EXPELLED
on AwesomenessTV

Alex Goyette:
Writer/Producer/Director

Back in 2013, at the ripe age of 25, Alex Goyette was already a pioneer in the digital television landscape. After receiving a record number of hits for his LOL YouTube shorts, he was recruited straight out of film school by AwesomenessTV, who not only backed the production and VOD distribution of his first movie, Expelled, but also auspiciously brokered a theatrical release from 20th Century Fox in 2014. He’s since landed major agency representation and is rapidly becoming a blossoming creative force in Hollywood—and maybe even his generation’s next John Hughes.

Despite his early success, Goyette remains humble and genuinely grateful for his opportunities. He is an example of how a talented, conscientious, indefatigable filmmaker can launch his own career with nothing more than a video camera, a clever idea, tenacity, optimism and hard work. Goyette’s short videos have gone viral, as he’s tapped into his generation’s vibe and interests, and helped him build his brand of irreverent, surprising content as creator/writer/director/producer/entrepreneur.

Neil Landau: How did the AwesomenessTV deal come to you? Walk me through the timeline of your big break.

Alex Goyette: As a student at CSUN [Cal-State University, Northridge] film school, the Senior Thesis Film is a coveted thing, because only 4 students out of 50 get to actually write and direct their senior thesis. You get $30,000. At the time we were shooting on 35mm film, and you get to see your vision come to life. I had this Indiana Jones style action adventure script that I was excited about. I had concept art, a production book. It was 60 pages. I had a budget and one-sheets for all the characters. It was called Rupture Zone and it’s about a seismologist who gets these mysterious readings from the Trona Pinnacles, this rock formation in the desert. He gets these readings and he’s investigating where these tremors are coming from with his intern. Its closest comp is the TV series Lost. They find an elevator in a cave. I’d put all my eggs in this basket, working on it day and night, and when they announced which thesis films were getting made, mine was shut out. I was devastated.
It was a week later that I started my own YouTube channel. I didn’t want to ever rely on anyone else again to make my content. I started doing everything: writing, producing, directing, editing. I paid for everything out of my own pocket. I made 1 video a month, put the same amount of work into those sketches as I did on Rupture Zone, and the third sketch was featured on eBaum’s World, and brought in a couple hundred thousand views.

Ten sketches later, I made a parody trailer and it grew from there. I learned from each one. It gave me an idea of what the market looked like. It’s a microcosm. What entertains people? What are people going to share? What are people going to post on Facebook? It gave me marketing experience. I was the studio head as well as the writer, director. I made all the decisions. I started bringing in money, which went to making more videos. With Waldo I spent $1,000 on it and went broke. It was featured on FirstShowing.net and they were like, “We heard Paramount is making a Waldo movie, and if they can make it like this that’d be great.” It put me in the right light. Awesomeness called me in for a meeting shortly after seeing the Waldo trailer. They started paying me to write sketch comedy. A week before I graduated, I directed my first AwesomenessTV sketch. Timing was great. So the YouTube channel was huge for me.

My lowest point, not getting the senior thesis project, was what spurred me into creating this thing that I owned entirely. Being self-sufficient is the most important thing because it can galvanize you. You don’t have to listen to anybody. That’s why I’m a producer on Expelled, because I’ve done everything. The team I put together to make Expelled is comprised of people I’ve been working with for 2-3 years.

**NL:** How is YouTube content monetized? Let’s say you get hundreds of thousands of hits on a YouTube channel. They’re selling banner ads. How do you know what those numbers are, and what your traffic is? And then, you just get a check?

**AG:** Yes, that’s how it used to work. In the beginning it was just Google Ads, they ran all the ads on the video. They still do. You get the banner ads, the pre-roll ads [10-second spots] beforehand. And they do evaluations on the different ad types. So, if someone clicks on one of these ads, you get some royalties. That’s the ultimate in that scenario. If someone watches the full pre-roll ad, they do evaluations on it. Pre-roll ads you can’t skip and those have big evaluations, because of the brand—they’re definitely being seen.

**NL:** So the ones that enable you to ‘skip ad’ are worth less?

**AG:** Right. Those are not worth as much. But the pre-roll ads are big. Now, it’s run by networks. AwesomenessTV picks up the content creators and then the money trickles down from them.

**NL:** So they track it and you get a statement?
AG: You have kind of an online bank account. You can see your grabs and the numbers you’re getting. Most networks offer services where you can get those figures. The phrase is called a CPM, which is how much money you make per thousand views. So everyone has a different CPM, depending on what content you make. A gaming channel gets enormous hits and you’ll make a ton of money, because the content is long form. Someone will watch 30 minutes, whereas a sketch is 2 minutes. Their CPM is lower and you don’t make as much. Sketch comedy is the most difficult form of content, besides animation, because you spend so much to make a high quality sketch and get so little back.

NL: But in your case, it became a platform.

AG: Yes, and I have maybe 1 or 2 vlogs on my channel. I kept it pure sketch comedy, which I think was helpful. The quality is the most important thing to me and was spurred by the comments, because people are so critical on the Internet. I’d think something sucked, and then improve it for the next one. It was the perfect ground for me to perfect the scripts and content.

