

- Tom: Up next is a conversation with Andie Grace, vice president of acquisitions and head cheerleader at Devolver Digital Films, a film distributor in San Francisco. Thanks for being on the show with us, Andie.
- Andie: It's great to be here. Thank you.
- Tom: Oh, great. We're going to delve into the world of film distribution and ask the question: What if a filmmaker spoke with a distributor before a film was produced or at least well into that process? What might they learn? Could any money be saved, or could there be some funds used in a way that would make the film easier to distribute or more successful? What do you think about that, Andie?
- Andie: I think that that's where the magic is. Right now I wish that I had the opportunity to talk to so many filmmakers before they ever started making their movie just because, from top to bottom really, thinking about who your audience is going to be and where you're going to find them is more important now than ever with so many different channels and so many different ways to find film. It's incredibly hard for indies and micro indies to figure out where their audiences are. If you don't think about who those people are and how they watch movies before you ever start shooting and start building an audience at the very beginning, you're just – you're going to labor in obscurity. So I think it's one of the most important things that a filmmaker can do.
- Tom: Well, good. I was thinking the same thing too, having been quite the follower of video on demand and films in general all my life. Well, as a filmmaker, we find ourselves rather singly focused on how the story moves you emotionally or singly focused on something anyway but rarely on how it plays in distribution, which is your point. Digital making is – I don't know – it couldn't be anymore highly competitive now, especially given the fact that fundamentally really hardware and software has just dropped dramatically in price all the way across the digital work process, workflow process. There's got to be – sort of the question is: What's the secret to making a film that really moves people emotionally, for instance, that's interesting in distribution beyond just special effects or whatever it is that you do? I think in the end it comes down to collaboration. That's part of my point as a colorist really is all too often I'm brought a film at the last saying, "Okay, do your magic." It occurred to me that's probably similar to what happens to you. It's all done, buttoned up, in a nice package, and they say, "Hey, Andie, do your magic." You've probably even heard that phrase.
- Andie: Certainly. Yet you get people who come to you thinking that even if they have done not a thing to develop their audience up to that point that you're going to be able to help them find huge success if you love their movie enough and if they just make the right choices and negotiate the contract the right way. Too often I'm receiving a package that may not be, even with explicit instructions, may not be up to snuff as far as deliverables and technical specs and requires a lot of back and forth on that front. Also, it's in some cases

impossible for me to place your film on the platforms that you want to be in if you have zero demonstrable audience already, if you've never done a festival, if you've got no Facebook page, if nobody can point to any link anywhere that shows your film has existed until now. I don't care how good it is. I'm not going to get it on iTunes for you and not be able to give it the full release that it really wants, no matter how much noise I make on social media.

Tom: It's really very similar in the book business these days.

Andie: Exactly.

Tom: Unless you're a high flyer, they're like, "Well, interesting book, but do you have an audience? Do you have a mailing list? Who's following you? Well, okay. I think there's some answers, though. There's a problem, but part of the issue, of course, is bringing the best of creativity forward from everyone in this process of creating a production, including the distributor. Getting back to you, let's just talk maybe in a broad sense. What is Devolver Digital Film, and what makes it unique, and why are you located in San Francisco?

Andie: Well, I happen to be living in the bay area, but the company is actually based their in Austin with you.

Tom: Oh, yeah. That's right.

Andie: Devolver Digital started out – my partners have been in the video game space for many, many years and in 2011 founded Devolver Digital to distribute independent game content. That was going like gangbusters. They were really making a name for themselves, and they're a bunch of great guys. My partner Mike, who is a partner in Devolver Digital, is also a filmmaker. He and I met 12 years ago or so when he was making – gosh, it's been even longer than that now – he was making a movie about Burning Man where I worked. His experience is getting that film distributed, and I worked a lot with other filmmakers who had made movies about Burning Man. I had friends who made films. I took sabbaticals to make movies of my own. Our experience is trying to distribute independent film versus Mike's experience with distributing indie game content and how ripe the audiences are out there for indie games and indie developers are kind of the rock stars of the video game world, and it's just so much friendlier and works so much better in concert with current technology, whereas trying to get his movie out was – you know, you give all your rights to some company for 5, 10 years and they say they're going to do a few things with it, and they promise you a certain amount of money. Then in a year the film is on one platform. You can't get them to answer the phone. You say, "Well, what about this or that?" and they say, "Oh, we don't work with that anyway." Can I have my rights back? Well, no.

