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As told to Elle Nash, 2272 words.

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On not losing sight of what you love to do

Game Designer Matt Fantastic discusses creating a business based on punk values, avoiding burnout, and focusing on joy. Can you tell me a little bit about your role at your game design studio, Forever Stoked? It seems like it's cooperative or non-hierarchical. How does that work in what you do?

I don't like being a boss of people. I'm okay at it, I guess, but I'm a pretty radically-to-the-left person who's continually lived a life where that is what's important. I used to play in bands and tour full-time and did a label. I don't necessarily have success averseness, but also I honestly don't really care about money. I want to make sure I have enough to pay for the apartment and whatever. I'd been talking about wanting to do the studio as a co-op for years, and we finally made the jump. Basically everybody that's worked for me is now a partner.

In terms of organizational structure, it's largely flat. There's a degree of different roles—we have design leads on various projects because we do systems design, we do graphic design, we do writing, we do content generation type stuff like writing trivia questions or adventures for games that have narrative stories, stuff like that with games, and then we do some stuff with comics. Within that creative space, functionally, we've decided that it's very difficult to have it purely, entirely non-hierarchical in terms of the creative work side. So all the business stuff is flat. We basically vote. We try to figure things out. Creatively, there needs to be someone who's the final authority on any given project.

If there's a disagreement, we talk about it. We want to make everybody happy. We try to reach consensus. But practically speaking, there are times where it's like, "Yeah, well, we're split on this one." What we do is we establish that early in the project; we have a clear tiebreaker that's established before anyone knows if they're going to disagree or exactly how they're going to be involved in it and how their involvement's going to develop over the life of making that project.

This structure feels like the result of experience. What was something that you wish someone had told you when you had first started doing this business and working in this industry?

One of the biggest things for me is be true to yourself and have a vision of what it is you want to be doing, and then do that. Don't worry as much about fitting into the boxes that other people have created for how you can exist in the industry and the kind of stuff you can make and the way you do business. Looking back, I wish I had embraced that earlier, but I was still the weirdo when I was first doing little bits and pieces. A lot of it comes from doing a DIY, punk, and hardcore label and having bands; that attitude and energy is something that I brought with me when it came to starting to make things.

Sacrifice is big. I think I did it, but I wasn't as intentional about it early on in my career. I'm very in the mindset that we need to remove barriers to entry to help get more people involved, and we need to keep it from being a thing for people that have the money to do—they need to fuck off and not make money for a while. But, yeah, I am also a big believer there are sacrifices you can make to get to the place you're in.

I don't have kids. I'm not interested in kids and that means that that's a whole full-time job that costs a ton of money that I don't have to deal with. No judgment in any direction, but people are like, "Well, how did you do it?" And I'm like, "Well, I lived very DIY punk rock lifestyle and don't have kids or expenses," and so, sure, I was able to go volunteer for this company and chase after this thing and do that. I didn't think about it as directly as that at the time.

Being more mindful about the choices I was making and the impact they were going to have and thinking a little bit further ahead, maybe that's it. I wish I had told myself to think a little bit further ahead. Think about where you want to be, think about what your dream situation is in a more specific way, too. It's important not to be unrealistic in the realities of what it takes to do the stuff.

You have to recognize that if you want to put time into this, you have to lose time somewhere else.

I feel like "I don't have time" is largely not actually what the situation is. It's that I've not prioritized this in my life. And there's zero value judgment around how people should or shouldn't

prioritize things in their lives, but it's like, "Yeah, well, I don't want to give up my day job, I really want to have a bunch of kids. I want to have this. I want to have that."

Another big piece of advice: Don't compare yourself to other people. I think everyone says this all the time. No matter how many times any of us hear it, it's impossible to actually do, but we're still all going to say it because really the best you can do is not compare yourself to other people because you don't know their circumstances.

The flip side to that is you can make as much luck as you can. You can really up that. That's why I do so many conventions a year and used to do even more. My biggest game on the road year, I did 236 days on the road, I just cranked out conventions and was going everywhere, talking to everyone. Even things that were one in a thousand chance, I gave myself a few thousand chances, so that volume of chasing those opportunities I think is really hard. It's not going to find you.

Everybody can look at that one person who, "Oh, well, I don't know. I just got plucked out of obscurity, fucking around and look at me now," right? Yeah, sure there's always outliers and exceptions to the rule, but really you got to put in the effort.

How did you manage to create a path for Forever Stoked outside of the established system of the tabletop gaming industry?

