On charting your own course

Game designer, media specialist, and storyteller Zain Memon discusses working outside of the established system, making work that matters to you, actively seeking feedback, and why all culture is political.

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As told to Jonathan Ritter-Roderick, 2287 words.

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How did you manage to create a path outside the established system?

It is absolutely imperative to create a path outside the established system. The established system relies on big economics. The second big economics shareholders and fiduciary responsibilities come into play, innovation always takes a backseat. You see that in everything from Big Tech to Big Media. There's a reason why executives love making sequels of remixes of adaptations every year. Especially cultural innovation, which you cannot test-run in controlled environments.

We understood this very early and we ensured that our projects were always community first, the films we made, the documentaries, and even the games we make, we put the community in the center of the project. Aggressively ask for feedback. Aggressively ask them to ponder and think about the things you have been pondering and thinking about.

Because you've worked in film, publishing and games, how do you determine the proper media for a project?

That is at the core of the studio's process. We ask our creators to only tell stories that are important to them. We do not at any point prescribe or medium. So when a creator comes to us, with every project we do, we ask what the best vessel would be for this story.

How do you know a project is done?

I believe that a project is never done. That no film is ever complete. No game is ever perfect. And no album is perfectly mastered. But there comes a time that the incremental gains are diminishing. As a creator, I always want to work for a few more hours on a mechanism, as a writer I always want to polish a few scenes a little more. It is important to start putting things out there not to just try and chase after the perfect, because the perfect is an ethereal being that doesn't exist.

One thing that I've always admired is you think, "What's everyone not talking about? Politics in games. Cool. Let's do that."

Yeah. Let's get people talking. Let's talk about that one thing that must be spoken about, but no one is. The next conversation that needs to be had is religiosity. The conversation around religion, faith, and its relationship with the state. That's a conversation, hopefully I'll have soon. And maybe the zeitgeist will agree and maybe they won't. And that's okay.

What does your work entail on a day to day?

I don't define myself as only a game designer, or a writer, or a media producer. I participate in telling stories that interest me. And that participation varies—sometimes I am the creator, sometimes I'm the guy in the chair at the back end troubleshooting tech for my team members. And that's all part of running a lab that incubates talent. So every day is just basically problem solving. I wake up in the morning with a call from some legal issues, rush into a UI/ UX meeting for a game after that, have an afternoon call with investors, and try and scale up the operations.

In the evenings, sit down with the writing team and figure out what's the best possible way to tell the story. And at night, talk to someone who has much more expertise in the subject matter that I'm dealing with, that my entire approach is myopic and wrong, and I should reconsider what I'm doing. And then go back to the drawing board the next day with the advice in mind trying to fix things and tell the story better. So it's a lot of learning. It's a lot of time to figure things out. It's a lot of knowing that perhaps what we are doing might or might not work and trying to create a path to tell stories that are politically and culturally enriching. Most of the time, it's just troubleshooting to make it happen.

When we joined the tabletop industry, I didn't know anyone in the industry. And I reached out to a few people who reached out to a few more people. And I got in touch with people from within the industry, showed up at conventions, met you, met everyone else and started building inroads into the space, learnt how to make games while trying to understand how things really work. It was a lot of reading, asking, playing and equipping myself with the best tools I could find. It's very similar with every industry and every project.

How do you set yourself up for success when you're entering a new industry?

So there are multiple things I fall back on. I always fall back on my own experiences as a consumer. So if I were to watch a film, or read a book, or play a game, what kind of richness or density would I expect from that experience? How much would I value the experience? What position would it take in my own life? I don't try to second guess my audiences, because that never really works out positively. What I try to do is create for myself as an audience, because I am not unique. And even if I were, even if I was one in a million, there are 7,000 of me, exactly like me out there. And that's a huge audience base.

One thing that I've realized is that, when you're young, you think "I'm going to be creating in the games industry" And then you get in there, and you're like, "Spreadsheet? Invoice? What is this garbage?!"

That's one disclaimer I give to every young person I hire. I'm like, listen, your ideas are great. And we are going to work on them. I have tons of my own ideas, and I really can't bring all of them to life right now. I need doers. I need people who can come and deliver at a very, very high fidelity, who understand that creating any sort of media requires immense amounts of rigor and perseverance. So if you think it's going to be just sitting in a room, brainstorming, you got it wrong. It's 90% drudgery.

Hammering the same thing over and over. You're think, "Oh, this is a fun idea. I'm going to discuss this and think about this until it's not fun anymore, but someone can consume enjoy it."

Yeah. I'm going to make a board game, but two years later your problems are not the graphic design, it's, "Where's the ship stuck. Okay, the ship is stuck here and we need to figure out warehousing."

The amount of times that I actually want to play the games that I create or work on is so slim.

I look at the games I make and go, "I wish I could play you. But I hate the sight of you right now."

How do other people or collaborators figure into your work? What is the most helpful or unhelpful thing about working with others?

