

TV Writers Vault - Industry Executive Interview

Nate Barlow - Vice President of New Media - Automatic Pictures

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The Television Writers Vault is very pleased to have Nate Barlow, Vice President of New Media at Automatic Pictures, Inc., in a personal interview with TVWritersVault.com prexy, Scott Manville, for our continuing series of conversations with key Industry executives.

Mr. Barlow oversees all New Media development and projects in the digital domain for Automatic Pictures, Inc., in addition to traditional project developments as an independent Producer. He is an executive member of the Television Writers Vault, and shares with us his thoughts on digital entertainment and the new Hollywood.



Scott Manville: Thanks for sharing your time, Nate. I'm excited to learn a bit about the "digital Hollywood" that seems to be opening up a whole new world for studios, producers, and content creators.

Nate Barlow: Thank you, Scott. It's my pleasure.

SM: How did you get your start in the business, and what has the road been like for you?

NB: Since I came into the industry pretty cold, with only a couple of contacts (and not close ones at that), I started off working crew for free on student films just to gain experience. Other than a couple acting and filmmaking courses in college (my degree is in computer engineering), my entertainment education prior to the on-set apprenticing was largely studying films and reading books, so I needed as much hands-on training as I could find. On those productions I made many friends and we transitioned to paying gigs together, bringing each other along.

SM: Help me understand, when you're developing projects, are you gearing them specifically for the internet or other digital devices and outlets, or do you focus on traditional tv/film projects and if they happen to have a life in new media, then great?

NB: I believe every project has its natural format for which it is best suited. That doesn't mean there aren't other elements, intrinsic or correlated, that work at least as well, if not better, in other media. So I look at every concept with a multi-media approach: filmed entertainment, websites, games, graphic novels, prose, you name it.

SM: Without breaking any confidences, can you describe the types of projects you're currently working on?

NB: At Automatic Pictures we have one giant property entitled The Looking Glass Wars,

which started as a novel trilogy and then expanded into graphic novels, MMOs, other games, etc. Of course, movies are being planned. Separate from Automatic, I've been writing an adaptation of a children's fantasy novel for Kerouac Films and negotiating the sale of one of my spec scripts. I'm also producing an indie film and consulting on a couple other projects.

SM: How many projects are you working on at any given time?

NB: That constantly varies, but let me see, that's six at the current moment!

SM: Can you shed any light on how the advertising models/strategies differ between traditional and new media? Do advertisers trust internet-based entertainment?

NB: Most web advertising is cost-per-click (CPC) and/or cost-per-impression (CPM), a very different model than the television/radio/print advertising buys with which we are accustomed. You're not paying for air time, only those specific end users whom you reach. And the rates per conversion are very, very low. A small percentage of ad campaigns are sponsorships, which more closely mirror traditional patterns in that the advertiser pays for X amount of time of specific page placement. Such campaigns, however, tend to be limited to very large sites and/or very specific niches in which a very specific product is marketed to a very specific audience. When you are limited to CPC and CPM, as many new media productions are, you're returns are very low unless you become a HUGE hit.

SM: From your experience and view, how has the emergence of new media and the internet as an outlet influenced decisions during the development of projects? Is it just another distribution channel, or is it a direct influence on the types of shows produced?

NB: It's definitely influenced production on the low-budget end of things, since it provides a distribution outlet for those people who otherwise may not have had one. Since those productions are often made as labors of love or just to be showcased, they have fared the best. Many of the more highly budgeted productions aimed primarily at new media (those with serious venture capital or studios/networks behind them) have been shuttered since they have failed to be profitable, and the corporations behind them are all about the bottom line. The problem is, you can't simply think of new media as a distribution channel unless you are doing so solely as a secondary outlet (ala Hulu) to earn some extra money. Just as television and DVD and film are all unique markets with their own considerations, new media has its own paradigms that must be recognized and accounted for when producing for it as your primary intended distribution outlet if you have any hope of being profitable

SM: What advice can you give to concept creators and writers who want to venture into new media?

NB: Design for the medium! I think the reason why so many new media projects don't find an audience is that people try to work television or other concepts into a new media format because it's a readily available distribution platform—perhaps the only one available for the creators, or at least the only one the can attain. Unfortunately, that usually doesn't work. As I said previously, everything has its natural medium. Create with that in mind.

I believe that the killer app for new media entertainment properties (particularly filmed ones) is still on the horizon. If one can discover that new twist that truly separates new media from film and television, the one that defines the format, that person will be set for life.

SM: What do you look for in a great project? Are you specific in the types of projects you take on, or is it, "I'll know it when I see it?"

NB: I'm definitely an "I'll know it when I see it" kind of person. At the core it has to have a

great concept. There are plenty of horribly executed scripts with brilliant ideas behind them. Often, one needs to look beneath the surface.

SM: We all know that ideas get sold, developed, written, and some produced. Regarding the creation of any show, can you describe the importance of Idea versus Execution?

NB: Idea is the concept; Execution is how the Idea is brought to life. Execution is worthless without Idea. At the script stage, both are necessary, but a great Idea even more so. Execution will definitely help one sell a good Idea, but a bad Idea with great Execution is still a bad Idea, no matter how polished the appearance; great Execution simply can't hide that fact. That being the case, Idea is without a doubt more critical; it can always be rewritten once purchased. On the other hand, a lot of executives and producers won't sit through bad Execution to find a potentially good Idea underneath (although some will), hence Execution's importance.

Of course, when it comes to the final product, Execution is just as critical as Idea. No one will watch a bad production just because the Idea is great.

SM: For Writers at the TV Writers Vault pitching projects, would you take on a project that wasn't specifically geared for new media, and develop it for digital venues?

NB: If I felt there was some element of the project that made sense for a new media production, yes. But, as you can probably guess from what I've already said, I would never try to force a project into a new media production just to make a new media production.

SM: Thanks Nate! I look forward to seeing more of your great work at Automatic Pictures.

NB: Thank you! It's been a pleasure, and I hope to have more great news soon!