

Purely a copy and paste of Sam's telling of the history from the Ask Sam channel in the Dropout Discord

ZevFeit — 07/08/2021

@Sam Reich can you tell us sort of the history of how CollegeHumor formed and with who and what cast and how it became what it is today along with what old cast members are doing today and their current relationship with CollegeHumor

Sam Reich — 07/12/2021

this is a monster of a question.

it was founded in 1999 by josh abramson and ricky van veen while they were still in college. two other co-founders, jake lodwick and zach klein, soon followed. (jake and zach would go on to found vimeo.)

in the early 2000's, the four of them moved to NYC, rented two floors of a building in chelsea, and lived on one / worked on the other. streeter, amir, and jeff were hired to run editorial. sarah began in sales and quickly transferred over.

jake hurwitz and i were hired within weeks of each other in 2006, me to run original video and him as an intern. the team was ~20 at that point, mostly editorial, tech, and sales. IAC bought us 2 weeks later.

'editorial' meant writing the occasional article, but mostly running the site's various picture, video, and link sections. in those first 7 years, collegehumor was mostly a 'best of the web' site - like ebaum's world, but frattier.

after i was hired, myself and the editorial team would write videos - mostly very experimental - and then i as a one man band would produce, direct, and edit them. dan gurewitch was hired as a front desk person but soon started writing me amazing scripts, and would be promoted to my only full-time editor within a year. we moved to park avenue south in 2008 and pat cassels joined the editorial team quickly thereafter.

once we had moved into park avenue south, jake and amir just happened to be sat across from each other and started making videos on their 4:3 digital cameras, and thus jake and amir was born. (there would be a legal tussle about who owned jake and amir given that it was (a) their names and hard work but (b) produced during work hours and at the office, which jake and amir would eventually lose. but, if you haven't heard, we just made a deal with them and they now own it outright!)

nearly as a response to jake and amir, the rest of the editorial team started making low-fi sketches around the office too, and thus hardly working was born.

in 2008 - 2009, MTV took interest in these low-fi sketches and ordered the collegehumor show from us. IAC expected us to pocket a lot of the budget, so we ended up producing the show with only a fraction of what MTV's had given us. but MTV wasn't guilt-free either: they had originally ordered a clip show with wraparounds, and a few months before air, they decided the wraparounds were more interesting.

so, myself and the editorial staff became responsible for producing a full sitcom with a tiny budget over mere weeks. between running the website and producing the show, we were all stretched to the max. i brought my old sketch comedy group members josh ruben and vincent peone to handle the web videos while i focused exclusively on the show.

the ratings were OK -- about a million viewers per episode, which by today's ratings standards is terrific -- but site traffic didn't improve, leading ricky to feel that the show was a distraction. when MTV asked for partial ownership over collegehumor in exchange for a second season, IAC said no way, and the show was cancelled.

feeling creatively repressed, i poured my heart into writing and directing this west side story parody, which went on to win a few webby awards:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtPb8g8JI6I>

funny or die and the onion were gaining traction at the time, and so began a viral video space race in which we, funny or die, and the onion all poured a completely irresponsible amount of time, money, and resources into individual videos without a concrete business plan. we were getting plenty of traffic and accolades, so surely the money would come later... right?

it never did. and so, partially in order to 'right the ship,' IAC had us move into the IAC building, where they could watch over us a little more closely.

after moving into the IAC building, ricky felt as if our way out of debt was series. after all, with sketches, we had to reset the world every time. series, as jake and amir and hardly working had proven, stoked the fires of fandom. thus began one of my favorite chapters of CH history as we gave birth to badman, troopers, precious plum, hello my name is, full benefits, dinosaur office, the adventures of kim jong un, and more.

meanwhile, we had our first ever editorial and cast member leave us: sarah schneider, who had taken a sabbatical to write for SNL for a few months, had been offered an official writing contract. (she would later become head writer in partnership with chris kelly, who had been plucked from funny or die.)

as streeter and jeff were asked to turn more of their attention back toward the website, we in video staffed up more: with brian murphy (promoted from dorkly), owen parsons (promoted from dorkly), emily axford (recommended by dan gurewitch), david young (recommended by dan gurewitch), adam conover (recommended by my then head writer ben joseph), and jenny jaffe.

the series worked, but not well enough to matter to IAC, whose goal was to turn us from a \$25M company into a \$250M company. ricky turned his attention back to TV and hired sam grossman - a MTV exec on the collegehumor show - to develop more TV shows out of our web shorts. but it's almost impossible to sell TV out of new york - 94% of the industry is in LA - and so those efforts quickly fizzled.

it was around then - 2012 - when i first approached ricky with a pitch deck for a platform called SHOWRUNNER where we would charge users \$5/month in exchange for shows. ricky was intrigued, but ultimately felt no one would pay.

