



## Creative Expression - Avoiding the Project Churn

By James Marsden

### Introduction

Here are the notes from my creative catapult presentation, edited to read as an essay for those of you who either couldn't make it, or would like to keep the document for reference.

John invited me along to do the seminar because I did a talk a couple of years ago which he thought was pretty cool. I talked about how I'd managed to get my own creative project up and running, and John suggested I revisit it, as it might be a good example for the possibility of doing your own thing, as opposed to working for someone else, or working project by project as a freelancer.

Well, the title Creative Catapult has got me thinking, and rather than just tell my story, I've decided to write a bit about the things I've learned that have made it possible to do my own thing. The aim being to ensure that you understand how I've been able to realise my own creative goals, rather than me just blab about what I've done, which could be a bit lame. Hopefully then you'll be able to take something away from this essay and apply it to your own situation.

Now I'd say the ultimate goal for us all is some level of creative expression, doing the stuff that comes from our own imagination; our own visual or storytelling style - cultivating that uniquely creative thing that we do, so that one day we can earn a living doing exactly what we enjoy. It's a very rare thing in fact, as it's so easy to lose track of what we want by getting caught in the digital media project churn. What I mean by this is just all the projects you don't care about - the ones you have to work on to make a living.

So, I'm going to quickly run through my story, to illustrate how it's really easy to lose sight of creative goals, and then detail the things I've learned in order to stay on track.

Some of you are no doubt thinking: 'as if I'm gonna get lost, I know what I want!' Well, what I have to say is actually pretty relevant to you, because that was my attitude too. For those of you thinking 'I haven't got a clue what I want!', don't worry, because you're just as important to this essay.

### My Story

After I graduated from a fine art degree, I went to study for an MSc, and during that time I came up with what I considered to be a genius idea for a creative franchise, a film and game idea so radical and amazing that I



had to commit every second of my life to realising it. I quit the MSc course and moved to Brighton, talking a bunch of friends into joining me, hyping them up about this idea, and about how we all had to learn web design, get into Flash, steal the imagination of a particular publisher, and then proceed to take over the world. In fact, I was so confident that I told my colleagues who stayed in Exeter that in 5 years time I would own Brighton. That was 6 years ago, and I don't own Brighton in case you were wondering, but that illustrates how cocky I was.

At the time I thought that in order to pitch the idea to a publisher, I had to demonstrate being able to realise the idea myself. If I couldn't demonstrate it, then people would either ignore me, or they'd steal the idea and do it themselves.

So we came to Brighton, and I found a startup company looking for someone ambitious, worked with those guys for a year and then started my own company, FuturLab. We had a big old launch party, inviting all the media crowd to make a statement that we'd arrived.

Fast forward 3 years to 2006, and I'd made not one conscious effort in pursuit of our goal. From 2003 to 2006 we'd jumped ladders from web design, to web development, to Flash corporate training, to Flash based eLearning, and we'd actually done nothing I was proud of the whole time.

During a particularly depressing period I got a swift kick up the ass from my producer Jade, and I realised that my cocksure vision had gone totally off track.

Something really extraordinary happened after that. I came back into the office and started building a Flash game, a big, complicated, platform game. I'd never made a game before in my life, but I sweated for 3 months, working flat out learning how to do it all. I had so much passion for it, and I couldn't really understand why. The game idea that had brought me to Brighton was so buried by that time, having been so preoccupied with project churn, that it didn't even cross my mind. I even felt a bit guilty that I was spending so much time working on it - as if I was ignoring something really important.

It turned out to be the company finances, because during that time I didn't do any paid work. We ran on vapour and almost went out of business. I didn't care, I'd unlocked 3 years of unspent passion and it felt like I was getting somewhere for once - the business would benefit somehow.

Toward the end of this period, I realised that we could build some elements of our idea into the game engine, and then we'd have something approaching a demo.

Jade discovered that Adult Swim was looking to publish Flash games for their site, and the next day we had



Adult Swim really interested. This was a real breakthrough for us at the time, and that's when I did the talk at the Digital Festival which John saw. That was in November 2006.

By March 2007 Adult Swim were still debating contractual clauses. It was mind numbing, and out of sheer frustration I decided to go straight for the publisher we'd pinned our dreams on.

Once I'd made this decision to just go for it, I felt a tangible rush of confidence. We pitched the game idea, using the game engine I'd built, and they said:

'We really love your ideas, and we want to work with you, but you can keep the game engine, cos... it sucks a bit'.

Ok, so I just spent 4 years tech'ing myself up, because I thought I needed to... and... you want to work with us because you like the ideas on their own?!

Does that mean we could have come to you with the ideas and pitched them about two years ago, or even straight out of Uni?

