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## TIM NIXON

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*Tim has used his skills in game development to establish Runaway Play, a Dunedin-based company that uses nature as the inspiration for creating games for desktop and mobile devices. Tim, who believes anybody can be creative, shares insights he has gained from establishing his own business and career path.*

### 1. In the context of your professional background, what does 'talent' mean to you?

This is actually directly stealing a line from a book I read a couple of years ago, which I really identify with: talent is overrated, talent doesn't exist, it's a myth. What exists is hard work and passion and the ability to focus in and try to be exceptional at one particular thing that you think you can do differently.

The big gap for us is game designers, people who are experienced in designing the actual interaction in the game as opposed to designers who might

Not to say you don't need to meet that threshold first. I think that's a very important thing that some people overlook as well.

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I think the most important thing is the purpose of your organisation, the working atmosphere, and how progressive your leadership is so that they feel the most empowered to make the biggest difference and grow as individuals. That goes for both bringing them in in the first place and then keeping them once they're there.

### 2. Are you aware of any talent gaps that exist or might arise within the next ten years?

Yeah, it's much harder for us to find artists than it is to find programmers. Down here we actually have a very good university, which trains highly competent computer scientists so we actually have a good base of programmers. Artists are harder to find – character artists, animators, those sorts of people. They've got a very good school in Auckland called the Media Design School, which has some really good graduates, but it's hard to relocate them down here.

design a character or draw a sketch. We don't have any really good formal qualification for that yet. There's no real support structure for training game designers yet.

### 3. How do successful organisations attract, keep and grow talent?

The most important thing for me and the most important thing in general is culture. I think it's very well proven now that monetary reward, over a certain threshold, has very little impact at all on the ability to attract someone.

### 4. Think about talent hubs around the world, what is cool and why?

I spend quite a lot of time in San Francisco and I love it. As far as the whole Bay Area, I mostly work out of downtown San Francisco because our publisher is based there. I worked with them a couple of months back and one of the biggest things I soaked up about their environment was their real passion and their focus and the clarity of their vision and purpose, what they're actually trying to do as a company and how that informed and focused their culture and their collective direction.

So, talent hubs? I really believe that even though everyone says the internet has broken down all these walls and you can really work anywhere with anybody, I don't necessarily think that it's the optimum arrangement. Being in the room with somebody is really so much more powerful if you're trying to work towards a singular vision. So that goes obviously towards a team that are working together or a company that are working together, but I also think it goes for an industry working together. In San Francisco we'd go out to a local bar after work and there'd be 300 people in that bar that are working on games or consult on game publishing or they're a tech start-up so you just get into these random conversations with people and that's really important.

## 5. Can you assess New Zealand's performance in attracting talent on a global scale?

From my experience we seem to be pretty good at attracting talent as a country. Weta Digital is mostly highly skilled foreigners, and our lead artist here at Runaway is Swedish. We brought her here over four years ago now, so for her to still be here says something about the quality of life in New Zealand.

I think the key thing that keeps her involved though is what I talked about before, about the actual clarity of our team's vision. We aspire to be the best game studio in the world at making mobile games inspired by nature, games that engage and surprise and delight people and might actually teach them something along the way. That clicked in with something that she believed was important in her career and her work. She could be earning twice the money that she's on if she went back to Sweden and worked over there, but perhaps there isn't a company there

that's driven by a higher level purpose that aligns quite as well.

But on a global scale I think there's still so much we can learn from San Francisco, from New York, from these places which are the absolute shining examples. The biggest thing there is actually having ambition, having passion. I think we're really good at just limping along and being humble, which is good

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to a degree but also can be destructive, or it can mean that we can't be quite as aggressive or competitive as a competitor in the States. So that's a cultural thing. Are we aggressive enough? Are we passionate enough?

## 6. What does New Zealand need to do in order to attract, keep and grow talent?

If I was to be totally honest with you, if I had my time again, I wouldn't have stayed in New Zealand. I would have moved to the States when I finished university, and the reason for that is the resources and the mentorship. They just don't exist here or they're not being connected.

I think just being super supportive and super encouraging of aspirational kids who want to do stuff that's different, but also making sure that they're not making stupid mistakes. Directing that passion in the right place is just so important. I think it's also fine as well to let certain people go and do this stuff overseas and then come back.

It all starts with making better companies. If you make a great company then you will attract great talent. That's it. I honestly think that's easily the most important thing out of all this. It's like the saying that the greatest PR strategy is just making a great product because people will want to talk about it and advocate for it. Get better mentorship and investment structures for young entrepreneurs. Make it easier to get visas. It's doable.

## 7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Just start doing it. That's the most important thing. Honestly, school is so far removed from the actual skill sets you're going to need, unless you want to be an actual researcher or a teacher. Don't abandon school, but don't let it convince you that if you get good grades that will get you what you want.

The best path towards achieving what you want is just to start doing it. And not to be afraid of the mountain that you have to climb to get to so-called success. It can feel like an absolute nightmare. The only constant we've really seen in the concept of success is that it all comes down to really hard work, and if you can master the ability to take it one step at a time.

Interviewed by Darren Zhang at Runaway in Dunedin, on 5 June 2013. Photograph provided by the Tim Nixon.