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So Dr Horrible's Sing-Along Blog was a roaring success, glitches aside. What lessons can be learned from its webisode release, and ... what happens now?



'What, do you think Bad Horse didn't work on his whinny? His terrible death-whinny?' ... Neil Patrick Harris as Dr Horrible

Call me old fanboy, but with Dr Horrible, scriptwriter Joss Whedon has once again exceeded all my hopes and expectations. And I'm not the only one: the three-part internet mini-series, which was free to view from 15 to 20 July, has become a phenomenal internet hit, clocking 200,000 hits an hour on the first day.

A couple of major glitches on the first day. They'd forgotten about viewers outside the US (grrr!), who found they couldn't access the video. It took a few hours for that to be sorted. Shortly afterwards, the site - at one point bombarded with 1000 hits per second - simply crashed (aaargh!), and remained out of action for another few hours.

Lesson 1: don't assume that because the internet is international, access is too. Even now, Dr Horrible is available only on iTunes America (where it's become the number one video download). Outside the US, viewers are eager to pay for it - but currently, they can't. They'll have to wait for the planned DVD release.

Lesson 2: web-based distribution can work, in certain conditions. Combine the reputation of Joss Whedon (for whom cast and crew will go an extra mile) with an internet-savvy fanbase who will gladly travel that mile, and the buzz creates a hit without any actual marketing. Of course, recouping the costs is a different matter.

But it's not just about buzz, it's about delivering. If Dr Horrible hadn't lived up to the promise, the verdict would have been all over the internet in no time, turning hits to misses around the world.

But it does deliver. The picture quality was great. The script was sharp and witty, with lots of lines that you'd replay in the hope of one day of using them yourself (the fanboy is speaking again, here). The episodes neatly divide into 15-minute chapters - ideal for short attention span net-heads - each with a cliff-hanger ending, even the finale (could this become an established programme format for the web?).

But it's the story arc that keeps you going. It opens with a set-up, softens you up with the funnies and the sillies, thus leading you willingly up the garden path before turning round and punching you in the gut. Ouch! Talk about bait and switch.

And it's left me reeling with questions:

What did you make of the social morality in that final episode? Sure, in the Whedonverse there are no straightforward goodies and baddies. But is he pointing an accusing finger at politics-as-presentation (with its "deltoids of compassion") and at the airheaded collusion of the media ("it's a good day to be homeless!")? And is anyone else picking up a making-of-a-fanatic/terrorist/gun-rampager story? Dr Horrible thinks society is corrupt (and we see that it is), but it's because of feted all-American hero, corporate tool and slimeball bully Captain Hammer that he goes "evil". The collateral damage falls on the innocent and the dispossessed, but do we take Penny, the do-good liberal, as innocent, principled or hopelessly naive? And is the escalating conflict she's caught in basically about masculinity?

Speaking of which, what was with the "Who's gay?" section? I'm taking the answer to be the guy in the trio of fans, plus the pink-gloved avenger-type who appeared with Moist. Yes, but WHY?

The damn subtext is driving me crazy. I need answers! Does anyone have any?

I sign off with three predictions:

1. Sales of frozen yoghurt will rise, globally.
2. Nathan Fillion will have to get used to people coming up to him and asking "What's the hammer?"
3. This is the beginning. Of something.

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