## **What I've learned**

I've had a lot of time to think about this since, and it's become clear that during that whole time I was so fixated on our weaknesses, such as a lack of design talent, illustration, 3D etc - that I failed to cultivate our real strength: ideas. As such I was constantly (and half heartedly) trying to fit us into some abstract model of a successful web company, which is ridiculous because I've never cared about web design.

Flash is an amazing tool for creative expression, and I've always seen it as a means to an end, but I realised that I'd become completely lost in the means. I'd built a company with a good reputation, but I was leading my team around in circles - learning new technologies to be better, to get better projects, although 'better projects' wasn't something I could really define properly.

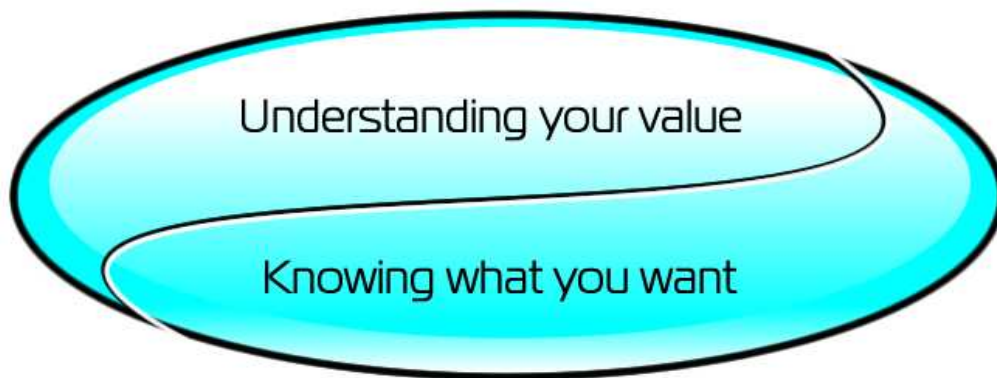
Until I'd begun to commit to what I wanted, I lacked a lot of confidence, but once I did make that step, and realised that our strengths were ideas - particularly the ideas that had prompted the journey in the first place - it was much easier to start building confidence because I was playing to my strengths and the strengths of my team.



It turns out that many of the skills we learned during that period have bolstered our offering to the publisher, and the game engine is now being licensed as a product in its own right, so it's not as if we've wasted a lot of time, but I can't ignore the fact that if I'd just had the confidence to stick to my vision from the beginning, and not been swayed by insecurities, we'd have saved around 2 years of hard, directionless work.

However, we have reached the goal - we are working with our dream publisher, and we're having a great time, and despite the stops and starts and problems along the way, it's become clear that there are three fundamental things that have kept the business on track. These are things that I've either learned through the process, or learned after the process through reflection, or some gut feel intuitions I've had all along, which have only been compounded by experience.

These three things are: knowing what I want, knowing my value, and actively building confidence around those two things. In retrospect, I think all three of these things are interdependent for success, and so I've devised this horribly corporate slide to illustrate the concept:



## THE CONFIDENCE PILL

As you can see, knowing what you want and knowing your value are two things that are mutually dependent, and without either of them, you don't get a well rounded confidence that's needed to move forward.

I want to talk a bit more about confidence, because it's rarely addressed, and is almost a taboo subject. It seems many people think that you either have it, or you don't, but I've learned that you can build the confidence to do anything you want.



## Confidence

Of course, talking about confidence being important is a bit of a no-brainer, but I think I have an original thought on the subject which I'd like to share with you.



It never ceases to amaze me how ugly Reebok trainers are. They seem to get uglier every year. For a long time I just couldn't understand how people could pollute the world in this way, and then I remembered a phenomenon I experienced at Art College, which some of you may be familiar with.

A character, let's call him Pete. Pete has next to zero talent, but has the biggest portfolio. He just works like crazy, creating bad work that even the nicest tutors can't say positive things about.

Behind his back the poor guy is the laughing stock, but what happens when college finishes? He goes for an interview and gets a creative job immediately out of college, because he has the confidence to knock on every door. He probably works at Reebok now, and this is a really important thing to acknowledge. There must be thousands of people with more talent than this chap, yet they're stacking shelves at Waitrose and getting increasingly bitter about their talent never being recognised.

I propose an explanation - Pete knows his value, and he knows what he wants. He knows he's not the best, and so he's not fussy about the level of prestige his job has, as long as he's doing something he enjoys.

Now, many of the more talented people find it hard to decide on what they want in the first place: "If only I knew what I actually wanted, I'd be able to go for it!"



However, when I ask people if they could have any job or lifestyle they wanted tomorrow, with instantaneous experience and a good salary/wage, most people can think of 5 or so jobs or careers they'd like to do within a minute.

So what's the deal there? These people are usually very capable and see potential for themselves in many areas. It's these kinds of people who have a sharp eye for quality, and it's exactly these kinds of people who

have the most, strict self-critique going on.

