AIM HIGH on Crackle
Heath Corson & Richie Keen:
Creators/Executive Producers

Aim High, produced by Warner Premiere Digital and Dolphin Entertainment, is an action web series starring Jackson Rathbone (The Twilight Saga, The Last Airbender) as Nick Green, a high school junior who’s just starting a new school year as one of the country’s 64 highly trained teenage operatives. Nick’s love interest, Amanda Miles (Friday Night Light’s Aimee Teegarden), is unaware of his double life as a spy. But his buddy Marcus, Johnny Pemberton (21 Jump Street, The Watch) knows everything and functions as Nick’s confidante and sidekick. Aim High premiered in October 2011, on Facebook (touted as the first “social series” ever created). Seasons 1 and 2 can be watched on Sony’s Crackle network. In 2012, series creators Heath Corson and Richie Keen won a Writers Guild Award for Achievement in Writing Original New Media.

Currently, Heath Corson is a writer and producer best known for Justice League: War (2014); Batman: Assault on Arkham (2014); and Justice League: Throne of Atlantis (2015). He’s currently developing TV shows with Mark Gordon and Fazekas & Butters as well as writing Bizarro for DC Comics.

Richie Keen is a director and actor, best known for directing episodes of It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia, Shameless, Sirens, Hooked, and Blake Shelton’s Not So Family Christmas. He’s currently directing the feature film, Fist Fight, starring Ice Cube and Charlie Day, for New Line Pictures.

Heath and Richie grew up in Chicago and went to Northwestern University together. They were both aspiring actors. Heath was doing theater. Richie was doing standup comedy. But they were restless to get into TV and movies, so they moved to Los Angeles to make a go of it. Richie became an acting coach; Heath started writing, but neither was gaining any traction in Hollywood. Being proactive, they decided to write their own ticket by creating their own short content.

Their first, self-produced project centered on a fictional accountant from Price-Waterhouse (the one who carries the briefcase with the secret envelopes at the Academy Awards telecast). The idea was - what if that guy got 2 tickets to the Oscars and someone in the office took them? Richie directed their script, leveraging talent and favors via Richie’s gig as an acting coach. The project became Heath and Richie’s first TV pilot—kind of. This was back in 2006—
pre-Funny or Die. YouTube was still brand new, and links weren’t a thing yet. So the enterprising guys held a screening at a theater adjacent to CBS Television City and invited everyone they knew—who, at the time, were all assistants. Meanwhile, the DVD was getting passed around. Lo and behold, they landed a development deal at a division of Fox, and got paid to write a new pilot. It didn’t go, thought they managed to get another pilot deal at Fox. It was low budget, and Richie directed, but ultimately, it didn’t go to series.

Frustrated by the studio development process, they decided to take a chance and write a new script on spec with one goal: pleasing themselves. As they explained to me over lunch in Studio City, “Even if no one wanted to buy it, at least we’d know that we pushed the envelope and totally went for it.” And that’s how *Aim High* was born. How it turned out, is another story.

**Neil Landau:** So *Aim High* was your passion project? What were your greatest influences?

**Richie Keen:** I was a John Hughes guy. I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, and they were shooting those movies in my hometown. Heath was always the superhero, comic book guy.

**Heath Corson:** And we were like, how do we mix these two things? So we struck on this idea about a high school kid who happens to have this job as an assassin for the US government, but he’s really Peter Parker. He cares about the girl, the swim meet, failing a chemistry lab.

**RK:** Initially it was a half-hour. We wanted to write a show for gamers. When it got made, it changed. But we wrote in the script that Nine Inch Nails was the music. Our influences were *Brick*, the film with Joseph Gordon-Levitt, and *The Bourne Ultimatum*, with a little *Grosse Point Blank* and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*.

**HC:** The idea was originally that the Department of Education was tired of their schools being shot up. This was at a time when there were a lot of school shootings. So they trained kids to covertly protect the schools like air marshals and this was their pilot program, a la 21 Jump Street.

**RK:** We wrote it, and I didn’t have an agent for writing or directing. We just sent it to people we knew. The first response we got was, “No way!”

**HC:** Everyone that wanted to do a high school show didn’t want action, and everyone that wanted an action show didn’t want it in high school.
RK: Can it be in college? Can it be adult? It was so close to the shootings, but the one thing that was important is that in our version, he never had a gun. Everything he used was smarter than that.

HC: He’d improvise a la Jason Bourne. He was such a trained weapon, because we thought teenagers are so used to taking in stimulus and focusing it. And we thought these are the guys that can do all that.

