

Alone With the Crowd

Zhura and similar websites might just reinvent the way we work

GETTING FEEDBACK ON a script is one of the biggest problems screenwriters face. Another is isolation. Imagine a day when a website could solve those problems — and do it for free. Apparently, that day is here.

The recently launched website Zhura.com offers a way to post an idea, treatment, scene, work-in-progress or completed screenplay for comments and feedback. According to its founder, Boston-based entrepreneur and tech whiz Eric MacDonald, an active community of more than 700 users had sprung up within a month of its January launch — the majority in Los Angeles, New York and Boston.

Zhura also offers its own free online screenwriting software, as does another re-



Eric MacDonald

cently launched site, Los Angeles-based Scripped.com, which plans to develop an online community and writing groups in the near future.

For now, Zhura seems to be the more fully realized of the two services. Among other nifty innovations, it lets users set up a personal page with a photo, location, favorite genres, favorite movies, favorite music, etc. In effect, it's a kind of MyWorkSpace for screenwriters.

Users can get to know each other by way of work samples, comments and feedback. They can decide to hook up for coffee and collaboration, or not — since one advantage of the Web-based approach is that it removes the personal relationship that can make giv-

ing notes so hazardous.

Because people who aren't into a script tend to stop reading it and not leave comments, those who do leave them tend to be genuinely interested parties who have something constructive to offer. Users can watch a script evolve via the dialogue between a writer and the note-givers. From what I can tell by perusing the public area, the process seems to be helpful and fast.

Apparently, you don't even have to ask people to read your script. You just post it, like shaking fish food into a tank, and if it looks interesting, they come.

Protecting an idea is naturally a big concern. MacDonald says Zhura has addressed it by adopting the tiered system of licensing called Creative Commons (creativecommons.org).

There's also the option of posting a script in either a public or a private area. "Writers can open their scripts to feedback from the community, or they can restrict access to a private group and invite members into it," MacDonald says. For example, a script that's ready for market can be posted in a private area, and the writer can tell a chosen group of industry pros or other contacts about it. If they choose to read it (and they like it), presumably, they'll be in touch.

Zhura also backs up your work and stores it online so you can access it from anywhere. Sounding good yet?

The site's guiding ideas, says MacDonald, are the concept of software-as-a-service and the desire to bring the collaborative features made possible by Web 2.0 technology to screenwriting.

He and his team developed Zhura over the course of a year using focus groups —

they'd put 20 potential users in a room and run ideas and applications by them for feedback.

Originally, says MacDonald, they designed the platform to be useful for developing sketch comedy — a short form he saw as ideal for collaboration. But then it occurred to them to think bigger. "There are a lot of creative situations where people don't have the skills required to get something from concept to completion, so I thought, what if there was a way to collaborate?" he says.

An engineer by training, MacDonald is somewhat new to the creative side. His re-



sume includes a stint as the managing partner of String Bridge Capital, a private investment company, and 10 years developing innovations at tech companies.

But as he spends time on the site, observing the way people use it, he says he's learning a lot about screenwriting. "This site can be kind of addictive," he says. "It can be really distracting."

The Zhura founder says he foresees the site bringing in revenue at some point, but for now, there's no sign-up or membership fee, and use of both the personal and public areas is free. "We intend to make money at some point," he says. "We'll find a group of features we can monetize, but I'm not sure yet what they'll be."

Scripped.com, developed by UCLA-based MBA student and screenwriter Sunil Rajaraman and his partners, has been developing a community of online users since it introduced its free software several months ago. The site recently announced the addition of an import feature for converting material written with box software programs like Final Draft or Movie Magic (Zhura also offers import capacity). But at presstime, its collaborative features were still in the pipeline.

In any case, the way we work and connect with others seems to be rapidly evolving. **CS**

What's the buzz? Send questions, news, observations and points of view to buzz@creativescreenwriting.com.