Tom: No.

Andie: It's night and day. In 2013 at South by Southwest we announced that we'd be starting a film distribution label as well, trying to bring some of that sensibility over from the video game world and from the tools that they used, different sales tools, to promote super indie content. So we launched at South by in 2013, and we've been putting out Indie films ever since. I think what sets us apart in a very some would even say crowded field is that we're kind of operating at a boutique level. We pick up just a few films at a time. We really try to partner with them as if they were our own movie. So that means not just putting it out on all the channels and expecting you to do all the work of promotions but picking up the stick and running with you for the second wind that a lot of filmmakers need once they've finished and they've done the festival circuit and everybody's heard about their fifteenth premier for the nine thousandth time.

They need a second wind and a boost to a bigger audience, to a broader audience than they'd be able to reach on their own. One of the ways that we do that is really kind of bonding our filmmakers together on the label and saying, "You're all here to support each other." Especially the more films we've added the more critical mass we've gotten. That's the thing I'm proudest of there is that all our filmmakers talk about each other's movies and review each other's films. We have them doing cross interviews and other things to really elevate their work with each other and their artistry as part of the story.

Tom: That's really smart. My wife and I were talking. Over the last two or three years we've noticed at the Grammys and other shows that are music oriented in particular and to some degree the films is that there's a lot more cross fertilization going on across artists it seems like. I'm not really sure what initially started that. It certainly wasn't that way 5 or 10 years ago. It was like, "Hey, this is me. This is my art. Forget you." Now it's like this guy plays with this guy. This one plays with Paul McCartney. You know, weird pairings. Really it's cool.

Andie: It's really neat to see. In our case, when you're talking about a whole bunch of different projects with little audiences of theirs that they've built, well, the one thing those audiences have in common is that they've clearly demonstrated they like an indie film. So they might like another indie film. All boats rise with the tide.

Tom: Smart, smart, smart. I like that a lot. Well, so let's see. We've already kind of touched on the fact that – maybe we can go into it a little bit further – some of the pitfalls that filmmakers find themselves into. I think the one you were mentioning there in summary was that as you're building your film, build your audience essentially. Is that the essence of that?

Andie: It is. Sometimes I think as artists it is hard to think like a marketer, and we tend to spit that out. We don't want to be told that we have to make anything that has broad appeal or

has to suit the taste of the audience. It's a tightrope to walk to not feel like you're just becoming a marketer when you're making your movie and just making what's going to be popular. You do have to examine the current market and think about where are films like this being watched. How big can a story really be? Is my romantic comedy with two people in it that nobody has ever heard of, can I realistically expect that it's going to just be a festival darling and it's going to get picked up by Lions Gate?

Storytelling is an art, and not everybody who makes a movie is necessarily a great storyteller, but some of these movies at this level really do have some amazing artistry in that regard. I don't think that alone is enough. Maybe if you have a story that doesn't have a niche – I don't want to call it a gimmick but a niche audience. It's not a genre. It's not an easily defined group of people who are going to watch it. Well, maybe you have to push the bar a little harder to get a name cast member or find somebody else to attach to the project to really kind of elevate it to the people are going to pay attention to this level because attention is a tough, tough, tough game right now. I mean people have so much content lying at their eyes all day long. You have to figure out some way to stand out.

Tom: True. Then how does a filmmaker have a clue what's a good topic these days? Is this the kind of thing where it makes sense to possibly have a conversation with you before they've even finished the script, for instance?

