



WHO IS HALFBRICK?

Born in 2001, in Shainiel Deo's basement, Halfbrick was a group of six game developers working on licensed games. After almost ten years in the uncertain Australian game market, they decided to make the switch to creating their own, original games.

That's when they changed the mobile gaming world forever.

Fruit Ninja, the first of many successful games created by Halfbrick, was a smashing success. It had over a billion downloads and was one of the first multiplayer games for mobile devices. It became a cultural phenomenon, sparking everything from video parodies to an actual cartoon.

But Halfbrick was no one-trick pony. They went on to release games like *Jetpack Joyride*, *Monster Dash*, *Age of Zombies*, and their latest hit: *Dan the Man*. They expanded from Brisbane, Australia to Sydney and Adelaide. Outside of Australia, they opened offices in Spain, Bulgaria, and the U.S.

This book seeks to capture some of the magic of those moments, small and large, that make Halfbrick games so special. From lush to 16-bit style animation, the art of Halfbrick inspires feelings of nostalgia, excitement, and in the case of one game, an unquenchable desire for fresh fruit!



THE AUSTRALIAN GAMING DEV SCENE

Halfbrick was formed in 2001 when console developers dominated the games landscape in Australia. There were a few developers also working with licensed games for portable devices such as Gameboy Advance, PlayStation Portable, and Nintendo DS, but it was generally a console focused industry.

"In hindsight, our work in developing for portable devices prepared us well for developing for mobile," said Sam White, VP of Entertainment and Licensing. "The small screens, graphic restrictions, and limitations on controls proved to be great training for releasing on mobile."

Around 2009 and 2010, with the growth of the iPhone and Apple App Store, the Australian games industry changed rapidly. Many of the larger console game developers either shut down or pivoted to mobile games. At the same time, the accessibility of the app stores created the opportunity for any developer of any size to publish a game themselves for a global market.

In addition, the value of the Australian dollar also moved closer to, and for a while, higher than, the U.S. dollar, practically eliminating the country as a once "cheap" labor source for work-for-hire game development for the major publishers. If a video game company wanted to survive, it needed to be able to adapt.

"Where many of the indie developers were not able to survive this shift, Halfbrick was able to continue to reach players that loved the simple, joyful experience our games delivered. We have since had to adapt and evolve in an ever-more-sophisticated market," said White.

TOP ROW:

James Barnes, Aaron Green,
Paul McNab, Sean Drnitt,
Rinal Deo, Matt Ross,
Stephen Last, Phil Larsen,
Ben Vale, Michael Dobebe,
Richard McKinney,
Jesse Higginson, Hugh Walters,
Matthew Maguire,
Anthony Hansen,
Murry Lancashire,
Dan Vogt, Tony Takoushi,
Motze Asher, Clint Hobson

BOTTOM ROW:

Dean Loades,
Grant Peters, Brent Hobson,
Jason Harwood, Ryan Langley,
Jason Maundrell, Daniel Fisher,
Sierra Asher, Scott West,
Adam Wood, Alex Butterfield





BABY STEPS

Halfbrick's first original IP was a PSP mini game called *Rocket Racing*. Although *Rocket Racing* was considered a commercial failure, game designer Luke Muscat used the lessons learned from making the game to eventually create *Fruit Ninja*.

"We learned things like don't make your game difficult to control, don't use an abstract theme, and don't make it tremendously difficult to play," said Muscat in a 2011 interview with *Kotaku*. "We learned a lot about branding and marketing in terms of having something that people can grasp onto, something bright and colorful, a concept that can be explained in three to four words."

Rocket Racing was abstract, complicated, challenging, and took six months to develop. *Fruit Ninja* couldn't be more different!

ABOVE: Images from *Rocket Racing*, released in September 2009.



ABOVE: Luke Muscat.

OPPOSITE PAGE: First image of *Fruit Ninja* (top); *Fruit Ninja* gameplay (bottom).