My process is very, very, very collaborative. It was six people who liked each other's work who came together to form a studio. By the inception of it the idea was that we'll piggyback off each other's strengths and build a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. I believe we've actually managed to do that simply because we have struck a big balance between hearing everyone out and listening to them.

I will listen to feedback from everyone and that's 20 people that I work with, I will actively seek out the feedback on everyone. I will let it simmer in my head for two, three days before I finally decide. And unless it's marketing or business calls, the veto lies entirely with the creator. But having a plurality of ideas always helps. There's a line in the *Rig Veda*, "Aano bhadra krtavo yantu vishwatah"(Let good ideas come to you from all sides). So that's exactly how the collaborative process is. I let all the ideas come, but I have a very strong editorial on what actually was into the product.

We have had people who have completely disagreed with everything, from the name of the product, to the book, to the packaging, to the art style. While we have had people who have given us ideas that have elevated the project in ways I could have never imagined. My collaborations have been very fruitful and healthy because all of us have drawn a very strong line on hearing everyone out, but doing what you really want to do as an author.

If someone's a collaborator, how do you determine who makes the final decision?

Every project has a core author. Everything creative decision lies entirely with the author. But the second it comes to more studio level decisions, which are marketing, budgets, release cycles the conversation will be lead by the producers leading the project. A creators expertise is creating the best possible experience they can, but that doesn't always translate into managerial skills. We try and unencumber our creator from those decisions and allow them to focus on their craft.

Your work involves different cultures, different voices, different opinions. How do you make sure, because you have your own lens, that other people's thoughts, feelings, perspectives are reflected and echoed throughout the things you create?

Specifically in the games I create, there's a lot of context that is required to create the project. There are stories from different cultures, time eras and countries that come into the project. At that point, I very well understand that I don't know everything. I don't even know the tip of that particular iceberg. I have a vague understanding of which direction the iceberg perhaps might be in, at the very best. And the best way of getting it right, is just asking people who are subject matter experts in the politics, culture, or sciences your story deals with. I ensure that I have the right people representing those conversations. So when we write a science fiction film, we ensure that the right expertise's from science comes on.

We also make sure that we agree with everyone's right to swing the arm, metaphorically speaking. But we also understand that your right to swing your arm stops at where my nose begins. So you have a right to say anything you want, as long as you're not punching down, misrepresenting facts or reinforcing prejudices. Freedom of speech does not mean freedom from consequences. And the only way of ensuring that is by making sure that opinions of a wide variety of experts are taken on board. So be it historical, scientific, or cultural opinions.

What industries are you a part of that you feel have creative responsibilities and what are those responsibilities?

Biological evolution the way we know it is over. It has been replaced by our ability and desire to tinker. The evolution or non-biological data or "Cultural Memes" almost entirely overrides the need for genes to evolve themselves. Because genetic evolution is very, very, very, resource intensive and time consuming. So when we find ourselves in a cold climate, we don't grow fur on our backs over a hundred thousands of years. We just find fur or foliage from the nature around us and wrap it on our own body. Thereby completely circumventing the need to ever grow fur.

At the far end of the cycle of innovation lays the innovation that is unique to humans only. And thats the invention of culture, of *Memes*, as coined by Richard Dawkins. The function of culture is to chart out the

blueprint of behavior for the individual, tribe, and species. We add to this ever-evolving organism by telling stories that either remind us of mistakes we've made in the past, pontificate on our current situation, or hypothesize future situations and warning us of what to do or what not to do.

The second a culture creator absolves their responsibility and says, "Hey, I'm just getting stories. I'm just allowing people to escape into hedonistic fantasy," they fail to realize their impact on people's lives, on their aspirations, and on their moods. Everyone from a child who is deciding what they want to be when they grow up, to people who want to just find a scapegoat for their life's problems, looks to culture for answers. And if the culture is not carefully crafted, it can start giving people the wrong answers, create walls of hatred and bigotry and privilege the few over the many.

It is very important for creators to understand the role they play in society. Games, films, and stories are not just fun. Fun is merely the capsule through which insight, inspiration, and aspiration are delivered. I often meet creators and audiences who tell me that media is just fun, and that we should "keep politics out of it." The stories that claim to not be political, are often simply reinforcing the status quo, because every story is political. Almost every creative industry that I am in, more often than not, tends to shirk this responsibility entirely and tries to, for whatever reason, hide behind the wheel of this is just for fun. Or can you please keep your politics and your culture outside my fun. But all culture is political.

Zain Momen Recommends:

The Selfish Gene - Richard Dawkins

Breaking the Spell - Daniel Dennett

Baba Is You - Arvi Teikari

Human Behavioural Biology Lecture Series by Robert Sapolsky (Available on <u>Youtube</u>)

Hitman - World of Assasination Trilogy

<u>Name</u>
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<u>Vocation</u>
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