
Why Network Television Needs a Minor League

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The writers strike may be over, but its longterm effects are only just beginning to be felt. Chief among them is the question of how to develop new shows for network television. The old model - a pilot season where money is lavished on producing many shows which never see the light of day - is expensive and inefficient.

The answer to this question already exists though - and it's in a place few are looking for examples these days - major league baseball. The major leagues understand that very few high school or college baseball players are ready to hit 100mph fastballs on day one. Instead of setting these guys up for failure, they send them to compete in leagues designed to develop their skills. Those who flourish get a chance to join the big show - the major leagues.

Network executives have already accidentally done this by promoting series like Showtime's Dexter and USA Network's Monk to prime time slots during the strike. Now they should consider a more serious and nuanced development plan.

Internet channels are crying out for content, for one thing. A series could be tested on iTunes, Joost, YouTube or a myriad of other places online. Three or four pilot episodes might be enough to pull together enough of an audience to justify a season-long run on a basic cable station. Then if the audience grows (in size and in passion) the series could make the jump to a broadcast network. This would also give each series a backstory - something for new fans to explore.

The writers' strike has given television networks an unprecedented opportunity to change their business model. It would be a shame to waste it.

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