

“It doesn't feel like a real job”



Shainiel Deo (above) and a scene from Fruit Ninja (left)



“In 2001 at Qantm I met up with the five or six guys and we thought ‘let’s give it [starting our own company] a go!’ but the first version of what ended up becoming Halfbrick Studios was pretty short-lived. In the end it was just me and Daniel [his first employee] and then we slowly built it up to what it is today,” says Deo.

Today Halfbrick is rated among its peers as the number two game developer in the world, has 57 employees and has started its expansion with a new office in Sydney. Jobs with the company are highly coveted in the industry and among graduates.

“He’s great to work for, you can just rock up to him to talk about anything and he’s a funny guy too. Shainiel doesn’t wear a tie to work; he’s not a stickler for rules and regulations. He’s made it an energetic and fun place to work. He hangs out with us, plays poker, we go fishing together, we both love it, we’re all good friends here,” says Phil Larsen, a fellow gamer and now Halfbrick’s chief marketing officer.

Larsen travels extensively with Deo who spent five months last year away from home. This year he aims to spend more time with his wife Rose and four children Isabella, 11, Pasquale, 8, Sebastian, 5, and Eva, almost three.

“My wife isn’t into gaming at all! We’ve been together for 11 years so she’s been with me for the whole thing. I test games out on her and if she likes them I know I’m on to a good thing,” he laughs. “The kids also score a lot of points with their friends out of what I do, but I really want to spend more time at home this year, get home at a reasonable hour, hanging out with my family, going fishing,” says Deo.

Although Halfbrick Studios opened an office in Sydney recently Deo rules out a move away from Brisbane and says satellite offices overseas would be the alternative if necessary.

“I have zero interest in leaving Brisbane and I’ve been to some of the most amazing cities in the world. When I’m on the plane and they say ‘We’ve commenced our decent into Brisbane’ my heart just sings. There are a lot of talented people here doing a lot of very interesting things. One of the first gaming companies was in Brisbane; here and Melbourne are the hubs of gaming in Australia,” says Deo.

Jeffrey Nevell, 36, met Deo when they were 12 years old at Canterbury College.

Nevell, now a solicitor, laughs and tells me “You know, until you told me Fruit Ninja was the number two game in the world, I didn’t even know! That’s so typical of Shainiel, he never really talks about his work. I mean, of course, we all know he’s doing really well, but the second most downloaded game in the world!”

Deo hasn’t changed much at all according to his longtime friend. “Me, Shainiel and another really close mate Toby still take a week-long trip each year, muck about, bloke stuff,” says Nevell. “He loves the sea so much I really thought he would become a marine biologist. He has a real affinity with the ocean, but his greater love was computer games. When we were kids we were always playing computer games; he was a lot more into it than I was. He progressed through all the consoles as they came out.”

Nevell says Deo’s talents were obvious even as a student. “He was just a sponge. He’d listen to something, absorb it and retain that knowledge so easily. He never really had to study as he was so bright but he’s also a very good communicator and has that social awareness too,” says Nevell.

The success of Fruit Ninja and Jetpack Joyride has created an inevitable domino effect with clothing lines and toys already in development and Deo is also looking at educational applications for the games.

He is also working with Dr Stuart Smith, a senior research officer at Neuroscience Research Australia, to use Fruit Ninja in the rehabilitation of stroke victims. “The motion where you have to swipe to cut the fruit is a really good exercise for people recovering from a stroke, so we modified the game to Dr Smith’s requirements. They’re trialing it at the moment, so hopefully that’s really going to help people. I want to continue to develop those kinds of relationships,” says Deo.

The sky is the limit for this Brisbane entrepreneur. “I do get how lucky I am. It doesn’t feel like a real job. I love jumping out of bed every day and getting to work and really, how many people can say that?” When I ask Shainiel what’s next he laughs and says “World domination.” Spoken like a true gamer.

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