NL: So AwesomenessTV initially hired you to write and direct comedy sketches, and a few went viral?

AG: Right. From there, I pitched this webseries pilot called Expelled to [AwesomenessTV CEO, see Chapter 1] Brian Robbins. The pitch I gave him is that the kings and queens of YouTube are vloggers. They rule the space because they’re able to connect with their audience. They make a deep, personal connection with the people watching because they look directly into the camera; I wanted to bring that concept to the screen in the form of a webseries, and develop this narrative character based off that concept. Using that and Ferris Bueller as a backbone, Brian liked the concept. They green-lit the pilot episode that we shot for $50,000. But no one saw that pilot, because we had to reshoot everything. Our lead actor dropped out and we had to start all over again. But it was originally a webseries. I wrote a story arc based off that character, finished a 130-page screenplay that was supposed to turn into the next 3 cycles of Expelled. They liked the script so much they decided to turn it into a feature film and managed to attach [mega YouTube star] Cameron Dallas.

The script worked in my favor, because it served as actor bait. Everyone wanted to play the cool guy, the new Ferris Bueller. We had Nash Grier, Cameron Dallas and a lot of guys thought the story fit with their brand. We held auditions and I’ve been asked a hundred times how we decided. Did we make a graph of who has more followers? What it came down to was the acting ability in the room. At the time, Nash Grier had many more followers; he was number 1 on Vine. He was the big dog as far as influencers. We went with Cameron because his acting was better; he had a raw ability. Cameron is more like the character, so that worked in his favor as well. We moved forward from there, and had 4 months to make the entire thing, start to
finish. I wrote the script in 2 months, and there was a hiatus in between, when they pulled the plug on the original 3 cycles and green-lit the feature.

We had a month of pre-production and had to shoot it in 22 days. We had to be picture locked 3 weeks later. Our editor was cutting as we were shooting. I got 10 days for my director’s cut. It was really quick, and stressful. I was in this small, windowless room, cutting. That’s the way things are with new media. Everything happens so incredibly quickly.

NL: It worked in your favor in that you were a first-time feature director being given a shot. What was the rush, do you think, to get it out there?

AG: Things on the Internet move so quickly. You don’t know what the space will be like in 6 months. If it took us a year to do Expelled, no one knows where those influencers will stand. Nash is ready to be dethroned by the next in line on Vine. The place has changed. So we move quickly, like the Internet, so we won’t ever be in a situation where we can’t predict how it will perform. That’s my interpretation. I wasn’t part of the marketing team. I was told that when Fox bought the distribution, they had a strict deadline for when we had to get this out for VOD release. We had to finish the film by Thanksgiving, and we wrapped October 10th.

NL: And then there was the short, 2-week theatrical release by Fox?

AG: Right. December 12, 2014, was the theatrical release. It was released in Los Angeles, New York and Dallas. Those are the three biggest fan bases for Cameron Dallas. And they actually flew him to each of the premieres, had him do a meet-and-greet and tweet-out, to bring a crowd to the theater. I saw the theater and there was a line around the block. It created a lot of buzz. They did some interviews in New York. The big story was: it was the first movie made by Viners. I actually did not get a spot on any of those interviews because I’m not a Viner. It was so weird to work on this thing longer than anybody, before anybody had any input whatsoever, and I just kind of got set aside, while these 2 guys took the spotlight, though which I’m fine with. There’s just more to the story than what was said on the Today Show—the first movie starring Viners. From 6 seconds to 90 minutes was the headline. And there was a story, which helped the marketing.

NL: And it all existed because of you. You created the characters, came up with the concept and directed the movie.

AG: Right. Wrote, directed, produced. At the time, it felt like a very long journey, but I also knew I was very lucky. I did talk to marketing and said, “I want to be part of these interviews.
Anything I can do to get in that room.” I was pushing to be part of the story. I’ve actually been on the Today Show before, for another viral video. It was called iPhone 5 Prank. It was a silly prank video done at the right place, right time. That’s the secret sauce behind viral videos— the timing of it. It was the day the iPhone 5 was released. We had all these people waiting outside of the Apple store. I dressed up like an Apple employee, and I had a stack of boxes on a dolly and I was wheeling them past the crowd. And I start hyping up the crowd, and they’re cheering and clapping. And then I trip and the boxes hit the ground. The boxes were filled with broken glass, so it was a big noise, and all at once you had hundreds of disappointed people going, “Oh my God!” It was a big reaction. It quickly picked up speed, and went viral. I think it played a big role in getting me to that next level. It stands as AwesomenessTV’s biggest video, with 6.5 million views. It did really well.

NL: Let’s talk about your original inspiration for Expelled.

