

On top of his game

This video game entrepreneur takes on the world brick by (Half) brick. Interview by Alex Bernard

You may not have heard of Shainiel Deo but overseas, particularly in China and cities like San Francisco, he's treated like a rock star, mobbed by fans and hounded for autographs. As founder and CEO of Halfbrick Studios, the creator of video game Fruit Ninja, he's an unlikely hero, but he's in charge of one of the most successful game development companies in the world. Apple recently announced that Fruit Ninja is the second most downloaded paid app in the world just behind the game Angry Birds.

"Yeah, we're pretty successful right now," Deo says modestly, "We're gaining ground on Angry Birds; we've got about 200 million [downloads] and they have 300, 400 million but they've been out for a year longer than us. We'll catch 'em."

"Pretty successful" is something of an understatement. At the Game Developers conference in San Francisco last month Halfbrick picked up several awards for its latest game Jetpack Joyride, including Best Arcade Game, Best iPhone Game and Game of the Year and it was Game Developer of the Year for 2011. Fruit Ninja also won the gamers equivalent of an Oscar

last year at the Interactive Achievement Awards.

But Deo's expertise may have been lost to gamers if he had pursued his other passion; the sea. "I was pretty sporty as a kid; I loved being outdoors, especially the ocean. I loved fishing, still go whenever I can. I actually wanted to be a marine biologist," he says.

But there was another passion competing for his affection. Computer games. "Our next door neighbour had an Atari 2600 so I was over there all the time!" He used his birthday money and Christmas card money to buy a Nintendo entertainment system when he was 13 and from then on he had a one track mind. "I just wanted to make computer games, but there wasn't really a games industry in Brisbane in 1995," says Deo.

After completing his degree at QUT he had a stint with an IT company, but in his spare time he was developing computer games and playing them with his friends. By then the games industry had started to take off and Qantm College was offering courses in digital media education, including animation, games design and games programming. For Deo it was a chance to mix with many more like-minded people.

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