Indeed, it's often the really gifted individuals that are most lacking in confidence, because they see flaws everywhere around them, and can't for the life of them assume they'd do any better. The fact is that these people will always be the best at the things they're most scared of, because they're so critical. If only they could lift the pressure of self-criticism to see this blinding truth, there would be no more ugly Reebok trainers!

Now, going back to my case, I had plenty of confidence in my heart - I've sacrificed everything to build my company, and sacrifice can only come from the heart. However, I was leading myself around in circles because when you only lead with your heart, you're essentially leading blind, feeling your way around.

You need to have confidence at the front of your mind, to be able to see what you want with an objective, logical perspective. Write down what you want, stick it on the wall, analyse it, plan it, discuss it with people - commit to it.

Often the hardest part of deciding what you want is admitting it to yourself. Writing down something you really would like to achieve is a scary thing, because..if it never happens, and someone calls you on it later in life. You'll feel like a failure, right?

Wrong. When you mentally commit to getting what you want by putting it at the front of your mind, things start happening immediately.

Conversely, some people don't even get as far as having a few options to choose from, because they literally don't understand their own value, and so it's hard to judge what can and can't be achieved.

It's important to be realistic about goals, but it's really hard to separate being realistic from thinking pessimistically. It's a constant balance that many people get wrong in both directions, and it only becomes easier with experience, by taking risks and learning your limits. However, there is something you can do to help you narrow down the options, and that brings me onto knowing your value.



## Belbin<sup>1</sup> - Understanding Your Value

I was really fortunate to have attended a creative leadership course recently<sup>2</sup>, which was heavily team focused. During the course I was taught a deep understanding of my own value in a team environment, and

the value of the people around me. This is something that really should be taught at University level I think. Institutions tend to fall over themselves trying to supply students with the quantifiable skills they need, but rarely cultivate things like confidence, and certainly don't to my knowledge make any attempt at identifying each student's possible team role. However, this system is really big in the corporate world, especially in the states, and although I never thought I'd say it, we can all learn something from a bit of corp tech.

Each of us has a preferential style of working. Some people like to research, others like to plan and schedule, others like to just think up ideas and experiment. These skills and approaches to work are all needed in the creative industry, just as much as the ability to use Photoshop/Illustrator and Flash. Indeed, the way in which we choose to even use these applications is determined by our preferred working style.

Having gone through this training I think it's important to understand where each of us fits into these team roles, as it can help to shape our goals. By recognising our skills and working styles objectively, we can evaluate the options for ourselves, and the sooner we do that, the sooner we can decide on what our goals are and get to work.

Your University course or college class will likely be divided up into types of team roles - the planning types, the getting things done types, the 'people people' and so on.

Now remember that this essay is about not getting stuck in the project churn - some of you will likely have no problem with the idea of being a freelance animator, working on marketing campaigns for completely soulless products. That's cool!

What I'm interested in however, is encouraging you to make the most of the skill dynamics in your class/peer group, because believe it or not, that represents the best set of resources for your future career. For those of you who don't have a clear idea of what you want, you'll know people who will be able to guide your talents to new heights. For those of you who have a master plan or vision, but have no idea how to go about it, you'll know people that can help you achieve it.

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1 Belbin team roles: <http://www.belbin.com/>

2 An ace course run through UCCA by Creative Interventions: <http://www.creativeinterventions.co.uk>



A simple technique you can use to identify yourselves is to get hold of a bunch of coloured stickers and ascribe the following meaning to them. Red means you know you have some skills, and you know what you enjoy, but you don't necessarily know how those skills are best used in terms of a career path. Yellow means you kinda know what you want to do for a career, but could do with some guidance. Green means you know exactly what you want, and you're going to achieve it whether you have the skills to do so or not. I suggest wearing the stickers, and talking to each other about why you've decided to wear each colour.

It's very rare for people to possess aptitude in all of the team roles, and so if you want your skills to be used to their fullest, or if you want to achieve your goals, you need help from other people, and those people need you too.

I've only been able to achieve my goals because I'm working with people who don't have their own dream as such, but have skills they are happy to contribute to a journey.

Instead of going and working for someone else, you could invest in your own creative futures right now by building yourself a team of contacts. Think about how you would like your skills to be used, and offer them to each other. Nothing may come of it immediately, but who knows what will happen in the months to come. The important thing is to get your gut feelings out into the open, for other people to hear, so that you might help each other in some way.

Once you start actively thinking about what you're good at, and what you want, you'll start to shape the confidence dynamic in your mind, and then you'll be able to make a decision about where to take your career. If you already have a strong idea of what you want, grab as many people as you can now to join you on the journey - if you don't have any idea, find the person in the class who does, and join them – they might take you on a very rewarding journey.

Together you'll be able to avoid doing the horrid, last minute banner adverts for some shitty product you don't care about.

I hope you've found this essay useful – you can read more ideas on my blog which you can find at <http://www.futurlab.blogspot.com>

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