RK: When everyone would say, “There’s no way,” I’d ask, “But did you like it?” And they’d say, “It’s fucking awesome!”

NL: Talk about cognitive dissonance. So it was too dark, and didn’t fit into any network’s prescribed wheelhouse at the time?

HC: Right, especially for a half-hour. So we decided to expand it. We made it 62 pages, and we were so proud of it. It’s the best thing we’d ever written. We were ready to get it out to everyone, and then the Writers Guild strike started. We couldn’t take it anywhere. People would read it and say, “It’s great, but I can’t do anything with it.” Except I had a friend who’d just been hired at Warner Premiere, which is the digital division at Warner Bros. Diane Nelson was running it, and she was a new executive there, and they were looking for material. She read it and went nuts for it. Ended up sending it to McG’s company and Bryan Singer’s company. Everyone wanted it.

RK: At the time, I only knew of one show that had been made the way they were talking about making it—The Bannen Way—which was the first thing I saw on Crackle. A couple guys wrote a script on spec, got a few hundred thousand dollars, and shot this really cool thing. So we got this romantic idea that we would get to do that. We wanted to run the show, and felt like the roles were good enough that we could attract real talent. It was an interesting journey because the more fancy people got involved, the more it became like a feature. And that process became less of what we thought this digital experience was going to be and in some ways we ended up making a show that could have been on the CW. We were striving to do something more outside the box. I’m truly pleased with how the show came out, but we wanted to make a pitch-dark comedy for not a lot of money. And suddenly McG and Warner Bros want it and who could say no to that? So during the process, it suddenly became—“It’s not a show for gamers, it’s a show for teenage girls. We want to get a kid from Twilight. We want to get a director who deals with younger talent.”

NL: What was the approximate budget of each episode?

RK: It was like $850,000 for the hour.

NL: And then they divided it up into webisodes?
HC: We did that. Once we sold it, it was 14 to 15 months to close the deal.

RK: There were no [carriage deal] templates. The WGA didn’t even have new media contracts in place yet.

NL: That was one of the big issues during the strike.

RK: One of the things we did—we didn’t want it to just be 1-hour. We decided where it’d be divided up, so that at the end of each episode there’d be a cliffhanger. We made sure it was chapters in a book.

HC: So that version was something like twelve, 4 to 6-minute episodes.

RK: Digital was changing. At the time, people were only watching 3-minute clips on their phones. And, as I was getting more into my directing, I was seeing a lot of 11-minute things. So we pushed for that.

HC: But there was a lot of pushback. Over the time that it evolved, we went from “Nobody is going to watch anything longer than 3 minutes,” to “OK, we’ll do a 15-minute episode.” But even then they were unsure. We always believed people were doing that, but at the time people didn’t have access to broadband. So the place they’d watch was at work. The iPad wasn’t even out, so it wasn’t a personal experience. People were doubtful that we were going to be able to push the envelope. But we felt like we could do a 6-minute episode, and we capped it at that. So there’s a version of the script that’s 14, 6-minute episodes.

RK: We eventually convinced the powers that be. Whether they remember it was our idea or not, it ended up being 11-minute episodes. It didn’t occur to them at the time, but the idea was if we make this the length of a feature we can sell this as a feature elsewhere. A lot of lessons were learned. We won awards — the WGA, the digital luminary — and a lot of amazing people were involved. But the real challenge was how to get people to watch it.

NL: It’s highly serialized and, at the time, serialized was a bit of a dirty word. Networks mainly wanted closed-ended procedurals, and yours was six, 11-minute episodes, each with a direct pickup. I watched them one after the other, and it’s a contiguous storyline.

HC: We wanted to do it so that they were segmented but they also were going end to end, because Warner always told us we would package it all together. But the rush at the end was they were missing 22 minutes of content, because it needed to be 88 minutes for international distribution.
RK: That was the other thing. We had meetings and all these ideas about how this could permeate digitally. Unfortunately, it was approached from a very traditional, broadcast network point of view.

NL: You guys were ahead of the curve, and now we’re all catching up.

HC: Even as we were making it, and as we were writing it, there was a push on Richie and my end for us to be the voices to curate this show digitally. But there was resistance on the Warner Bros. side to let us do that. They were like, “No. The star or the director has to face front.”

RK: Anytime we wrote, we would video and talk about what we did that day. And we offered it to Warner Bros—and now audiences can have an extra experience. And they didn’t want it.

HC: We asked, “Do you want us to tweet about it?” I suggested a podcast. Let us do DVD commentaries on every episode. We offered to do it for free. And they said, “No thanks.”