I'm 40 and our generation, a lot of parents in my mom and grandparents who raised me very much like, "You can do anything, you're smart. You're talented. Whatever you want to do, you can do it. I believe in you." Then when I was a teenager and getting into punk, which I'm going to use as a giant umbrella, I was reading Henry Rollins' Get in the Van...that sort of energy has run as a thread through what we do with Forever Stoked, where we say yes to kind of whatever, we chase stuff that we probably have no business chasing after as potential clients. Part of the joy of being able to have that kind of path is that we largely do what we want. We're very values first as an organization, myself as a person, and we're able to do that because we have carved this path.

We're the cool weirdos in the game industry. I'm not a cool weirdo in the wider world, and I'm not trying to insult the game industry either, but there's not a whole lot of people covered in tattoos that are ridiculous cartoon characters that played in bands, just the profile that we cut is our branding is all. We look like a black light poster. Our aesthetic is this very out-there thing. There are enough people that are into what we do that when they find us or we find them, whatever, it's like, "Oh, we totally vibe."

How do you avoid burnout in your career?

When you have a good answer for that, I would love to hear it. As much as I want to say that I'm not the boss and that it's not hierarchical, everyone still screens me that way, and it means that there's a lot of extra pressure on me. But I'd say honestly for me, a lot of it is just keep going. The just keep swimming philosophy of, "I can't be burned out so I'm not," or I try not to be. But that said, I'm trying to be better.

Something that I get to do because the studio has been growing is that I do have the ability to shift my focus day-to-day. If I'm feeling like my brain's just not interested in being creative right now, that's not going to happen. There's plenty of other shit I can work on. There's a diversity of things that I can do that are still furthering the work that we're doing and the cool stuff we're making, but that doesn't require me to be as on. I can look at a calendar and try to figure out who we want to meet with at a convention. Stuff like that is a lot less demanding and taxing mentally, so I can sort of half work. I mean, now I sound like a psycho who just works all the time. But I mean, the thing is that I legitimately adore what we do.

I think there's a doggedness that comes from that DIY culture where you're like, "I'm always trying to find a path to that success," and the success is whatever you define it to be, right?

Yeah. That's something that's really stuck with me for the co-op: I would rather have a dope life than a bunch of money. I'm fortunate enough that at this point in my life, we do okay. Well, we do more than okay. I mean, we do great. If you're a business bro, we don't do great. But for my standards, we do great.

I'm also very not interested in any of that materialistic consumption type stuff. I wear jeans until they fall apart, which I think comes from the punk rock, but also just years and years of not having stuff. Growing up, we went through periods of time where we didn't have money, certainly not to a degree that a lot of people have had to struggle through. We weren't worried about ever being homeless, but we had to move with my grandparents. So thinking about what you spend money on, and what it actually makes you happy, which also comes from punk rock where it's just that kind of anti-materialism.

I am very proud of the fact I live my values in the sense that I try as much as possible to make as little money as possible when it means that I can help other people do cool stuff, and we can build something together. That's been the attitude before we were officially a cooperative for a long time, and now I'm excited about really putting our money where our mouth is, to go somewhat esoteric. It's one of the core tenets of Leninism that set it apart from some of the other competing lead interests in building the USSR before Stalin turned it into absolutely fucking garbage.

I think a lot about business structure and co-ops and how we can do things in the world at large. This

idea that if we had good people who made a thing and then were great and now we're giving it to the people. When the labor movement really took off, it seems like most of the most successful things in business followed that sort of pattern where it was a more traditional business, or it fell within that kind of like, "Yeah, there's a boss, there's an owner, there's a couple owners," or whatever it is. Then at some point it was decided, "Hey, we have this successful company, now let's convert it to a co-op, make it work. Let's do that."

I've been involved in a lot of political work over the years and various other sort of co-op type things, both creative and otherwise, and it's difficult to get you going when you have a bunch of opinionated weirdos that are like, "Well, I don't know, I read this book and that book," and then all of a sudden you're debating Trotsky. It's good and interesting, but also difficult to get over that hump to make a sustainable business from the ground up. I want to say that that's what more people should do.

I want to say that that's where society should be, and I think that that is where I would like society to get to. This business is a real-ass business and everyone makes salaries the same that you would make if you were doing this, in, say, a more corporate world. That money's there. Business is making that kind of money. It's just now we're distributing it more equally amongst everybody, and having that money makes it so much easier to then redistribute. It's difficult to redistribute wealth when there isn't any wealth.

Matt Fantastic Recommends:

Watch *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Be more like Ted Lasso and Roy Kent

Listen to new music

Read Emma Goldman's autobiography, *Living My Life*

Give up the whole idea of "guilty pleasures" and take unabashed joy in the things you like

Name

Matt Fantastic

Vocation

game designer

Fact

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