

## BLACK20 MAKES WEB WAVES

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BY RYAN E. SMITH  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Neil Punsalan quit a job making funny videos in the digital studios department at NBC for this:

Twelve hour days, a huge pay cut, and a New York City subway train that keeps interrupting all of his filming.

"We'll be shooting ... and every seven minutes we'll have to stop because a train is rumbling by," the Oregon native said. "Not only can you hear the train, but it will shake your water glasses."



Neil Punsalan, second from left, is a founder of Black20. Jay LaPlante, right, is a writer for the Web site. Both are from Oregon.

Such are the pitfalls of life on the cutting edge.

For less than a year, Mr. Punsalan, 29, and two of his former colleagues at NBC have been working on the next wave of Internet entertainment on a shoestring budget. They pooled their resources to create the Web site, [www.black20.com](http://www.black20.com), which offers short, polished videos. New ones are added every day.

"Our goal here as a company is to really hopefully take a small step toward changing the way that content is consumed," said Mr. Punsalan, a 1996 graduate of Clay High School who now lives in Brooklyn.

In the age of YouTube, where the Web is bloated with videos of dogs on skateboards and kids falling down stairs, Black20 aims to take things a step further.

It has a slickly produced, wryly written office comedy called *net\_work* that comes in episodes of a few minutes each. A program called *The Middle Show* offers late-night-comedy-type sketches. There's a *Black20 News* program, and a live music show featuring up-and-coming bands is in the works.

They say they like to give a little twist to what you might expect. Remember, this stuff is from the same people who while they were at NBC made "The Easter Bunny Hates You," a video of a person in an Easter Bunny costume beating people up.

Ultimately, said Mr. Punsalan, who is director of content and executive director, the hope is to create a legitimate broadband network with a stable of fresh, original content, "something along the lines of MTV or VH1 but online."

The world is taking notice. The site was written up in the New York Times and has received outside investment to keep things going until it builds up the kind of daily traffic that would help court advertisers.

Since the site's launch in February, its videos have been seen by 25 million viewers across multiple platforms, including MySpace and YouTube, according to J. Crowley, one of Black20's founders.

There's no question that online video is the way things are headed. Fifty-seven percent of online adults have used the Internet to watch or download video, and 19 percent do so on a typical day, according to a recent study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

The next big market is video programming for phones, said Mark Shapiro, editor of Internet Video Magazine. That means short content that 18- to 34-year-olds can download onto their mobile phones - the kind of stuff that Black20 produces.

"In general, I'm really impressed [with Black20]," Mr. Shapiro said. "The editing is good. The acting is good. The writing is good."

Still, group members said there's always that gnawing fear that it might not be profitable.

"No matter how good your product is, it's really hard to monetize right now," said Jay LaPlante, 29, a friend and former classmate from Oregon that Mr. Punsalan recruited to join Black20. He gave up a job with Associated Press to write, produce, and redesign the Web site, a project that should be completed in a few months.

"Ever since being in a band in high school, I've always wanted to recapture that feeling of being surrounded by your friends working together toward a common goal," he said. "If I hadn't done this, I would have always been disappointed in myself."

No one can accuse those at Black20 of not being gutsy.

Mr. Punsalan is a former high school newspaper editor who traded in his biochemistry major at the University of Notre Dame to pursue writing. He switched to communications and eventually landed a job in the page program at NBC giving studio tours.

That's where he met Mr. Crowley, who recruited him to help work on a script that eventually got the green light from NBC Universal President Jeff Zucker. When that project - a comedy Web series - got its budget cut in half, the group drove to Atlantic City and bet the entire remaining budget on one spin of the roulette wheel in the hopes they could still produce their original vision, Mr. Punsalan said.

"We put all of our money on black and it came up black 20," he said.

The show was never released, but at least Mr. Punsalan and his accomplices had a name for their new company when they left NBC's digital division. And, he said, it gave them reason to be optimistic:

"By starting this company, we've definitely placed a large bet on the table again, but like the first time, we believe in our team and in our vision."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: [ryansmith@theblade.com](mailto:ryansmith@theblade.com) or 419-724-6103.

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