
Hellicar & Lewis create all their projects using open source software and when completed, they give them away for free. By Eliza Williams

We are open

Among the many pieces of bite-sized wisdom in his 2003 book *It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want To Be*, Paul Arden encouraged us to give away our ideas, in the belief that if you give everything away, more comes back to you. And yet, as the ability to share information and ideas via the internet becomes ever easier, it seems that individuals and companies (commercial ones at least), are increasingly paranoid and concerned over how they can protect their ideas, and, in turn, the content they produce. However, running alongside this conventional way of approaching commerce are new propositions,

and new tools, with sharing at their core.

Perhaps the best known of these is open source, a way of designing and distributing software that allows access to its source code, without copyright restrictions. Over the decade or so since the phrase was coined, the attitudes of open source have spread beyond just software, to be used as jargon for other forms of intellectual property licensing. Organisations such as Creative Commons, for example, now provide 'some rights reserved' licenses allowing artists and creatives to retain copyright of their work while also making it available for others to use. It's still unusual to find companies adopting open source strategies at the core of their business, however, which makes meeting the designers/artists Hellicar & Lewis especially refreshing.

Pete Hellicar and Joel Gethin Lewis set up their business formally earlier this year, though have worked together on projects over the last couple of years and known each other for longer. At the centre of their business strategy is open source, with all works they create being placed online for others to download and use or adapt after they are finished. You might imagine that this approach would cause anxiety in some of the advertising agencies or brands they have been talking to, but surprisingly this is not the case. "We say everything upfront," says Lewis. "A lot of people said to me 'no-one will want to open source their projects, you're crazy', but no-one's had a problem with it so far."

Lewis first used open source software in a project that he helped create while

working as an interaction designer at United Visual Artists, whom he left last summer to set up his own practice. The project was *Contact*, an artwork commissioned by the British Council to celebrate UK-Japan 2008, and used *openFrameworks*, a system described by its creators, Zach Lieberman and Theo Watson, as "an open source, cross-platform C++ library for creative coding", which "allows beginners and experts alike a starting point for developing real-time software interfaces that move far beyond traditional screen-based interaction and into the physical space". *Contact* was a floor-based artwork set up in a plaza in the Roppongi Hills area of Tokyo that responded to people stepping on it with a range of changing patterns and shapes.

For Lewis the use of *openFrameworks*



was something of an 'epiphany', and he in fact has also set up another company with Lieberman and Watson, Yes Yes No, which he works on alongside Hellicar & Lewis. "We did it [Contact] in openFrameworks because there was a very limited amount of time," he explains. "It just seemed to make sense to use openFrameworks because it had a whole bunch of things straight out of the box ready for us to use, and it meant we could work in a cross-platform way, to develop stuff on the Mac, or on the PC...." Lewis's delight in using the open source software eventually led to his departure from UVA, who license the software they create to make money. "That's not the kind of thing that I'm interested in doing or pursuing," he explains. "Obviously the three founders have their approach to doing things and they've got

their business plan and strategy and it came to a point where that was moving away from the kind of things that I wanted to do. So last July, when I left, it was a mutually advantageous thing - Matt [Clark, a founder at UVA] had always said that he knew I would leave and set up my own thing so, with their blessing, we parted ways.

"I just wanted to get to the point where there's this strategic idea of getting paid for your creativity and knowledge, rather than duplicating the same piece of software again and again and making this licensing thing, which is the business model that obviously Microsoft and other people have pursued," he continues. "I think the business model that people like O'Reilly or the Apache Foundation or a lot of these other open source projects have pursued is something

that's a lot more sustainable and closer to my personal approach to, well, life and other things - that things get better if you share them in an open way."

