CASE STUDY

KINECT™

Herrmann

CASE STUDY:
A GAME DESIGNED FOR A BROAD CONSUMER BASE, DEVELOPED IN A FRACTION OF THE TIME

How Microsoft Game Studios combined "wild creativity" with discipline, structure and science to develop "Kinect Adventures"

OBJECTIVE:

Develop a pack-in game that would be enjoyed by a broad cross-section of consumers to demonstrate the wide appeal of the Kinect for Xbox 360 system—and do it in an extremely compressed timeframe.

What if you could expand a product's appeal beyond its narrow but very devoted fan base?

It's a question many companies ask themselves, particularly as innovation becomes key to business growth, competitiveness and success. It's a question Microsoft Game Studios asked as well.

Microsoft's Xbox 360 video game platform was a hit with the typical gamer. By developing Kinect for Xbox 360, the company aimed to take that success to a broader consumer market. The groundbreaking Kinect sensor, which launched in November of 2010, allows users to interact with and control the Xbox 360 using ordinary hand gestures and spoken commands. No game controller or hardcore gamer dexterity required.

But Microsoft realized that Kinect would also have to ship a game that equally appealed to a broad consumer audience to fully showcase the product's reach.

What would it take to create an innovative title to deliver on Kinect's promise?

Shannon Loftis, head of Good Science Studio within Microsoft Game Studios, led the team responsible for developing "Kinect Adventures," the game that would ship with every Kinect sensor sold. She believed that the game design process would need to be reinvented in order to reach their goals.

CHALLENGE:

Balancing the wild creativity and disciplined structure that would be needed to meet the project's goals.

The challenge Loftis's team faced was a need to not only innovate and evolve the platform but also to meet an aggressive timeframe for getting the product to market. Figuring out how to give the development team the freedom necessary for creative experimentation while providing a structure and process to keep the development on track would be key.

The ideal solution would be a system Good Science Studio could apply to its internal team structure, communications, and methods to optimize creativity and decision making as well as to the external world to better understand consumers of all backgrounds and interests.

That's where Whole Brain® Thinking came into play.

SOLUTION:

Fully leveraging the diversity of thought within the team and within the customer base.

"We really wanted to break the process apart from the beginning and get away from thinking about game design in a traditional way. Part of doing that was making sure the all of the thinkers on the team had a voice." – Shannon Loftis, Good Science Studio Head, Microsoft Game Studios

Having experienced the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®) assessment and Whole Brain® Thinking system, Loftis felt that the Herrmann Whole Brain® Model would give the team a single underlying framework to help them meet their goals, from efficient development and delivery to creative thinking and user-focused design.

Bringing the HBDI® Assessment into the process was the first step.

The HBDI® Assessment is a 120-question assessment that evaluates and describes the degree of preference individuals have for thinking in each of the four quadrants of the brain, as depicted by the Herrmann Whole Brain® Model. While everyone has different thinking preferences, the Whole Brain® Model demonstrates that everyone also has the ability to stretch to less-preferred quadrants when the situation requires it. Herrmann International research has shown that when people understand their own and others' thinking styles and leverage the right thinking for the job by using the skill of Whole Brain® Thinking, they can achieve better results no matter what the task is.

Getting the Thinkers in the Game

Before work began on "Kinect Adventures," everyone at Good Science Studio completed the HBDI® assessment and learned about their thinking preferences through debriefs of their HBDI® Profile results. As development progressed and new members were added to fully staff the project, the team was restructured based on HBDI® Profile results to ensure that a full diversity of thought was represented. Assembling this whole-brained team was fundamental to the entire process.

The team also participated in workshops with a Herrmann International consultant to learn the importance of different thinking preferences in the innovation and design process, and to get practice applying the skills and using Whole Brain® Thinking tools to accomplish their objectives. The activities showed them how to leverage, not just their own thinking, but that of their teammates as well—particularly those with different preferences—and how they could use Whole Brain® Thinking to improve idea generation as well as decision making.

By providing a common language and understanding of how different thinking preferences come into play, this experience also gave "voice" to the full diversity of thought within the team, and that meant the group could reach more balanced solutions and ideas.

Loftis explains that in a typical design project, the members of the creative team historically have the loudest voice. "We really wanted to break the process apart from the beginning and get away from thinking about game design in a traditional way. Part of doing that was making sure all of the thinkers on the team had a voice, too."

The team learned how to use Whole Brain® Thinking communication techniques to "give voice to the minority," as Loftis calls it, and get a wider range of input, feedback and suggestions. This was a game changer for a team that needed to develop a product that appealed to the broadest potential audience.

Additionally, according to Loftis, because the more analytical and structured thinking preferences of the A and B quadrant thinkers kept the creative designers on track, they were able to reduce overall development time by avoiding the overruns and delays that often plague design projects.

Loftis emphasizes that the experience also taught her that metrics and milestone checks aren't just the domain of analytical thinkers. Instead, it's an issue of finding ways to go about measurement that will be more in sync with your thinking preferences.

"My guidance to my team is, no matter what it is, no matter how crazy it is, how wacky it is, try it. But you have to know whether or not it's working, "she says.

She says that team members with A and B quadrant thinking preferences are "thrilled" about setting metrics. While the creatives, who often have stronger D quadrant preferences, are less comfortable with the idea, the Whole Brain® Model provides a way for them to identify and seek out the tools that work for them.

Finding Out What the Customer Thinks

"One of the reasons we chose the Whole Brain® Thinking system was to ensure that we're achieving brain balances within the game experiences." – Shannon Loftis, Good Science Studio Head, Microsoft Game Studios

The internal piece was only the first step, though. Understanding the audience—a much broader market than the traditional gamer audience—was critical. Kinect Adventures would have to have something to appeal to everyone in the family.