HALFBRICK FRIDAYS

It all started here. This small, unassuming bit of art was the very first piece created for the game that would become *Fruit Ninja*!

Luke Muscat created the image to pitch his idea for *Fruit Ninja* at Halfbrick Fridays. Something of a company-wide game jam, Halfbrick Fridays occur a few times a year and involve the entire company breaking into small groups to brainstorm new ideas. Team members can come from any department, from receptionist to accounting to everything in between. Once the team has a game concept or demo, they present or “pitch” it to the entire company.

Fruit Ninja isn’t the only Halfbrick Fridays success story. *Age of Zombies* and *Monster Dash* also saw their beginnings in this creative setting.

Fruit Ninja came about at the time of a very precarious Halfbrick Friday. The company was in a tight spot. CEO Shainiel Deo estimated that the studio had perhaps nine months left if they did not create a successful game. The idea came from Luke Muscat, a designer who would go on to become the Chief Creative Officer of Halfbrick, before eventually founding his own company.

Inspired both by developing games for the DS, as well as by a late-night Chef knife commercial, Muscat wanted to create a simple and yet unique game, focused on the gory slicing of unsuspecting, juicy fruit!

“The original tagline was ‘The Premiere Fruit Murder Simulator,’” Muscat said with a laugh.

Stephen Last, who would soon program the *Fruit Ninja* gameplay, was drawn to the idea because... well, fruit murder sounded kind of fun!

But unlike Last, most people at the studio thought it was a really bad idea. It just seemed too simple. Luckily for Muscat, the team eventually rallied behind the game after playing the first prototype. And it all began with a simple image of sliced fruit, pitched during Halfbrick Fridays.



ABOVE & OPPOSITE
PAGE: Early *Fruit Ninja*
art and backgrounds.

NINJAS HATE FRUIT?

In simplest terms, *Fruit Ninja* is a mobile game in which you use a slicing motion to chop fruit, while avoiding bombs. However, *Fruit Ninja* has become so much more than that. It became a Kinect game, a VR game, an iPad game, and an animated series. It has won awards and spawned videos with millions of views on YouTube. *Fruit Ninja* isn't just a touch-screen mobile game anymore: it is a cultural phenomenon.

Fruit Ninja came out at the perfect time in mobile games development. The simplicity of the gameplay meant that it was accessible to everyone, from grandmas to toddlers. Over time, Halfbrick continued to make changes and additions to the game, creating a thriving community and encouraging strategic gameplay with the release of special blades and dojos, scoreboards, online multiplayer, and much more.

Within three months, *Fruit Ninja* had a million downloads. By 2015, it had a billion downloads. This small mobile game about slicing colorful, delicious fruit is one of the most successful games ever made.

And it all started with one fun idea: what if ninjas hated fruit?



FRUIT NINJA™



FRUIT MURDER SIMULATOR

By May of 2012, *Fruit Ninja* was on one-third of all U.S. iPhones. That was quite a big feat for a game that initially seemed to be too simple to be a success.

Fruit Ninja is the brainchild of Luke Muscat, and the seeds of the idea first formed in his head when he watched a late-night commercial for chef's knives. The chef was cutting shoes, cans, and even threw a pineapple into the air and sliced it before it landed. Years later, Muscat bought his own set of chef's knives and did what any adult would do in that situation.

He threw tomatoes in the air and sliced them, just as he'd seen the chef do all those years ago.

Fast forward to the Halfbrick Friday ideation session when Muscat and the team were thinking of ideas for iPhone games.

"I was like, okay what kind of verbs seem natural for this, and I was doing like press, and pinch, and swipe. What are other words to describe that kind of motion, and the thing that popped in my head was slice," said Muscat.

Like a lightbulb going off, the word "slice" reminded Muscat of the tomato incident.

"What if we could make a game that was really gory, but like G-rated gore?" he asked.

From that question, the idea of slicing messy, splatter-prone fruit was born. Despite being inspired by the humble tomato, he decided that tomatoes and vegetables were too boring for this game. The other thing the game needed was a difficulty edge. That's where the bombs came in. Why bombs?