Andie: Possibly. I mean contrast to how we work on the game side. We do a little bit more production on the game side working with the crews earlier in a production. We just haven't been resourced yet to do that on the film side, even though we have great connections and we love that part of the process. We love making movies. We're filmmakers. That's why we do this. It just hasn't been possible for us to do so far. However, on the side I consult sometimes with film projects and have had plenty of people just come up before they've even written an outline and say, "What are the things I need to think about before I make this movie?" I've had several conversations where I just said, "Well, on the back end here's what it's going to look like if you take the movie that you're talking to me about right now and try to put it out. You might go back to the drawing board with this." I've had a few experiences of people saying, "I didn't realize that this is not the movie I need to make. I need to make this move instead," or, "I never thought about who my audience even was." Especially in a documentary that's incredibly important. Across all genres it's just a huge important first question. It's like the first three questions you should be asking yourself as a filmmaker. Who is my audience?

Tom: Yeah. I mean at least as a distributor you could also provide some feedback, it would seem. It's like, "Look. It sounds like a great idea, but we've just distributed five of them just very similar to that topic area. Maybe we can have a conversation and find another angle for you on this. Know that there are some others that are already on top of that."

Andie: Exactly.

Tom: Tough to hear. Probably tough to hear that.

Andie: It is. It's sometimes not the first thing they want to hear, especially when they're already pretty far into the process. It's a heartbreaker but better than three years down the line when you're still waiting for your first revenue check to roll in.

Tom: Well, again, I mean the parallel for that for me as a colorist is when they bring the film done, edited, locked. Obviously, I'm not going to critique the story, but they've locked in the way they've shot it at that point. In the same way that digital films have now a proliferation of ways in which they can be distributed. There is also a proliferation of the ways in which films can be captured digitally. We've been in transition with that with filmmakers, and there are a lot of excellent filmmakers out there, but there are a lot of – this is a little more the indie market. Not the big higher end things, but on the indie market you've got a lot of people buying their first camera. Not their first camera but their first one where they're shooting RAW or LOG encoded files, and they're not exposing them properly. That's a bit of an over-simplification, although I've had a couple of them in this last year that was the issue and can you fix it. Well, kind of, but if you just would've talked to me. What I've been saying of late is offer me a cup of coffee. We'll talk. We'll talk.

Andie: Yeah. Exactly.

Tom: I'm not going to critique your ideas, but at least on the technical side I could possibly take whatever budget you have, instead of spending 65, 70 percent of it on fixing problems, I'm spending 60 percent of it on doing really cool things to help emotionally tell the story. You've got to have to almost go through and get your knees skinned on that one I think really to really grasp it, unless, of course, you have a good DP that's got all that nailed, and that's fine. There seems to be more troubles than there are solutions, people with solutions right now.

Well, cool. Well, while we're on the technical side then, just from your perspective, what are the kinds of things – let's say someone has a film they're – ideally, let's say, has gone to color and has gone to sound. What's the best way to bring you the film in its digital form?

Andie: Well, I mean as far as reviewing what we're going to take on, we're usually looking at a Vimeo link that's finished. We occasionally see things not at their final edit, but they think it's their final edit. We take a look at say, "You need to come down from two and a half hours," that kind of thing.

Tom: Okay, well, there's that one too. I've got a few of those.

Andie: Yeah. For the most part, we're seeing things that are pretty much wrapped up. However, as we've gone along, there are a million different ways that a film can fail to pass QC. If you're trying to get a full release on a bunch of different platforms, everybody has different specs. We've learned to be able to watch a little more closely for, you know, you shot these segments of the film on this kind of – in this way and they've been up-resed and we're not going to be able to get that on that platform for you. So let's have a realistic expectation right now. I can do these 5 platforms, and those 10 are out of reach for you, that kind of thing.

Tom: Oh, really? Really? Now, you have, if I remember correctly, some very nice – I won't call them homework sheets but some guides, don't you? You want to talk a little bit more about that?

Andie: We have been working nonstop trying to keep up with the changes in the industry to create really useful white papers on both technical specs and delivery and also windowing and how all the different platforms work and what social media promotion works with which platform and what you need to do on release day and what you need to do two months from release day. These are things that we partner with and offer to take on a whole lot of for filmmakers that don't want to do it on their own, but anybody who is willing to jump in and get their hands dirty is only going to amplify the efforts. I really think that filmmakers should have this information for their next project as well and know as much as they possibly can about every step of the process.