and so we hatched a plan to get the team to hollywood...

in 2013, we gathered the video team into a conference room to tell them we'd be moving to LA, and not everyone would be asked to come with. just one of many heartbreaking moments that are inevitable working for corporate america.

adam conover told me he probably wouldn't go and then - months later - that he did want to go, by which point i was almost unable to accommodate him. we talk about that sometimes: that, if not, adam ruins everything would have never existed.

otherwise, the cast coming with was emily, murph, dan, owen, pat, jake, and amir -- although jake and amir were at this point doing jake and amir exclusively. almost as soon as we arrived, dan and owen got job offers back in new york for last week tonight and the daily show respectively. both of them recommended mike trapp as their replacement, and so i quickly gave trapp a job offer, and to LA he moved.

with the video team now in LA, NYC felt far less exciting, mostly focused on traffic-generating articles and ad sales. streeter and jeff eventually both left to go to other gigs. suzanna wolf, then running editorial, left was and was replaced by andrew bridgman (my now soul brother and business partner), who had been brought in to run dorkly after murph and owen graduated to originals.

those early days in LA were rough: we were spread out over three floors of an IAC building, working mostly out of an ugly wood-and-faux-leather conference room the writers affectionately called 'brown town.' but, slowly but surely, we settled in and started pitching long-form.

over the course of three years, we would do adam ruins everything, middle of the night show, hot date, bad internet, the britishes, i want my phone back, and fatal decision. we were also the production company for other projects: rhett and link's buddy system, etc.

long-form was exciting but also very stressful. margins were low, IAC wanted us to grow aggressively, and the networks were very demanding, which meant that we were again overtaxed and under-resourced. i had turned my attention away from rest of the business and - while i had - it was floundering. i got a call from then CEO shane to say i needed to cut my

department's budget in half. if we weren't go to lay everyone off, we had no choice but to spend dramatically less per video.

so, putting jobs over art, i hatched a plan to do only hardly working -- hoping that the repetition (in a world where the youtube algorithm catered to repetition) would save us. long story short, it worked, and within two years we were back to our old view numbers while spending 20% what we used to.

around this time, pat cassels was offered sam bee back in NYC, and mike trapp stepped up to become head writer. we did a new, robust search for sketch comedy writer-performers, this time sifting through and grading 250+ submissions from regional comedy theaters, and out of that pile hired zac, siobhan, and grant. (grant had almost the best grade of any candidate that's ever been through the submissions process.) later, a similar process would bring us ally and raph -- although ally had already been cameoing with us and had earned a reputation as the 'world's coolest person.'

also around this time, jake and amir would leave us after disagreement with the company about whether or not they should be offered additional compensation for a video licensing deal -- but not before winding down the series thoughtfully.

cynthia kao had a brief stint with us before being plunked by adam ruins everything, as did kassia miller between TV gigs.

but the writing was already on the wall with IAC. TV wasn't a get rich quick scheme. online, we were spending less money but making the same. after striking out with ads and striking out with TV, IAC was eager for us to take one more swing.

you can see where this is going. :eyes:

IAC's final get rich quick scheme, which was championed internally by then GM shane rahmani, was to launch a subscription service under the collegehumor banner. (they were simultaneously considering doing this with vimeo, but those conversations quickly turned into a multi-billion dollar spending scheme, and were promptly shut down. vimeo would then pivot into a B2B model that was very successful for them.)

i was at first resistant. given that netflix, HBO, and apple would turn into our competitors, even IAC money felt like bringing a knife to a gun fight. but i also agreed with the premise that all TV was going subscription -- i myself had cut the cord several years ago -- and that there were room for niche offerings. i was also frustrated with producing TV: given the demands of both talent and networks, i had turned into a middleman, and my role was increasingly non-creative. i decided it was worth a try -- if only to get to make some things again. (also, barry diller told me i had to.)

the pitch to our employees was that our goal wasn't unreasonable: 100k subscribers in two years. given that reasonable goal, we could achieve it; please our fans, IAC, and ourselves; and achieve financial independence from advertisers and networks in the process. i later adapted that company-wide presentation into our announcement video.

the programming plan was balanced between acquisition and retention. "acquisition" meant higher-budget, mostly scripted programming in order to get subscribers through the paywall; "retention" meant lower-budget unscripted programming en masse in order to get them to stay there. on our acquisition list were some reboots of popular collegehumor shows from yesteryear, including jake and amir and precious plum, as well as some high-concept stuff like WTF 101 and total forgiveness; on our retention list were some more experimental shows, like um actually, cartoon hell, and dimension 20. each of those shows has its own story in terms of how it came to be, how it almost wasn't, etc. but just to focus on a key one:

brennan lee mulligan nearly made it through the round of CH auditions that had landed us with raph and ally, so we already wanted to work with him. question-writing for um actually, now that it was going weekly, was the perfect excuse. before long, it was only natural to bring him aboard full-time as a cast member so he could contribute to hardly working. one afternoon, then development VP adam frucci said to me, "you know brennan is an experienced DM." the idea was to find a happy medium between critical role and harmonquest: an anthology series fans could easily pick up between seasons, focused on high-concept humor but not at the expense of story or pathos. i can't remember who, but someone dropped out relatively last-minute, and after an urgent meeting we all decided ally beadsley was the right substitute. brennan brought 90% of the ideas you see on screen in "fantasy high"; david kerns, my EP and a brilliant gamer slash improviser in his own life, brought 9%; i brought the idea of the "dome."

