

Got Toon-Game Scribe?



MONDAY, JANUARY 21, 2013

Meet Joelle Sellner... Freelance Animation Writer, Copywriter, Video Game Writer, Graphic Novel and Comic Book Writer



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FADE IN: It's no secret, historically the fellas have dominated the writing of superhero cartoon shows. But the ladies have made a significant mark, and making strides daily.



ANGLE ON Freelance Animation Writer and Story Editor of **Samurai! Daycare for Shut Up Cartoons** — **Joelle Sellner**, proves that when it comes to action, like penning her recent **Ben 10 Omniverse** script — gender is definitely not an issue.



Let's not forget our animated divas in front of the camera who refuse to take a back seat to the show's superhero, and continue making their presence known in the action/adventure world.

Kim Possible — one our favorite ninja divas, and **The Powder Puff Girls** — will forever stay in their fans' hearts.

Kim Possible





(Gwen Tennyson)

Ben Tennyson's go-to-cousin, **Gwen**, may not have an Omnitrix on her wrist that transforms her into an alien fighting machine, but she can still kick the aliens' butts without breaking a nail.

Eventhough she's off to college, enjoying the galaxy she fought to save — fans can still see her galactic smarts in many episodes.

We're thrilled Joelle took time out of her busy freelance schedule to chat with *Got Toon-Game Scribe?* for our debut close-up.

She's our first scribe to brave our interview chair. But before we find out about her adventures in animation, let's do a quick pan of her writing career.



(Teen Titans - Cartoon Network)

Joelle sharpened her animation teeth writing for the Cartoon Network, DC Comics, Marvel Studios, Mattel, Porchlight Entertainment, Dic Entertainment and You Tube... for the shows: *Samurai Daycare, Ben 10 Omniverse, Monster High, Hi Hi Puffy Ami Yumi, Teen Titans, Shin Chan, Secret Saturdays and Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes.*

Joelle also swims in the comic book waters, writing for Lion Forge, Marvel and DC comics.

Whipping on her copywriter's hat, she wrote webisodes, videos twitter feeds, mobile phone messages and web copy as eight different Mom characters for Kleenex's *Get Mommed* campaign.

Her copywriting clients include: Draftfcb - one of the largest global advertising networks; StudioCom - An Agency for Digital Times, Team One Advertising and the Rosetta Company (formerly LEVEL) - a consulting-centered interactive agency.

In the game world, she recently wrote story and dialogue for multiple characters and story arcs for Voltage Entertainment.



GTGS: What's the best advice you've ever received from a fellow animation writer?

Joelle:

The best advice I got from another writer was that writing (in any genre) is 5% writing and 95% sales. You always have to pitch yourself and your ideas, so if you're more comfortable staying home and writing than dealing with people this may not be the career for you.

GTGS: What aspects of copywriting prepared you for the transition into animation writing? And what prompted you to enter this field?

Joelle:

Advertising is excellent training for animation writing. Working with an art director at an agency, I learned to think visually. In animation you have to visualize what the scene looks like as well as what the characters are saying.

Also, copywriting teaches you to meet a strict deadline. Your client presentation is scheduled whether you have work to show or not -- so you better have something written.

I decided to pursue animation because I always loved cartoons, and I wanted to write longer form work. You can't get a lot of character development in 30 seconds.



(Geek Tyrant)

GTGS: How do you start your writing process?

Joelle:

First, there's a research period where I read the scripts that have already been approved, or I watch the previous season of the show to get a sense of where it's going. When I'm ready to start an expanded premise or an outline, I usually write the broad strokes of the story on a legal pad so I can scribble and cross things out.



GTGS: What was your first television writing assignment?

Joelle:

I used to write with a partner, and one of the people he worked for got a story editor job on Mary Kate and Ashley Mysteries. She had read our sitcom specs and liked them, so she brought us in to write an episode. The execs were happy with our work so we wrote two additional ones. Sadly, the show only lasted one season.

GTGS: Give us the highlights of writing for Samurai! Daycare?

Joelle:

Samurai! Daycare is the closest to a staff job I've ever had in animation. It wasn't a traditional staff job where you had to be in a writing room every day. We only met in person once a week, and then went off and wrote our episodes and worked on everyone else's scripts to make them better. There was constant communication over email, so we always knew what needed to be done.

GTGS: Describe a typical day?

Joelle

Every day was different. I had two other shows I was writing at the same time, so some days I'd have to stretch my time management skills to get it all done. But usually I was able to set aside time to do whatever was needed for the show. This might include making revisions on my work, giving notes on the other episodes, writing jokes, discussing and pitching premises for future episodes, etc.

GTGS: What are the challenges and joys of this market?

Joelle:

Most animation jobs are freelance, so I'm always looking for work. I can have multiple projects at once, or months with nothing to do. But I enjoy working with people in animation. Every story editor I've had has been great to work for and made my script ten times better.

GTGS: What are some of the pitfalls to avoid?

