Producers and writers deal on digital future

Hollywood must decide how players get paid for movies out in e-land.

By Jay A. Fernandez, Special to The Times
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In any fragile negotiation, language is everything. The right word choice can mean the difference between a handshake and a sucker punch.

This last weekend, producer Peter Guber took a cue from the understated rhetoric of our current political theater and described the developing fight between the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers and Writers Guild of America over future digital revenue as a "jihad." The forum was AMC's "Sunday Morning Shootout" -- Hollywood's answer to "Meet the Press" -- and hosts Guber and Variety Editor in Chief Peter Bart had invited Writers Guild, West President Patric Verrone.

"If this is going to ultimately be a jihad, a holy war over how we're going to slice up the digital pie, you have to have a club behind your back," said Guber, former chairman of Sony Pictures. "Is the club a strike? Is the club a lockout? Is the club a shutdown?"

As amusing as it may be to envision TV and film writers as an unholy Shia and Sunni alliance battling the godless, capitalist overlords, the tenor of the contract negotiations has been relatively civil so far, despite the writers' discomfort with the producers' initial residuals rollback proposal three weeks ago. But the rhetoric is heating up.

"More and more, the business of Hollywood is not about finished product -- the script or the teleplay," said Bart. "Now, the obsessive activity of the community is all about how to slice and dice that material so it can be recycled, re-purposed, downloaded and whatever. ... What piece of the action does the creator of the original material really possess anymore?"

Verrone acknowledged the ethical fuzziness of the user-generated revolution, even volunteering that he used his own first VCR in the early '80s to cut "Citizen Kane" into chronological order.

"We as writers feel very strongly that this industry is changing," said Verrone, a lawyer and former editor of the Harvard Lampoon who went on to write for "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson," "Futurama" and "The Simpsons." "We don't know how these things are gonna evolve and develop. But because we don't have crystal balls, we need to have the other kind. ... If we can develop systems with them that allow us to get our fair share -- and by "us" I mean the writers, the directors and the actors -- that's really ultimately what we're after."

Last week, the AMPTP locked in deals with the Teamsters and several craft unions, so it's gearing up to exchange potential dates with the WGA to resume their talks.

Asked directly by Guber if noise about a potential strike is an idle threat, Bart pointedly alluding to the WGA's current closeness with the Directors Guild of America, Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, explained the Guild's resolute-but-cautious approach to pulling the strike trigger the way any self-respecting writer would: he quoted "The Godfather" (with, of course, respectful credit given to screenplay authors Francis Coppola and Mario Puzo):

"Blood is a big expense."

Would someone read this script? Much like men thinking about sex, every 6 seconds in Hollywood someone complains about it.
about having to read a screenplay.

An agent can't watch Junior's soccer game because she has to read 10 scripts this Saturday. Producers prop them up on their Lexus SUV steering wheels between talent meetings. Some directors have assistants read them aloud, while most actors just couldn't be bothered. Even a lot of writers despise reading scripts, not excluding their own.

With a partly selfish motivation as overwhelmed producers, Mark Roberts and Lorena David ("Extreme Dating") have just launched a new service called iScript that is designed to provide writers with aural, adaptable, mobile versions of their screenplays. A writer submits his script, and for $125 for works under 56 pages or $175 to $225 for feature-length screenplays, someone will read and record the entire script. The typical turnaround is two days.

The hook is that iScript makes a writer's work available in formats downloadable to iPhones, MP3 players and PDAs, making it that much easier for producers and other potential buyers to spend valuable PCH bumper-to-bumper time "reading" more scripts. (A separate function allows the writer to share it with invited users via the iScript website.)

Anyone who's tried to use Final Draft's robotic voice assignation function so he can hear his dialogue knows how immediately counterproductive it is -- more than anything, it calls to mind that sinister "fitter happier" lecture on Radiohead's "OK Computer": "... still kisses with saliva, no longer empty and frantic. . . ." Its only inspiration is to get you thinking of creative ways to end your own life.

And not many people have access to enough actors to organize a full-cast table read -- unless you employ the extended family at Thanksgiving dinner, but who needs Uncle Chet and Grandpa Phil arguing over who gets to play Morpheus?

Based on a few iScript samples on the site, its effectiveness will depend on how dynamic the specific reader's intonations are, even more so than with audiobooks (now a huge profit-generator for the publishing business).

Roberts and David have mostly stocked their reading pool with theater actors, and the customer can not only request gender but can also suggest performance characteristics that best play to the screenplay's genre. For one script, a female reader even put on accents for both the Latino male and British female protagonists. (Roberts and David have had requests for two readers, but the economics and timeframe become less workable.)

At the very least, the recording could serve the writer by illuminating unseen problems in the script.

As a bonus, unimpressed producers and executives can't cut up MP3 files and write phone messages across the back.

Scriptland is a weekly feature on the work and professional lives of screenwriters. Please e-mail any tips or comments to fernandez_jay@hotmail.com.