AG: Ferris Bueller’s Day Off is my favorite movie, and I’m a huge John Hughes fan. The Breakfast Club is great. I love Uncle Buck; Planes, Trains & Automobiles. He is the ultimate teen comedy writer. And I wanted to make the new Ferris Bueller. I developed the pitch around that. It may seem obvious now, but it was a huge breakthrough to say it’s a vlogger breaking the fourth wall, talking to the audience. This is the perfect hybrid. I had just finished producing a new comedy sketch, and it was the most money they’d spent on a sketch. It’s called Cereal Killers; it’s Avengers meets Cereal Mascots. So it’s like, Captain Crunch and Lucky Charms Guys and we used all the catchphrases. It was a lot of fun. Trix Rabbit is an alcoholic. Quaker Oats guy is the antagonist. The sketch did really well and Brian Robbins asked me, “So, what’s next?” And I asked for more time for the pitch, but he wanted to hear it. So, I gave him an impromptu, impassioned idea. There were no character names. It was just the core idea of jumping off of vlogging and using that popularity to drive this character. That was enough for Brian. Right in the room he was like, “Yeah, I want do this”—and he ordered a script.

NL: At this point though, they’re thinking it’s a webseries for AwesomenessTV?

AG: Right. I never expected it to get this far. It was so cool to watch it grow from the smallest webseries pilot to getting all this attention. It was number 1 worldwide on iTunes. I’m proud of what we were able to accomplish.

NL: So it was going to be a webseries in 3 cycles; you had 130 pages of material to be told in a serialized way. But then they said, “Hey, let’s make this a feature-length movie that can be streamed on AwesomenessTV?”

AG: Right. They’d already made the Fred [with hugely popular YouTube personality, Lucas Cruikshank] movies. But Expelled was a bigger budget.
NL: Was Expelled their first theatrical release?

AG: Technically, no. They made Mindless Behavior first—which is about the band. It got a very small theatrical release. They wanted to make a film about Austin Mahone and his rise to stardom, but I think it may have ended up as a web series. Then their feature Terry the Tomboy didn’t actually make it to the theater, though it was picked up by Nickelodeon. They made that very affordably and sold it to Nick for $3 million. Expelled was the fourth.

NL: And AwesomenessTV had separately already made a deal with Cameron Dallas?

AG: Yes. They did a 2-picture deal with Cameron and Nash. However, they were both signed on to this other project called Outfielders, at the time. Initially, I was supposed to make Expelled until after they finished production on Outfielders. That project got put on hiatus and we stepped in and made Expelled the movie. The timing was impeccable. We were almost the second of its kind. If Outfielders had hit it first, they would have been the first with Viners. They would have been the big story. We really lucked out with the timing.

NL: Do you feel that without Cameron Dallas, the movie would not have been made?

AG: The film was going to be made either way. But once he signed on, it gave us a huge boost. I don’t think it would have had the same buzz if it hadn’t starred Cameron. That was a huge part of what fueled this thing. The film existed before Cameron, but he’s really the one that brought it to millions of viewers.

NL: Vine and YouTube personalities transitioning into TV and movie stars is a fairly new phenomenon. But I suppose it’s the way of the future?

AG: The stars really are what the production revolves around. They’re the name and the face. It’s almost like YouTube is a microcosm for these movies being made. The face is so important. You have to have this brand around it. Look at like sketch comedy channels on YouTube. Aside from Smosh, the second one down is FreddieW. He has the face. It’s so important to rally these people around. It would be really difficult to do a digital release without influencers. It’d be very challenging.

NL: You got your big break doing something with tight budgetary limitations, starring a super popular actor with a movie star level following, and yet little acting experience. Where does a digital content creator like you go from here?

AG: Shortly after Expelled, I was offered a writing/directing gig for another feature for AwesomenessTV. I wasn’t interested in the project, as it was a script I wasn’t passionate about. I decided to just look for the right project. I recently signed with UTA as a writer/director. They’ve been sending me out to general meetings. Now I’m meeting with Disney, Paramount,
Sony Pictures and Legendary. These are all general meetings, so they aren’t pitch meetings. I have 3 treatments that are the frontrunners. In the room they ask me a lot about Expelled—which has actually been monumental to my career. I’m suddenly the ‘expert’ in this digital space. I was meeting with Legendary and there were 3 executives taking notes about how to make and market an Expelled. It’s been huge to sit with these people who have made monster box office hits, and have the opportunity to pitch my next idea. I really do want to write and direct the next project. I’ve gotten some open directing assignments, but I’d really like to be the creator around it.

The sketch that first got me noticed was an action-comedy, the one that went viral and really catapulted me into working with AwesomenessTV. I’ve always loved action-comedies. From Lethal Weapon to Kiss Kiss Bang Bang. [Screenwriter/director] Shane Black was a big inspiration. I also love Edgar Wright and Robert Rodriguez’s sensibilities. I’m writing a buddy comedy right now. I’m hoping not to limit myself to the teen comedy space. Now I’m in a position where I’ve done a film that’s successful, I’m hoping to leverage that to get the project I truly want, rather than taking the one that’s put in front of me first.

**NL:** I think that’s smart, as you continue to build a body of work with your voice, signature style and brand.

**AG:** That’s the plan.