"Based on the research, we know that successful innovation requires a Whole Brain® Thinking process and team," says Ann Herrmann-Nehdi, CEO of Herrmann International. "We also know that we live in a whole-brained world. So if you want to create a product that appeals to the broadest possible audience, the methodology provides a great system for coming up with ideas and, as the Good Science Studio team demonstrated, vetting them as well."

Through the workshops with Herrmann International, the team learned how to look for clues to diagnose the thinking of potential customers and then identify product features and benefits that would appeal to different preferences. The workshops

gave them experience with tools and methods they were then able to apply as they were developing game elements, and, significantly, in the consumer testing phase.

To provide a framework for the testing process, the team aligned game elements with the Whole Brain® Model, showing what thinking styles would prefer, for example, strategic play or interpersonal activities. Using a series of Cluster Maps based on the four thinking quadrants, the team created "word bubbles" of descriptive phrases that corresponded with each style of thinking, and used these as benchmarks for evaluating customer feedback.

As testers were brought in to try out game elements at various stages of development, they were asked to assess the experience by checking off the descriptive words and phrases they felt best described the activity. If testers didn't rate a game with descriptive words from all four quadrants of the model, the team started over.

"One of the reasons that we chose the Whole Brain® Thinking system and one of the ways we used it was to ensure that we're achieving brain balances within the game experiences," Loftis says.

The team used the Whole Brain® Model as a filter for evaluating every aspect of "Kinect Adventures" as it was being developed, and this simple process gave the designers a wealth of information about how the game elements appealed to diverse thinking preferences. They could immediately see what thinking preferences were represented and where there were gaps, and then quickly act on those insights.

Developing a product that delivers "something for everyone" meant understanding what different people prefer, and the Whole Brain® Model helped the team tap into the thinking behind those preferences to make such a wide-ranging task more manageable.

RESULT:

The first consumer product built from the ground up using a Whole Brain® framework, "Kinect Adventures" provides "something for everyone" and showcases what Kinect can do.

"We want to make sure we have a set of principles we can apply not just to experiences but to things like process and people. That's part of what we learned from working with Herrmann International." – Shannon Loftis, Good Science Studio Head, Microsoft Game Studios

With a tagline that announces "You are the controller," it's fitting that the title shipping with every Kinect sensor is the first consumer product built from the ground up using a Whole Brain® Thinking framework.

By harnessing the diversity of thought of the game design team as well as an understanding of the way different people prefer to think, Microsoft was able to create activities that connect with you, the consumer—no matter who you are or what you like to do.

From an internal standpoint, Loftis says that the Whole Brain® Thinking system allowed her team to successfully combine "wild creativity" with discipline, structure and science to get to better results. Creative experimentation can cause discomfort, she acknowledges, but the structure and continuous improvement integrated into the process made it easier to handle.

And, as Loftis adds, "It's amazing how quickly we brought everybody together

and got the product made and out the door."

Kinect for Xbox 360 holds the Guinness World Record of being the "fastest selling consumer electronics device." It sold an average of 133,333 units per day with a total of 8 million units in its first 60 days. As families around the world can attest, Kinect Adventures delivers on its promise of offering something for everyone.

"The Whole Brain® Thinking framework has been incredibly useful," says Loftis, "and now that the game is out in the marketplace, we've done quite a bit of benchmark testing. We're getting feedback that the experiences are well balanced. You can find people with an equal level of passion around each one of the different types of experiences that we put in the game."

Not only that, the most popular game has proven to be the one that's the most "whole brained."

In its review of the game, GameSpot noted that the activities "are fun to watch even when you're not playing. Kinect Adventures makes for a good pack-in by demonstrating that the Kinect's technology really works and by getting you and your friends or family on your feet and into the fun right away."1

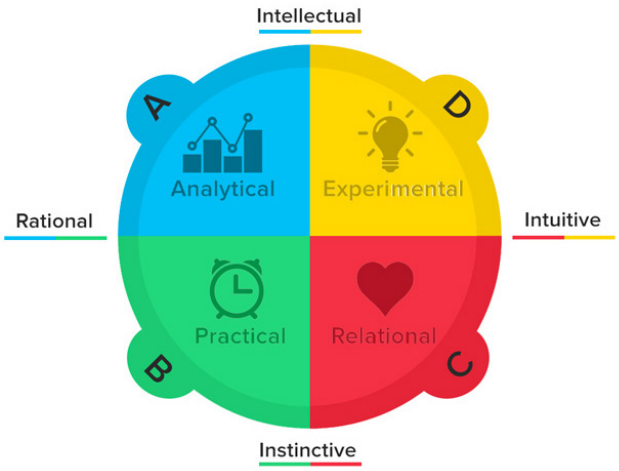
These are the kinds of results and accolades that are pushing Good Science Studio to reach for new milestones and even greater successes in future projects. Part of that exercise involves refining the process and developing core principles to guide all decision-making going forward, from hiring to feature vetting, to product and process goals.

"We want to make sure we have a set of principles we can apply not just to experiences but to things like process and people," Loftis notes. "That's part of what we learned from working with Herrmann International. It became clear, reading through the notes of our work, that we needed to expand our decision-making gauge."

With learnings from Kinect Adventures reverberating throughout the Studio, the language of Whole Brain® Thinking has become part of the vernacular. The Studio has continued the principle of including diversity of thought on every virtual feature team, and team members talk to each other in terms of thinking preferences, particularly when there are conflicts between two people with very different styles.

As the Good Science Studio team gears up for new projects, its members believe the principles of Whole Brain® Thinking will help them continue to push their creativity, processes and speed-to-market.

Game on!



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