The challenge to that has been that every single film releases in a slightly different way based on individual criteria with a thousand different on/off switches that I could name. Every time it works slightly differently. I learn something new that might work for someone in the future. The industry just changes so much week over week literally, week over week, that new territories are added or other territories start to require new ratings that they didn't require two months ago. A film that you look at in my catalog that released six months ago, if you come to me and say, "I want that to happen for me," it may take a completely different set of backflips to get there. It's just been hard to keep that documentation up to date.

Tom: Specifically, what are some examples of things that have changed in the last six months to a year?

Andie: In the last six months to a year, let's see, a year ago I could put a film on iTunes and it would release in Australia. Since then, Australia has created new ratings laws that you have to get a localized rating. They're trying to restrict adult content and give better information to viewers. So they require an Australia rating for a film to come out, which is an expensive process. There are lots of territories like that around the world. People think, "Oh, I'm going to put it on this platform," which reaches every territory, but many

of those territories aren't going to take it if you don't have translations or localized ratings.

Tom: That's fascinating.

Andie: I mean that's one example.

Tom: How does one get an Australian – I mean is that an entirely separate process you have to pay for?

Andie: Yep. We have one film that did it recently. I think it's in the 1,000 to \$1,500 range. I'm totally pulling that out of the air. I don't seem to remember them mentioning it. You go to the local board and you send them a screener, and they go through it and out pops your local Australia rating.

Tom: Oh, wow. That's another three months to rate, right?

Andie: Yep. Yep.

Tom: Anything else along that line – that was just fascinating – in the last six months to a year that's changed?

Andie: Well, there are always fluctuations, a lot of them having to do with anything from staff turnover to adjustments in technology at the various partners that we use because there are some places you can only get through aggregators, others that we're direct with. As their technologies change, sometimes things slow down. Let's see. Last summer I was about 12 to 14 weeks out to get a digital release date for a film once it hit my desk or our desk.

Tom: Oh, that's good.

Andie: It's more like 20 to 22 right now to get a date from iTunes.

Tom: No. Why do you think that is?

Andie: I would be completely speculating. It seems like – and we have several different ways that we can get to iTunes right now, but all of them seem to be very slow.

Tom: Just we think they're inundated, is that it, fundamentally?

Andie: It could be that. I think there's a lot of – with the changes in the industry, I imagine that there's a lot of pressure and more and more content and how to figure out how to curate properly and filter and process everything that's coming in. I'm sure the volume just

continues to increase because, like you said, technology to make films gets cheaper and cheaper. I can only assume that's what it is, or maybe it's just a crowded year with studio content taking precedent.

Tom: Well, there's that.

Andie: It could just be some kind of backlog from the holidays. I've only been in this part of the game for a couple of years so maybe it's par for the course. It's a long wait for a film that's got a little bit of buzz going and I'm trying to keep something aloft from their final screening at a festival, or they haven't screened at a festival in a year. You're rebuilding all the momentum if you have to wait that long.

Tom: Oh, you know, that's a really, really good point. Well, so let's say that you've...

Andie: Sorry.

Tom: That's okay. That you've produced your film that – I mean you've written it, you've produced it, you've edited it, you've got it. Maybe you were in the loop on it. Along the way, they've built some social media credit as well as had releases and they've won some festival awards and things of this nature. At that point, what, that you can say anyway, are sort of the unique differences in aiming for something like Netflix if you go down the list – Netflix, iTunes, Amazon? Are those, I guess, the top three?

Andie: It depends on what the goal of the filmmaker is. Those tend to be the ones that everybody asks about first.

Tom: Right. Makes sense.

Andie: Yeah. For sure. iTunes is definitely curated. Netflix is curated and also is a different window. iTunes and Amazon Instant Video they're the first things that you generally want to do. If you've got any audience that you think will pay to watch this movie or own this movie, you want to go there first before you move to subscription services where people are paying a one time fee to watch a whole lot of movies in a month. That's known as the transactional VOD window. That's usually where you go first, where your distributor is going to go first. That's the first window when it comes to a digital VOD release. Of course, there's theatrical and DVD and all the other things that can be folded in there as well. The ones that curate are looking for social media following, those awards at festivals. Festivals definitely still count.