RK: It’s not that they didn’t like our ideas or didn’t want us. They just didn’t understand and were antiquated in their thinking. They were business people and these were scary new ideas. We were trying to be forward thinking about how to get the word out. For all the kudos we got as writers, we were bummed by how few people ultimately saw the show. There was no engine to get the word out. So when they came to us about a second season, we pitched a 2-hour version. We said, “We’re only going to do this if these things changed.” It was clear they weren’t interested in that. We still talk to all those people, and we think highly of them. But we were really surprised that we couldn’t move the needle on these things at the time. And it was hard for us to let go.

HC: It was the hardest thing I had to do. The dream is to set up the franchise and run it forever. But we were not going to get what we wanted.

Richie Keen: *The people at Warner Bros were lovely to us. They brought us into meetings with executives and applauded us. When you make a digital show with a traditional group of people, you’re going to be shackled by a traditional way of thinking. I think House of Cards made people rethink that.*

And for *Sirens* on USA network, the whole cast gets together and live tweets, and people love it. Same with *It’s Always Sunny*. I’m sure Heath and I weren’t the only ones with these ideas, but it’s great to see people catch on.
HC: We were excited about making the show digitally so we could have a dialogue with the audience. That was the exciting part for us. The problem with making that move so slow was that the conversation was taking place, but we weren’t part of it. And then you look at The Lizzie Bennet Diaries1, 2 years later; those guys got to run with it and talk to people, and had a really passionate, rabid, fan base. Niche is the thing. When I talk to people at Crackle, and Legendary, what they say is, “We don’t want to be everyone’s third favorite show. We want to be some people’s first.”

NL: Was there always the voiceover a la Ferris Bueller talking directly to the camera?

RK: We struggled with this. I was pro-voiceover and Heath was against it. We felt that we were copping out by having voiceover. Once we decided to go with breaking the fourth wall, then it became: “How can we be clever about this and not just have it that he’s walking around talking to the camera. Where is he the whole time and who is he telling this to?”

HC: We went through a couple of months trying to get that voiceover out of it. Because it gave this edgy thing a sense of safety that you know that whatever happens he’s going to live. He’s talking to us from the future telling this story and he’s OK.

RK: We had the idea that he was one of 64 and we thought if by the end he’d seemingly went off the reservation and got a kid to deal with him, then the way we end the show is saying, whenever we move forward, “Oh wow, he’s now connected with at least one of these people. What’s going to happen next?”

HC: We also had this idea that we could drop in on any one of these kids for a season.

RK: We wanted to do an Avengers thing, pre-Avengers. We wanted to introduce different people and then bring them together and start to overlap as the seasons went on, like Marvel is doing with Captain America and Guardians of the Galaxy. Now that Marvel’s done it, everyone wants to do it. At the time it was like, why would we get away from our lead character ever? We said it’s an investment. You’re investing in the longevity of this franchise. The cool thing is if an actor is out doing a feature he can pop in and do a couple of days and we’ll build these people.

NL: When you were doing it for Warner Digital – was it connected to AOL Originals at any time?

1 The Lizzie Bennet Diaries is a web series adapted from Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice and told in vlogs. Created by Hank Green and Bernie Su, it premiered on YouTube in 2012, and posted its hundredth, final episode in 2013.
RK: That might have been distribution. They had a really great idea that, unfortunately, we couldn’t execute well. They had this idea that if you watch it on Facebook there will be places in the show where it would pull information from your Facebook and put it in the show. So in the show they’re looking at the yearbook, and next to the girl are pictures from your profile. We came up with dozens of interesting places and ways to do that that tied to story. And they found 4 or 5 spots where on the table it’ll say, “Richie Keen was here.” We had all these ideas and again they said, “No, we got it.”

NL: So if it were on Facebook, how would people know to watch it? Were there banner ads?

RK: I really don’t know. I think the answer is they didn’t.

NL: Because it was for Warner Bros Digital, were there Standards and Practices? There’s a kid masturbating under the covers—which you never see on a kids’ show. There’s the grenade that goes off which implies heavy carnage. Were there limitations?

HC: We had limits on the amount of blood and language. They gave us a full S&P run of the script, and we pushed back on some things.

RK: When they decided to go this other direction with the show, there was a period of 6 months where they brought on a different writer. A terrific writer who wrote a kids’ show, and the script changed dramatically. And then they came back to us and said, “We need you back.” And we pretty much on the sly put back 65% of what the script was. The things you’re talking about are remnants of things we slipped back on the sly to add edge.

