

Narrative Franchises: Stuart Kelban's Response:

I make my living as both a university professor and a professional screenwriter for film and TV. Since this panel is well-represented by the former, I'd like to respond to this question as the latter.

As a member of the Writers Guild of America, I joined my brother and sister screenwriters on the picket lines during our most recent strike. Though the issues involved were many and complex, the strike largely revolved around questions about writing for new media. Really just one question: how will we get paid? After months of acrimonious build-up, then four months of a contentious strike, an agreement was finally hammered out between the negotiating parties and sent for ratification to every WGA member. Here is an excerpt:

"Television Ad-Supported Streaming (New Programs): Ad-supported streaming of television programs is payable at 2% of distributor's gross receipts one year from the end of an initial streaming window. There is an initial window of 17 days (24 days for episodes of the first season of a series, one-off television programs, and MOWs) with no residual. This window must include or occur contiguous to the initial television exhibition. In the first and second years of this contract, after the initial window, for network prime time television programs, a fixed residual of 3% of the residual base ("applicable minimum") is paid for each of up to two 26-week periods. For an hour program, this fee is \$654 per period in the first year of the contract; \$677 per period in the second year. For a half-hour the figures are \$360 and \$373."

The contract continues in that vein for many more pages.

Now I'm a writer, not a lawyer, and honestly, I couldn't follow a single word of this – I barely recognized this as English. And I'm willing to bet I wasn't alone. And yet, 93% of my fellow screenwriters voted "yes" to ratify this contract. Which makes me think if they'd been asked to ratify the Los Angeles yellow pages, they would have voted "yes", simply to end the strike. After four months on strike, they just wanted to go back to work. They wanted to ensure their livelihood. They wanted to make money.

Which leads me to the topic of "Narrative Franchises". Because when we ask how "syndicated storytelling functions within larger narrative franchises", what we're really talking about is money. And when we're talking about money, we better define our terms:

As a TV writer, when I hear the word "franchise", I think of it in several distinct contexts. As someone who writes pilots, "franchise" refers to the central conceit of a TV series – the "high concept" which draws an audience back week after week. "A cheerleader who slays vampires"... "an irascible doctor who diagnoses difficult cases"... A clear, strong franchise is essential to a series' success; it's what keeps viewers tuning-in and advertising dollars flowing.

Now if I'm lucky enough to get my series on the air, then "franchise" assumes a different – and more lucrative – meaning. In this case, "franchise" refers to those big, plodding elephants which keep a network fat-and-happy: the "Law and Order" franchise, the "CSI" franchise. These are the franchises that network executives get most excited about: the spin-offs that keep spinning-off profits.

But the use of "franchise" in this roundtable is different, I believe. This use of "franchise" is concerned with things like "synergy across multiple platforms". In other words, franchises within franchises. Or \$³.

So no matter what the definition, "franchise" – as all things in the entertainment industry – comes down to money. And profits. And while I'm concerned with those things too – even to the extreme of going on strike, at great risk to career and livelihood – my main concerns still remain creative ones: story, character, structure. When I'm writing a TV pilot, do I spend much time thinking about "franchise" in all its myriad definitions? Well, yes, I do think a lot about the show's central conceit. I even dream a bit about spin-offs and their never-ending residuals. But as far as video games, internet distribution, action figures based on my show...no, I don't give those much thought.

But I bet J.J. Abrams does.