

Innovation & Workplace Culture in the Australian Interactive Entertainment Industry: The Halfbrick Story

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Abstract

A recent success story of the Australian videogames industry is Brisbane based Halfbrick Studios, developer of the hit game for mobile devices, *Fruit Ninja*. Halfbrick not only survived the global financial crisis and an associated downturn in the Australian industry, but grew strongly, moving rapidly from developing licensed properties for platforms such as Game Boy Advance, Nintendo DS, and Playstation Portable (PSP) to becoming an independent developer and publisher of in-house titles, generating revenue both through App downloads and merchandise sales.

Amongst the reasons for Halfbrick's success is their ability to adaptively transform by addressing different technical platforms, user dynamics, business models and market conditions. Our ongoing case-study research from 2010 into Halfbrick's innovation processes, culminating with some 10 semi-structured interviews with senior managers and developers, has identified a strong focus on workplace organisational culture, with staff reflecting that the company is a flat, team-based organisation devolving as much control as possible to the development teams directly, and encouraging a work-life balance in which creativity can thrive.

The success of this strategy is evidenced through Halfbrick's low staff turnover; amongst our interviewees most of the developers had been with the company for a number of years, with all speaking positively of the workplace culture and sense of creative autonomy they enjoyed. Interviews with the CEO, Shainiel Deo, and team leaders highlighted the autonomy afforded to each team and the organisation and management of the projects on which they work. Deo and team leaders emphasised the collaboration and communication skills they require in the developers that they employ, and that these characteristics were considered just as significant in hiring decisions as technical skills. Halfbrick's developers celebrate their workplace culture and insist it has contributed to their capacity for innovation and to their commercial success with titles such as *Fruit Ninja*.

This model of organisational management is reflected in both Stark's (2009) idea of heterarchy, and Neff's (2012) concept of venture labour, and provides a different perspective on the industry than the traditional political economy critique of precarious labour exploited by gaming conglomerates. Nevertheless, throughout many of the interviews and in our informal discussions with Halfbrick developers there is also a sense that this rewarding culture is quite tenuous and precarious in the context of a rapidly changing and uncertain global videogames industry.

Whether such a workplace culture represents the future of the games industry, or is merely a 'Prague Spring' before companies such as Halfbrick are swallowed by

Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play.

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traditional players' remains to be seen. However, as the process of rapid and uncertain transformation plays out across the videogames industry, it is important to pay attention to emerging modes of organisation and workplace culture, even whilst they remain at the margins of the industry.

In this paper we investigate Halfbrick's workplace culture and ask how sustainable is this kind of rewarding and creative workplace?

References

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