

May 9, 2015 Updated : May 9, 2015 | 11:19 am

T.O. Webfest celebrates Toronto's online creators



By [Luke Simcoe](#) Metro



Actress Elysia White plays the main character, Maxine, in *Haphead* (Contributed)

The second annual [T.O. Webfest](#) is coming to Toronto, bringing with it a raft of creators who care more about YouTube views than Nielsen ratings.

The three-day event takes places May 22 to 24, and features free screenings of web series at the Bloor Hot Docs Cinema, as well as panels and networking opportunities for web creators.

“Five years ago, people thought of web content as cat videos, but it’s become a really good place for storytelling,” said festival spokesman Dan Speerin. “I can guarantee that there are web series in our community that are doing better than some Canadian television shows.”

Ahead of the festival, Metro spoke with some local web creators whose work will be showcased over the weekend. Here’s what they had to say about thinking outside the box.

Davin Lengyl, creator of Space Janitors

In 2006, Davin Lengyl quit his job at a Bay Street law firm to help a friend co-produce a web series about video game players.

Nearly a decade later, he’s got no regrets.

“I probably could have been rich by now, but I did what I wanted to do instead,” the 39-year-old said.

Lengyl’s latest project, Space Janitors, follows the misadventures of menial labourers on board a futuristic space station. The series, now in its third season, has received a number of accolades and will be featured at T.O. Webfest.

Much of the show is filmed in front of a green screen, and Lengyl taught himself how to create the special effects and CGI. Fortunately, he says one of the perks about working on a web series is that the online audience is more forgiving when it comes to production value.

“There’s a lower bar in terms of production. You can literally film something on your phone and reach a million people.”

Like other web producers, Lengyl has cobbled together funding for Space Janitors through different sources, ranging from crowd-funding campaigns to audience members who have paid for product placement.

“In web-land, the audience definitely helps you make the show,” he said.

Jill Golick, creator of Ruby Skye P.I.

Jill Golick is one of the most successful and supportive members of Toronto’s web series community. She’s a co-founder of the Independent Web Series Creators of Canada, and her latest project, Ruby Skye P.I., recently finished its third season.

Many people associate web series with sci-fi and sketch comedy, but Golick believes the medium is great for children’s programming.

“Kids are the most agnostic audience ever,” she said. “They don’t care whether something was made for T.V. or delivered on an iPad, all they care about is getting a great story.”

Golick said web series can serve as a counterpoint to modern kid's programming, which "is driven by large corporate concerns" and features an abundance of young female characters sporting "jewelry, make-up and high heels."

"We really wanted to create more relatable television," she said. "The television offerings for children are very narrow ... and there are parents out there searching for something different for their kids."

Golick is among a growing number of web creators whose shows are getting picked up by major broadcasters. Ruby Skye P.I. recently made the jump from YouTube to CBC Kids.

"Broadcasters are recognizing there's a new way to create and market test content," she said. "There's a creativity happening outside of the traditional industry and they want to tap into that."

Jason Leaver, creator of Out With Dad



TDS grads Kate Conway and Lindsey Middleton starring in the international award-winning web series *Out With Dad*

Jason Leaver started his web series, *Out With Dad*, in 2010. Since then, the show has racked up more than 24 million views.

"I think we're the most-watched web series ever made in Canada," he said.

The show follows Rose, a teenage girl who comes out as a lesbian to her single father. Leaver believes it's a story that wouldn't necessarily get told on network television.

"Web series are a great place for stories that aren't mainstream," he said. "No one is doing a web series about six white friends hanging out in a coffee shop."

While big-budget television shows need to cater to a mass audience, web series can succeed just by tapping into small online communities, Leaver said.

"The Internet is so vast and so many people are connected. So, even if your audience is tiny, it's still a lot of people," he said.

Partly because of the medium and partly because of the subject matter, Leaver said fans of *Out With Dad* are very passionate about the show. Some have written him to say the series gave them the courage to come out to their parents, while others have volunteered hours of their time to translate the show into different languages.

"We are crazy spoiled for fans," he said.

Sean Lerner, producer on Haphead

Written by Toronto indie game developer Jim Munroe, [Haphead](#) is a sci-fi series set in a world where people can learn skills – including martial arts – by playing video games.

Producer Sean Lerner comes from an independent film background and says working on a web series has been a great experience.

"The Toronto web series community is very supportive. I've met with other web series producers and they're always forthcoming with information and sharing," he said.

Lerner said *Haphead* may not have been possible without help from the [Independent Production Fund](#), an endowment established in 1991 that has since become a major supporter of web series.

"Canada is really at the forefront with web series and it's because of the IPF," he said. "It gives people in Canada the ability to access money and put a half-decent web series together."