Tom: Worth mentioning that again. Yeah.

Andie: Yeah. Festivals are often thought of as markets where your film is going to get bought, but I think that filmmakers really need to be thinking of them as an opportunity to pop

with the first audience that they can get in front of their film. That might mean you can get some reviews during that process or get some audience buzz going or take pictures of the full house that you get, whatever it might be. You've got something that you can stick up on social media and say, "We exist. I'm a film and people care about me." The more of that that you have when you walk in the door the more likely those curating platforms are going to pick your film up.

Tom: Right. So same with Amazon, I suppose?

Andie: Amazon Instant Video not necessarily. In order to get your film moved Amazon Prime, which is a subscription service and which is really where I'm seeing a lot more action for indie films, you do, again, want to have some buzz going that stokes the fires. The more reviews and shares you're getting in the first week when your film goes live on Amazon Instant Video the easier it is to get it moved to Prime. The algorithm needs to be paying attention to your film. Some films you can get placed on Prime right out of the gate, depending on how the package looks when Amazon sees it. Overall, I think that the subscription VOD window is right now the strongest place for an indie film. If you've got a movie where, again, it looks like an interesting story, it's got a nice poster art and a great description but I've never heard of these people, I'm way more likely to take a chance on that if I paid \$8 for my Hulu subscription this month than I am to pay \$12 or \$19 on iTunes to own your movie.

Tom: That's a good point.

Andie: I'll take a gamble. The trick is putting it out in the right order so that some of the platforms that are subscription are still paying per viewing and others pay a flat fee and they want your movie for two years as many times as it gets watched. When you put your film on Netflix as an indie and taking a really small amount to do that, you're pretty much finished earning money on your film A lot of the times – yeah, I mean Netflix is often the first thing people ask us about. They are really largely focused on television content right now. A lot of the throughput that's happening there is television content. You don't see them making good offers on a lot of indie films anymore. The number has just decreased so much that, sure, we could get you there, but we want to wait and figure out if there are any other revenues anywhere else for your film before we jump there and just show it to everybody basically for free.

Tom: It sounds like the value that you offer as a distributor is also based on writing the ways of change and the video on demand marketplace, the major players, and this balance between transaction versus subscription, and knowing if maybe intuitively any way working with it on a day-to-day basis the particular curation process or nature for each one of those.

Andie: Yeah. That and I mean, of course, we sit on an array of relationships and pipelines that we can put to use, which are not always available immediately to an independent filmmaker who is new on the scene. You can't just walk in and get your film on iTunes. You either pay upfront, or you go through a heavily curated process and others like it and cable relationships. We have some broadcast cable relationships that we can also bring to bear. I mean the first thing I'll say to anybody is, no, you don't need a distributor anymore. You definitely don't need us. If you have the resources and you feel that you either are surrounded by people who will help or you yourself are a powerhouse at all the things that need to happen to have a release be successful, I would not take your movie on. I only want to take on films that we can make bigger than they would be without us.

That means not everybody has the wherewithal to sit and do the social media stuff and knows how to make boosted posts and how to do targeting on an ad. They might just be filmmakers who are ready to go off and make their next movie and not really sitting there in front of the laptop day by day doing all these things, as well as press and marketing and all the different encoding that you have to do to reach all the platforms. This is a way to be able to say, "I need a partner. Will you help me?" We grab whatever balls are in the air. In some cases, that's a filmmaker who has moved on to their next project, and we're doing everything. In some cases, I kind of stay out of the way while they do what they do, and I just help to amplify their message that they've already got going because we have our own followership around the world as well, largely coming from our video game audience. Sometimes that's an audience that we can help them to reach if it's appropriate.