HC: We went back and forth with them for a while on the masturbation thing.

NL: As an athletic teenager in high school, in what universe would he not?

RK: Again, we thought we were making a digital show, and they thought we were making a CW show. Those were the issues they had. What about the ‘tween girls? And we kept saying that’s not who we are making this for. You can sell it to those people, but I don’t know how to write a show for ‘tween girls. I just know how to write a show that’s cool.

NL: It’s perfect for Crackle. It’s the younger version, but they have a very male demographic—suspenseful action, sexy intrigue. So when you’re working in a shorter format, how did you structure it?

RK: Once we knew how long they wanted them to be, we reworked every 10 pages to be its own thing.

NL: And they were written without breaks?
HC: We submitted them as 6 episodes, so they got the script in 6 chunks, each one with breaks. Each one was its own show.

RK: We had to get out of a traditional way of thinking. It wasn’t a 3-act structure, it was a 6-act structure. Every 10 pages something had to happen. We weren’t using the word “serialized,” but we knew we had to be serialized without using the word. We knew at the end of every 10 pages, something had to happen that was complete and made you say, “What’s going to happen next?”

HC: This is where I was lucky coming from comics and superheroes. We always talked about beginning, middle, and cliffhanger. It’s very much like a Spiderman run—a 6-issue miniseries where it has to end, but every 10 minutes a big thing has to happen. And it has to be emotional, a big moment, and you have to earn it. We shuffled a lot of things.

RK: We also had 2 more big action sequences that we thought were awesome. Because of time and money, understandably, we couldn’t pull them off. We had more angst-y action where the steam was coming out of it in the wrong spots. Everyone who ended up fighting had it coming to them. They were all bad dudes.

HC: And he says that this is how democracy gets preserved.

NL: Whose decision was it that Nick never use a gun?

RK: I felt strongly that I did not want him to have a gun in school. And it wasn’t because of the pushback. From the get-go I thought it was way cooler if he’s not participating in that, and if worlds start to collide, and these bad guys come in, we’re going to find him more interesting if he finds creative ways to deal with them.

HC: And he doesn’t need it. It goes to the cockiness of being a teenager and feeling you’re invulnerable and he’s a great fighter. And we built it into the story. He says, “I can’t have guns in school. There’s a metal detector.”

RK: I always had this idea that he would use a book as a lethal weapon. There’s a final sequence and he’s in a science lab and there are protractors and Bunsen burners—all of the stuff that he learned in school is paying off.

NL: So you were ordered straight to series. What’s the positive and negative side to that model?

HC: If you’re going to do an 8-hour limited series, and write all the scripts ahead of time and shoot it in 3 months, of course it’s more cost effective. But what’s challenging with that is your show is trapped in amber. You don’t get the fluidity that some digital shows had to respond to
people on the fly. Our show is done, so when people say, "I hope this happens." We couldn’t say anything other than, “Yeah that would be cool.”

**NL:** Do you foresee production budgets going down given the glut of original content?

**RK:** It’s already happening. I shot 2 episodes of *The Comedians* for FX—in 8 days. And I just did another show that was 2 episodes in 6 days for IFC; *It’s Always Sunny*—5 episodes in 20 days.

**NL:** What about the future of the 22-episode season?

**RK:** Writers want to do 13 episodes, even though you get paid more with a full season. I just did my first basic cable 5-day show; it’s only 10 episodes. It’s called *Angie Tribeca*, and Steve Carell wrote and directed the pilot. It’s 10 episodes, and that’s what the talent—Rashida Jones, Alfred Molina—was available for. Talent looks at it like a feature. You go away for 3 months and afterwards do what you want.

**HC:** And creatively it’s really enriching. You can tell a full story—beginning, middle and end. With 22 episodes the idea is you have to reset to status quo. Nothing, or very little, can change. As a creator and writer, it can be boring. As a viewer, there’s very little difference between the first episode and the last episode of *House*.

**RK:** What’s interesting is basic cable—and even Showtime—are looking at themselves in that digital way. They’d rather be less people’s number one favorite than everyone’s third favorite show. Networks are still, in terms of budgets, hanging on. I did an episode of *New Girl* and these network shows that are the same model, but viewership is going down so something is going to have to shift.

**HC:** You’re seeing more limited series and some experimentation on broadcast networks, but cable and digital are eating their lunches.

**RK:** I think Bill Lawrence [*Cougar Town, Scrubs*] said it best: “Broadcast networks are cable outlets that don’t know it yet.”