

No Superpowers

December 17, 2007

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I've been somewhat-obsessively following [the recent writers' strike in Hollywood](#). It's got a lot of attraction for me. First, it's a big, bold, public labor battle — the kind you don't see much anymore. And second, it's filled with people I know. (Yes, I'm the dork who actually tries remember the names of the authors of the TV shows I watch.)

For those who haven't been following, the story is something like this: [Amazingly](#), Hollywood doesn't consist of actors on soundstages simply saying the brilliant lines that come to them in the moment. Instead, people called “writers” slave away in darkness to craft plots and dialogue which are then turned into scripts for the rest of the people in Hollywood to follow.

Despite their importance, writers haven't been given much due in Hollywood. They work as employees for studios who pay them money in exchange for the copyrights to their scripts. Meanwhile, the studios then turn the scripts into TV shows and movies that go on to run for years, in reruns and syndication and on home video and DVDs and now on the Internet thru streaming and download.

Writers have banded together to form a union, called the Writers' Guild of America, to make sure that, just like authors of songs or books, they get paid when the things they write become a success. These payments are called “residuals” and writers get them when their show reruns or is sold on DVD. The studios have a contract with the guild, and thus with all writers, specifying the minimum amounts they have to pay whenever something like that happens. The guild then audits the studios on behalf of the writers, makes sure they pay their fair share, and then determines which writers deserve the money and mails it out.

Studios are still upset about having to pay writers for their work, wishing they could keep all the profits for themselves. Writers are still upset about not having negotiated a better rate for home video residuals. Right now, when you buy a TV show on DVD, the writers get 0.3% of the price — something like six cents, usually. The studios want to pay them the same pitiful amount for online downloads and pay them nothing at all for online streaming. The writers, not surprisingly, would like to get paid a more fair amount.

So when the contract between the studios and the guild expired weeks ago, the two sides couldn't agree on a replacement. The studios basically refused to seriously negotiate and that refusal has been going on (in various forms) ever since. So the writers went on strike: they're no longer allowed to write a single word for a studio until the contract issues get resolved.

Instead, writers have been out picketing studio gates, making [clever videos online](#), and trying to bring the studios to the table. As a result, much of television has gone off the air, because there are no new scripts to film. *The Daily Show* and other nightly comedy shows disappeared immediately, writer-run shows like *The Office* soon after that, and most of the rest are disappearing as we speak. The studios are continuing to refuse to negotiate.

Along the way I've learned a great deal about the arcanities of labor law (many of which, like *Taft-Hartley*, are everyday words in Hollywood), the oddities of Hollywood jargon (the Alphabet=ABC, hyphenates=writer-producers, etc.), and read many gripping stories about what it's like to be [fighting for your livelihood](#). (*Note to future selves*: Don't get [in a written debate](#) with people who write for a living.)

But perhaps the most touching thing I heard came from J.J. Abrams, the creator of *Alias* and *Lost*, and his partner Damon Lindelof. Both are writers and both are bound by the "pencils down" rule of the strike, even though they're in the middle of filming the new *Star Trek* film, presently Paramount's biggest movie. [John August describes the scene](#):

Neither J.J. nor Damon are writers on the movie. But they are writers, and WGA members. During a WGA strike, you're not allowed to write on movies or television shows, period. So they can't change a word of the script, nor can anyone else. The script they had at 11:59 p.m. November 5th [when the strike started] is the script they have to shoot.

To a screenwriter, that might seem kind of awesome. For once, the director can't change things. But when it's your own movie, it's maddening. J.J. was describing a scene he was shooting the day before. Midway through it, he got a great idea for a new line. Which he couldn't write. Couldn't shoot. Couldn't be in his movie.

Damon described it like having one of your superpowers taken away.

I am not the director of a big Hollywood movie, nor am I striking for my livelihood, or even doing much of anything, but I have to admit, that's how I've been feeling lately. Now that I'm [getting over being very sick](#), I find that I don't feel terribly bad anymore, I just feel kind of tired. All the time.

So I go to finish up a new piece of software I've been working on (I've got dozens, just sitting here, waiting for the finishing touches), and I just can't. I can't type. I feel like someone who's used to having lightning bolts fly out of their hands but now all I get are little sparks. Ssszzt. Szzzt. Bzzt. I've got nothing.

And so I'm stuck here in my room, lots of stuff I want to do, but nothing comes out. It's like having your superpowers taken away. Damon, I really know what you mean.