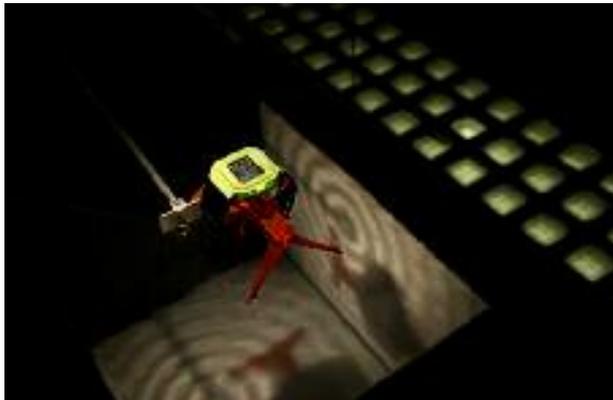
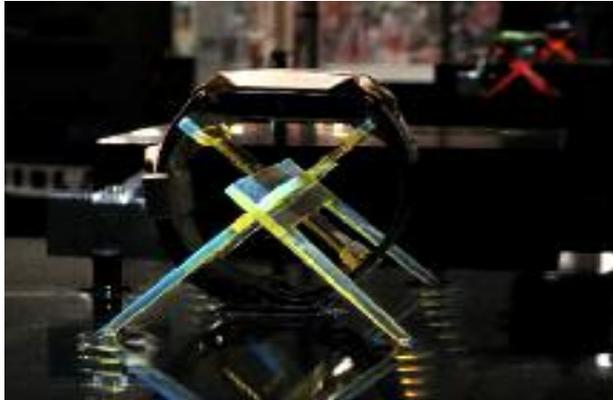
While Lewis may have come to the new enterprise via UVA and technological experimentation, Pete Hellicar's background is rooted in skateboarding culture. Despite these differences, and an age gap of ten years, they make compatible business partners. "What's interesting is that we do come from completely different backgrounds, but we've got to the same place, along totally different paths," says Hellicar. "I think openFrameworks ticks that anarchic box in some sense, because there's not a control, it's just there for everyone to use. It's not about the thing itself, it's what you choose to do with it."

The company may still be very young,

ABOVE: Light Masters image created by Hellicar & Lewis for the German magazine *Lodown*. "We had been talking about all these light ideas and wanted to see what we could do with our collection of random fibre optics, LED and glow sticks," says Hellicar. "We got really into layering all of these elements and ended up building these images."

but Hellicar & Lewis have already created projects including a responsive window for the Selfridges sale in London, and also a piece for the education department at the V&A, to tie in with the Baroque exhibition. "We're using this face-tracking technology, all through openFrameworks," explains Lewis. "There's a mirror-like interface and when the kid sits in front of the screen and remains still, a Baroque mask grows across their face spontaneously."

Much of their work so far may have been based around interactivity, yet the duo are keen that they are not pigeonholed too >



< early. “It’s nice as well to keep our work as broad as possible,” says Hellicar. “We’ve been pitching on films, we’ve been pitching on installations, identity work ... it’s not just this interactive thing, we’re making all sorts of things. We’ve got lots of different ideas and it’s not just down this one route. I think that’s what is good about us working together, is that we’ll go down different routes. It will be terrible to get into a situation where people are saying ‘I want one like that.’” However, should this occur, they are happy to just give their away old ideas. “That’s the advantage of doing stuff in open source as well,” says Lewis. “That if someone just wants an old project, they can take it – steal it! Go right ahead – I want to work on new things. Creativity is variety for me. That’s what we’re interested in, and if you want

something from before then nick it, fine.”

The duo are also excited about taking interactivity beyond simply technological effects into a deeper dialogue with brands, and how they talk to their customers, to encourage a more honest interaction. Though Lewis expresses surprise at how little interest the media and ad industries are paying to digital ideas, still. “The really interesting thing for me is I’ve worked in these technology companies previously, or worked with these pieces of software, and then I’m encountering other forms of media, and it’s really interesting to see how these things – and media and advertising are traditionally viewed as quite innovative areas – don’t seem to have taken on board a lot of the lessons that have been learnt. And they’re decade old lessons now.”

Hellicar & Lewis may appear to operate purely at the technological end of the spectrum, making experiences that use technology in innovative and exciting ways that allow us to look at our world a little differently. Yet, in spite of their love of technology and the virtual, they also insist on recognising the importance of real experiences that happen in the real world too. “In the future, even if we get to this point where virtual reality is everywhere and you can plug your brain into a spinal link and be presented with a reality that’s totally convincing ... you’ll always know that it’s not the real world,” says Lewis. “So the social function or the social value of being able to say ‘I was there’ only increases in the future ... no matter what other technologies are invented. So doing these things in the real

ABOVE: Together (Everybody Hertz), an installation of G-Shock watches created for bStore on Savile Row featuring ripple tanks. “When bStore approached us about doing an installation for their window we started by thinking about what G-Shock meant to us,” says Hellicar. “We started to focus on them being digital objects built to respond to an analogue problem. We wanted to investigate vibration and how it could be visualised. We remembered using ripple tanks in school and thought that they would be a great way of showing interference patterns.”

world is for me the most sustainable approach I can take to business and being creative in the future. If you link yourself to any one particular piece of technology then you’re reliant on that, but doing things in an open source way means you can adjust as you flow through stuff. And you can be paid for what you want to be paid for, which is being creative, engaged people.” ■

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