we launched in october of 2018. almost immediately, every assumption we made about programming went out the window.

almost immediately, every assumption we made about programming went out the window. the less expensive content, meant to retain viewers, both acquired and retained them. the more expensive content, meant to acquire users, didn't acquire or retain them -- except in the case of WTF 101, whose audience unsubscribed the moment they were finished.

dimension 20, on the other hand, was a different animal: its audience was loyal, rabid, evangelical, and growing week to week. um actually and cartoon hell were to a lesser extent enjoying the same kind of success. there was something about this longer-form, unscripted, personality-based content that was inspiring the imaginations of our viewers more than we could have ever predicted.

those were exciting early days: we were growing quickly, and even IAC was upbeat. but as the months went on, progress began to stall.

our programming slate was scheduled out so far in advance that we couldn't pivot as quickly into unscripted content as we needed to. our creatives, who largely aspired to be in narrative TV writing rooms, weren't enthusiastic about creating the unscripted content our audience was gravitating to. several narrative shows came out in a row - kingpin katie, troopers, gods of food, and (my personal favorite) ultramechatron team go - all of which were good, but none of which delivered subscribers.

by late summer, IAC was losing patience, and putting serious pressure on the executive team to deliver. i in turn was defending the creative, saying our talent, shows, and overall programming strategy needed time to gestate. in one particularly heated conversation, i was told to "man up" and "fix shit faster." those words, at a time when i was for the first time confronting my queerness, wounded me deeply.

in september, once "gods of food" also failed to perform, there was a somber meeting with IAC in which it was clear they were going to dump us. we were on track to meet our original goal of 100k subscribers by the end of the year, but given some unforeseen expenses not in my department, that goal was now higher and unachievable. soon thereafter, "game changer" would premiere and be our biggest success since dimension 20 -- but IAC had already made up their minds

in an internal strategy meeting afterwards, our CMO put in her notice; she had seen the writing on the wall and been interviewing for weeks. our CEO joined us through the first leg of the sales process, but his heart wasn't in it, and he bailed ship shortly thereafter, leaving the company leaderless. (i should say at this point that, without spending a year under rich cusick as CEO, i wouldn't have been prepared to run the company. his transparent leadership style is entirely responsible for my business acumen.)

IAC asked myself and CFO natalie maysliche to see through the sales process. in october, i stood in front of the whole company and announced that (a) we were for sale and (b) our CEO had quit, but that (c) i was optimistic -- and at the time, i was. collegehumor was a legacy comedy brand with a massive fanbase, dropout wasn't unsuccessful, and there were already 15 prospective buyers. despite my optimism, there were many nervous glances around the room.

i went around like a traveling salesman meeting with funny or die, sony, viacom, and many other companies that would surprise you. slowly but surely, i realized is that - on paper - we looked horrible: IAC was midway through a ~\$30M investment, and the business plan had us losing another ~\$10M before becoming profitable. if the business plan were viable, then why did IAC lose interest? in each of these meetings, i made the case that the company could be profitable sooner if only we did this and this, but i looked like a sentimental creative trying to save jobs -- and, to some extent, i was.

one by one, the prospective buyers pulled out. IAC began to plan mass layoffs for after the holidays. they told us explicitly not to warn employees, but i conspired with david kerns, mike trapp, rekha shankar, to leak the news. by the time we shot season 2 of game changer in

december of 2019, we all knew it was the last time we would share the stage together as full-timers. i used the season as an opportunity to give away as much IAC money as i could get away with.

as the holidays rolled around, there was one corporation offering chump change to fire everyone and seize the assets. IAC was seriously considering it. insulted as i felt by the offer, i couldn't help but think about the business plan i had been pitching. before leaving, rich cusick had told me "careful, sam: pitch enough, and you might start believing yourself." did i? and, perhaps more to the point, was there a chance i could do it myself?

i called natalie. she excitedly helped me to put the business plan on paper. in a video conference with IAC's CEO joey levin, in what can only be described as an out of body experience, i bore witness to myself saying "here's the pitch: rather than selling the company for next to nothing, you give the company to me, keep some for yourself, and i'll make you more money long-term."

on december 27th, two days after christmas, i got the call from him to say "we're in."