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## *Emmys: ‘House of Cards’ Reinvents Foundation*



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*Josh Chetwynd*

Like the series' lead character Frank Underwood, the “House of Cards” creative team had to navigate some tricky hurdles en route to nine Emmy nominations in its first season. While none of them required Underwood's Machiavellian scheming, they did necessitate some serious cunning.

Lacking extensive TV experience, showrunner **Beau Willimon**, an adroit former political operative and successful playwright, and producer-director David Fincher, among others, had to be quick studies on the medium. Moreover, they were re-imagining a BBC miniseries of the same name that had a fiercely loyal following. Finally, they were putting together a dramatic series for a company, **Netflix**, with virtually no background in episodic television.

Willimon says they addressed issues (especially the lack of TV know-how) with “hard work,” but the “Cards” brain trust also succeeded with a thoughtful approach to the project.

First up was how to handle the beloved 1990 BBC version. The creators of the U.S. edition immediately recognized that the British effort represented a different time and place and concentrated intently on avoiding a straight adaptation. Instead of a post-Margaret Thatcher Britain, the focus was on making it current to the world of American politics.

Still, Willimon knew where he should cherry-pick from the original. He retained a key dramatic device: having the show’s main character speak straight to camera.

“It allows for a direct communication with the audience that creates intimacy and makes the audience complicit,” Willimon says. “On paper you might not condone the actions, but as a voyeur you become complicit.”

Even after the show’s structure fell into place, the plot was still fluid once production began. In early shooting, Willimon was enthralled by the interaction between actors Kevin Spacey (Underwood) and Corey Stoll, who plays doomed Congressman Peter Russo, and wanted more of it. The story arc originally didn’t have Russo running for Pennsylvania governor. Rather, the plan was to put another character on the campaign trail. But Willimon reworked scripts on the fly in order to get Spacey and Stoll’s electric chemistry into more scenes.

As everything came together, the one big question remaining was how to release the show. Working on Netflix’s digital streaming platform, the “Cards” crew was offered a variety of distribution choices — all at once, weekly or in batches.

Willimon says they opted for providing all 13 episodes simultaneously because it left viewers with the most options. With more viewers becoming addicted to binge watching, it was a savvy choice that would have certainly made tactician supreme Frank Underwood proud.