"Because bombs are bad," Muscat explained.



However, despite Muscat's belief and enthusiasm for the game, most of Halfbrick was skeptical about the game's viability and the project died out.

Fortunately, the stars would align for Muscat's simple iPhone game when Shainiel Deo, the CEO of Halfbrick, began researching mobile games to create a hit.

"A lot of them were very simple, and they took advantage of the touchscreen," Deo said.

"So we were really looking for games that were single screen, touchscreen, and very easy to play because of the broad demographic."

Muscat's fruit slicing game fit each of these categories. It was pitched again, and this time he created a Flash prototype that helped sell the idea. Deo said that out of all the pitches, this was the game that really embodied the goal of that particular Halfbrick Friday.

"You played it and you could just feel straight away there was something about that game that was

ABOVE: Concept art featuring a newly-created Sensel.



fun, rewarding, and visceral. It just kept you coming back wanting to play more," said Deo.

Though *Fruit Ninja* may have looked like an overnight success, Halfbrick had been building the skills needed to create a successful mobile game through their work on console games and other portable platforms.

"We had been working on making games for memory limited devices, with small screens and touch input. We've been doing that for years, and so when the iPhone came along it really played to our strengths," said Jason Harwood, a producer at the time.

Combined with the innovation of a slice mechanic, *Fruit Ninja* both catered to and stood out from the rest of the mobile scene.

The first version of *Fruit Ninja* was developed by three people at the company. They had six weeks to get the game built and ready, then another six weeks to prepare for marketing and release. The game launched with classic mode, devoid of combos and no blades to unlock. The only character was Sensei. According to Shath Maguire, the artist of the original team, it only took one try to get Sensei right.

"That drawing of him was the first drawing I did of him. No sketches or anything," said Maguire.

One of the first challenges the team faced was getting players to understand the slicing motion. When people were handed the build to play, they immediately began tapping the screen, then handed the game back saying that it didn't work.

Muscat's solution was to detect when a player tapped the screen three times and to play a simple animation of a finger slicing through the fruit.

Once the kinks were worked out, it was time to release *Fruit Ninja* to the world. Halfbrick might have prepared themselves to create such a game, but they could not have prepared themselves for the overwhelming reaction it received.

"We never anticipated the success of this game. Not to this level," said Jason Harwood.





NINJAS

HATE

FRUIT



THE FIRST TRAILER

The very first *Fruit Ninja* trailer was quite unique for the time.

"It was right around the time when people started doing high budget trailers," said Luke Muscat. "And we were like, well, we'll do the opposite!"

The team bought twenty dollars' worth of fruit and went down to the park. The "actors" playing the fruits and the ninja were actually Halfbrick developers and artists. The idea paid off and the trailer stood out from the crowd for its irreverent humor. Though a lot has changed since that first trailer, and even the first version of the released game, it was a solid indicator of the kind of carefree, fun atmosphere that would mark future Halfbrick releases.

ABOVE: Images from the first *Fruit Ninja* trailer, released in April 2010.



PERFECT FOR MOBILE

“If we released *Fruit Ninja* in the market today, I think we’d have a much tougher chance of getting noticed,” said Shainiel Deo.

As Deo pointed out, the mobile scene was very different at the time *Fruit Ninja* was released. For example, *Fruit Ninja* was one of the first games to have multiplayer on a mobile phone. It launched without unlockable characters or advertising.

One of the biggest challenges the team faced was getting into the mobile mindset. Games on mobile phones had to be updated regularly. Players expected their feedback to be incorporated and to receive new content to keep the game exciting.

During the first year, the three-man team shipped about fourteen updates, which is an incredible number for such a small team. Perhaps their biggest update was the addition of Arcade Mode.

“We loved the three modes we had: classic, zen, and multiplayer. They were all really strong, but we wanted something to come along and just dominate and really change the whole thing,” said Jason Harwood.