James Earl Jones impression for the voice. Sloan also plays Chad's nemesis.

Their Vader-in-a-store idea has netted them some decent jobs creating viral videos for companies, making them enough to allow them to quit their day jobs. But they're more excited about the exposure that "Chad Vader" has brought them.

"The biggest resource that we're getting from this is an audience," Sloan says. "I think that's more valuable than the money we're making off of it."

"[Red vs. Blue](#)," which first appeared on the Internet in 2003, was one of the first big serial-comedy successes on the Web. It's also the best-known example of machinima - a kind of animation that uses the characters and backdrops of videogames, with dialogue dubbed over the action. In the case of "RvB," as it's known to fans, the footage comes from the Xbox games "Halo" and "Halo 2."

The creators' dialogue give personalities to the otherwise indistinct red and blue soldiers, who often hold existential discussions about their strange plight and the absurdity of war. It has been shown on Spike TV, MTV and at Lincoln Center. Critics have likened the dialogue to that of Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard. Its creators in Austin, Texas, have developed about 100 episodes, most of which are available on DVD.

That's the kind of mainstream crossover that California resident Brian Dalton hopes to obtain for his creation, "[Mr. Deity](#)." The show centers on Mr. Deity, who may or may not be God, depending on whether you buy Dalton's insistence that his character isn't quite so specific. He's surrounded by second-guessers questioning his handling of human matters on Earth.

Dalton, 41, uploaded his first episode in January, and it almost immediately took off on YouTube. Now he wants to turn his series into a weekly sitcom. "It would be a very different show," he says, with more involved stories and character development than the Web version. He shoots the episodes, each about five minutes long, in about five hours and

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edits them in a day.

"It's a gut-wrenching process, because I hate looking at myself," says Dalton, who plays the eponymous character.

As for "Chad Vader," Yonda and Sloan are filming the final episodes of their first "season." Though "Star Wars" creator George Lucas has objected to other Internet projects that have played off of his space epic, Yonda says he hasn't heard from the filmmaker. He figures Lucas is a fan.

"George Lucas knows that the Internet is the place where 'Star Wars' will live on," Yonda says. "It's where new generations will learn about 'Star Wars.'"

BREAKOUT WEBISODES:

CHAD VADER: www.splu.net

- Premise -- Darth's sibling suffers backtalk from slacker employees and a demotion to nightshift; battles his rival, Clint, for the affections of cashier Clarissa.
- YouTube views -- 3.5 million for the first episode
- Crossover potential -- Pretty good, considering the audience so far. Its creators are also developing a video for a VH1 show featuring crime-solving radio DJs.

YACHT ROCK: www.yachtrock.com

- Premise -- A fictional look back to the heady days of soft rock, when Christopher Cross and Loggins & Messina ruled the airwaves. In the first episode, a foul-mouthed John Oates challenges the yacht rockers to a songwriting duel.
- YouTube views -- 91,000 for Episode 1
- Crossover potential -- Not much, barring a sudden surge of interest in the formative days of soft rock. On the other hand, Drew Carey makes a cameo in Episode 9.

MR. DEITY: www.mrdeity.com

- Premise -- God parsing the particulars of humanity's fate. For instance, denying humans the power to harm others with their thoughts alone. Genocide, on the other hand, gets the OK.
- YouTube Views -- 154,000 for Episode 1
- Crossover potential -- The religious content might keep networks away, but it might work on premium cable.

ASK A NINJA: askaninja.com/

- Premise -- The Ninja helpfully answers viewers' questions ("Do ninjas have award shows?"), then tells them he looks forward to killing them.
- YouTube Views -- 2 million
- Crossover potential -- The creators have appeared on VH1's "Best Week Ever," and their website says they're producing an animated
- show called "Kinzai Ninjas" that will be out later in 2007.

GOD, INC.: francisstokes.com

- Premise -- Bureaucracy and interdepartmental politics dictate the events on Earth. It's like "The Office" in heaven.
- YouTube views -- 1.25 million for the first episode
- Crossover potential -- It's pretty close in structure to the conventional workplace comedies, so it stands a chance. Creator Stokes is also working on a film, "Time Travel for Dummies," about guys who steal an hour so they can buy beer.

Contact Bill Weir at wweir@courant.com.

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