Tom: All right. Well, let's talk a little bit about the shadow side of distribution then. It sounds like you're very on top of – certainly an appropriate and thoughtful and mindful actually comes to mind way of the interaction with the filmmaker. You're just kind of determining where you fit in the process to help them be most successful, which might mean just stepping aside. There are stories of distributors that have often sort of – I was going to use the word predatory, but there certainly is somebody who just wants to get it out and they get it in, and then they get in this quagmire around, well, it seems like it's a whole bunch of stuff. You need to do this, but we'll take care of it for you for so much dollars to make it broadcast safe. Talk a little bit about that.

Andie: That is a matter of picking good people to work with and kind of seeing the whites of their eyes I think and really developing the savvy around reading an agreement and what is being promised and what's being promised on the phone.

Tom: Ask a lot of questions.

Andie: Ask a lot of questions. Don't be afraid to negotiate. They're always going to entertain any suggestion that you might have. Our deal is set up very purposefully to be filmmaker friendly. It's a little four-pager contract. We don't take all your rights. We only take the

ones that we can use. If we have an opportunity to put more of them to use for you, we'll extend with an addendum on the agreement, but you keep your DVD rights, and you keep your international broadcaster rights and other things that we can't touch. Our deal is only three years. We tried to be only one year when we started out, but every platform we work with...

Tom: Takes too long.

Andie: Yeah. It takes too long. You'd be in a paperwork nightmare all the time. When I put the film out through various different platforms, their agreement is three years anyways. So I'm entering into that agreement for three years on your behalf. We try to keep it short. Part of that transparency, that process of documenting all this stuff that lives in our heads about windowing and how things end up where, trying to make that as transparent as possible is very much about demystifying so that you're not sitting on – waiting for them to pick up the phone in two years and have no information on what's happening with your release. I've heard that story and have been part of that story plenty of times. I know it definitely happens, and every deal looks different. You really have to just read the fine print.

Tom: Okay. I think we're down to two last things here. Andie, thank you very much for an extremely insightful journey through this process. Also, it was just helpful for me to get that might intuition was right in that it's really important to be speaking to a distributor sooner than later. So how would someone get a hold of you? What's the best way to get a hold of you and talk further about this?

Andie: Well, our website is [devolverdigital.com](#). There are two sides of the website. One is video games and one is film. You can check out our current catalog there as well. Of course, we're Devolver Flicks on Twitter. Right now we've been in a place where we've been very focused on video game related films. The reason being that one of the reasons that we went into business was knowing that several video games' first platforms we're going to increase their offerings to include film in the years ahead. The first one of those that did that went live in October. It's [gog.com](#). It's formerly known as Good Old Games. The way that iTunes works for us for movies is how it basically works for distributing games. They've decided to put in some film content. It's not exclusively video game related titles, but that kind of led us to a wave of really good game related titles that are out right now and us being a pretty logical place for those to be, given our built in audience. That's really where our focus has been for the last little while, but we have a great spate of films coming out right now, including a documentary about Beatles tribute bands.

Tom: Oh, that sounds exciting. What else?

Andie: Oh, it's great. It's called *Come Together*.

Tom: Of course.

Andie: Our Valentine's Day release – it's hitting L.A. theaters this weekend – it's called *The Worst Year of My Life*. It's a romance story sort of. We never wanted to just focus on game related titles or genre stuff. People told us early on, "You need to just do horror films and gamer stuff," and we didn't want to do that. We're film fans all the way around.

Tom: Yeah. Well, that sounds great. Well, thank you so much.

Andie: Thanks for having me on. This is great. I really can't say enough about getting this kind of information out to filmmakers so they can make the best movies possible.

Tom: A special thanks to our guest, Andie Grace. If you have any questions about this podcast or have any ideas for topics on color, please email me at tom@tomparish.com. Color Talk is in iTunes. Be sure to subscribe and get your latest show there, or I'll tell you a secret. I post in SoundCloud first. Hint, hint. Many thanks Jenny Meadows at mycopyeditor.com for the faithful and kind and accurate copy editing, to Senise Sebastian for the amazing use of 100 percent organic, gluten free SEO tags to help make tomparish.com more visible in the search engines and, finally, Paul Cox, my C-level support person, CSAO chief, smart ass officer, and long time friend. Until next time, ABC, always be learning.