Joelle:

Don't get pigeonholed. If you're doing action and you want to do comedy, write a comedy spec. If you do one thing well, sometimes it's hard to convince people that there are other things you've good at. I write mostly boys action and I've had to make the case several times that I can write for girls. Hey, I'm a girl.

GTGS: What are your hobbies and interests?

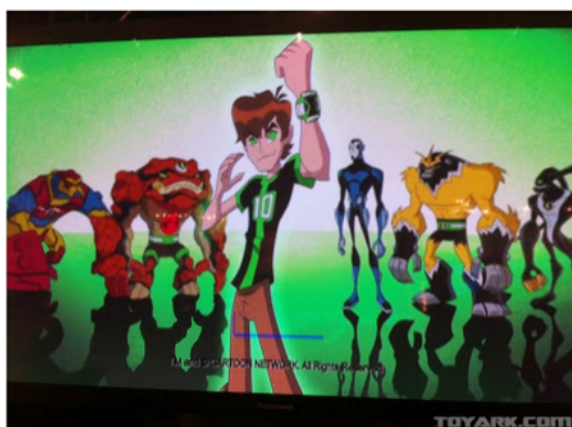
Joelle:

I try to run and take spin classes a few times a week. Sitting in front of a computer all day makes me nuts -- sometimes I just need to jump around or bike so I can clear my head.



GTGS - What should a successful animation script have?

Joelle: If it's comedy, the jokes need to be character-driven. In action, I try to focus on interesting set pieces for the fight scenes. All scripts need to have an emotional arc for the character. Kids need to care about the hero/protagonist or they'll stop watching.



GTGS: What kind of specs should newcomers write?

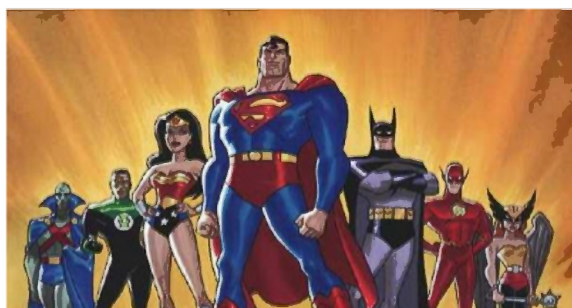
Joelle: Newcomers should have one example of each, a comedy and an action spec. There's a lot of preschool work, so a spec in that genre wouldn't hurt. Comedic shows will also read live action sitcoms.

I don't think there's any specific script people want to read, but it should be something most writers and execs are familiar with. Check the ratings and find a popular show that appeals to you.

GTGS: What are a few common mistakes new writers make?

Joelle: Sometimes new writers get very attached to their work and don't want to cut any of it. Scripts are 22 minutes or shorter - the network isn't going to extend the show to include that great action sequence you wrote.

If your story editor tells you to cut something, just cut it. Don't argue and don't sneak it back in thinking they won't notice. If it's really the best joke you've ever written, use it in your next script.



GTGS: What's the most important part of the animation script?

Joelle: Getting the audience to connect with the characters.

GTGS: How does writing for video games differ from animation writing? How did you land that gig? What kind of spec did you show? What specs do you present to a video game company?

Joelle: An animation script has a specific format. In a 22-minute show you have two or three acts, act breaks with cliffhangers and a resolution at the end. Game writing isn't that structured.

When the player makes a decision, you have to write what happens in each possible scenario. Some companies have you write using software designed to handle this branching situation, other writers have to write in Excel.



The company I'm currently working for contacted me. I'm not sure whether they already had my resume. I sent them an episode of another web show I wrote for which was a good match for their demographic.

Since most game jobs I apply for are action-oriented, I usually send out my Avengers episode or something with good fight scenes. Some companies only want to see other examples of game writing, and many will give you a writing test to see if your style matches theirs.



(Ben 10 Omniverse Game)

GTGS: How did you start writing for comic books? What is the best way to get started?

Joelle: I was very lucky. I had written for a show called Secret Saturdays on CartoonNetwork. A good friend of mine had been an editor at DC and got me in touch with some people he knew over there.



(fanpop - cartoon network)

DC (DC Comics) was publishing a Cartoon Network comic with stories from their shows, including Secret Saturdays. I sent in some pitches and ended up writing two stories for them.

If you're not established as a professional writer in another field, the best way to get in is to publish your own comic. With the web, the barriers to entry are lower so if you put up your own web comic and get a following, people will notice. You don't need a lot of money, just enough to pay an artist if you can't draw.

GTGS: What inspired you to write your feature screenplay, *Flushing*?

JOELLE: Flushing is loosely based on what happened to me when I was sixteen and lost my mother. I had no other family or guardian to go to, so it was a strange time for me and something I always wanted to write about one day.

GTGS: Feel free to add any final advice or words of encouragement to writers from neophytes to professionals?

Joelle: Try to write something every day, whether someone's paying you for it or not.