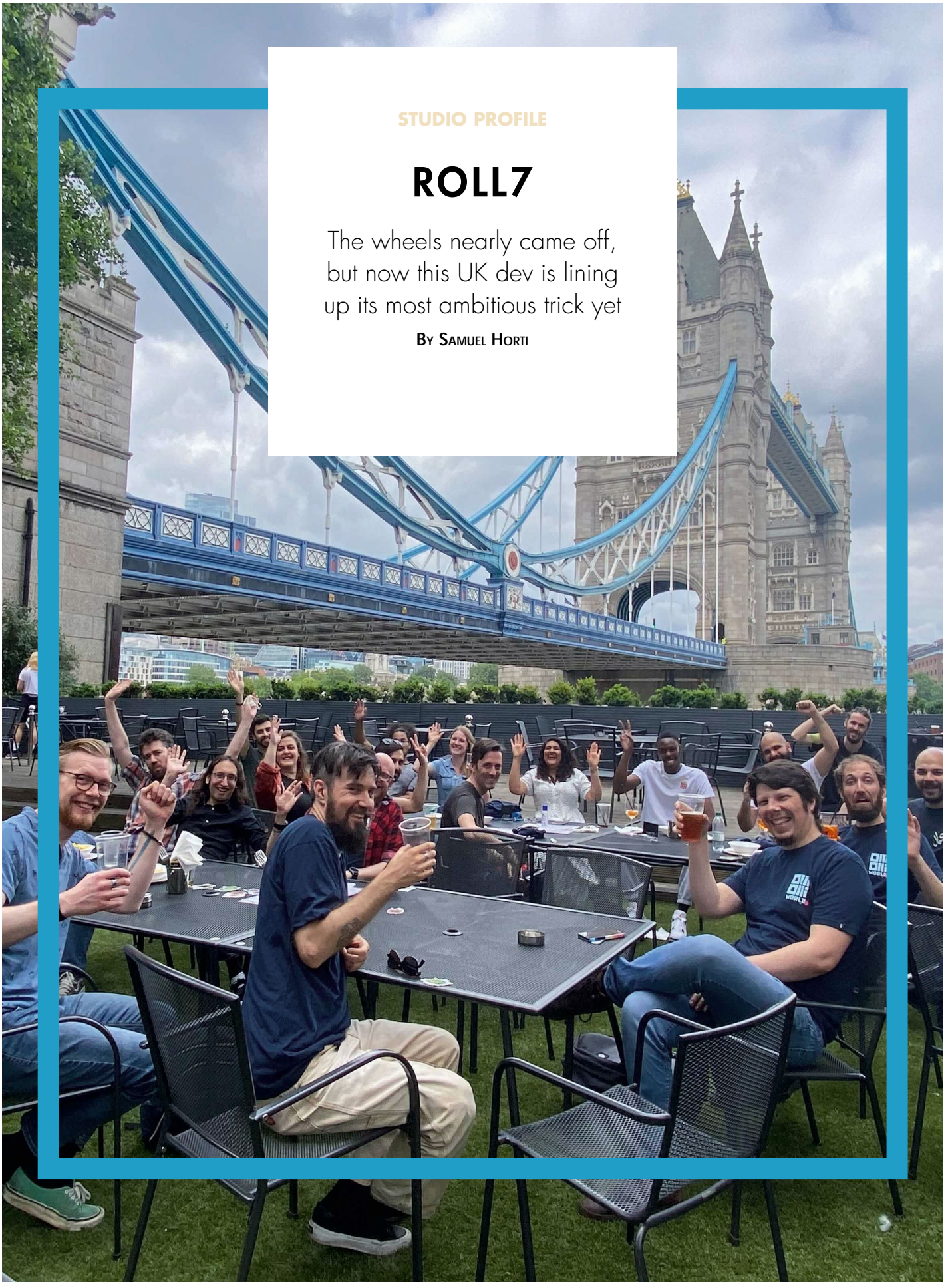


STUDIO PROFILE

ROLL7

The wheels nearly came off, but now this UK dev is lining up its most ambitious trick yet

By **SAMUEL HORTI**



From friends working out of a “dive in Deptford” to the Fitzrovia boardroom of international publishing giant Take-Two Interactive, its marble meeting table so long that Tony Hawk himself would struggle to grind it – it’s been a long ride for the founders of *OlliOlli* developer Roll7. As **Simon Bennett** and **John Ribbins** sit at that imposing table and explain that journey, it becomes clear that the change in setting reflects a much deeper transformation, in culture and ambition, in attitude to crunch and diversity, and in clarity of mission. The hope is that Roll7’s 55 members of staff – now with a clean slate of projects and big-money backing thanks to the 2021 acquisition by Take-Two subsidiary Private Division – will be well-placed to do their best ever work. And, in the process, avoid the pain that plagued Roll7’s early years.

By their own admission, Bennett and Ribbins “fought tirelessly” in the beginning. The games were good, in particular the *OlliOlli* series and the brilliant, if underappreciated, *Laser League*. But Ribbins was unreliable (“I didn’t reply to emails and didn’t wake up until ten o’clock”) and the team were overworked and “constantly at loggerheads”, to the point that Bennett and the third co-founder, Tom Hegarty, had to ask themselves: “Are we friends any more?”

The problem was that the trio tried to do everything themselves. They sat within a small core of permanent employees, hiring temporary staff on a project-by-project basis. None of the founders had a defined role, and none trusted each other to make big decisions alone. “We were all designers, all HR heads, all managers,” Bennett says. “It was a total fucking shitshow.”

The release of *Laser League* in 2018 was something of an existential moment. They spent months debating whether to call it quits before deciding that they cared too much about their games, and each other, to let it fall apart. Ribbins characterises the relationship thus: “Fuck, man, you’re really annoying me, but I like you as a human, so we do need to figure this out”. They agreed that, if they wanted to avoid crunch and grow sustainably, they needed people that they could hire, keep, and build around. Most importantly, they needed to trust each other.

The three founders sat down for a “land grab”, each gaining full responsibility for their area of expertise. Ribbins, the creative driving force, could focus on design; Bennett could focus on hiring, culture, and marketing; Hegarty could focus on production and finance. This eliminated the imposter syndrome they’d felt working outside of



Roll7 is fully remote, save for monthly office days in London and regular staff meetups, including a recent trip to Tuscany

their core strengths. Bennett no longer had to lead UI meetings, for example; Ribbins never had to build another cash-flow model.

With that much-needed trust established between the three founders, they were able to pass it on to their new employees, the vast majority of whom have arrived since 2019. They appointed team leads and empowered them to make decisions. “If you worked with us on *Laser League*, you were micromanaged to fuck,” Bennett recalls. “You knew that fundamentally we’d be the

“WE’RE NOT DOING ROCKET SCIENCE, WE’RE NOT SOLVING CANCER, WE’RE MAKING GAMES – IT SHOULD BE FUN”

ones who would make a decision, and therefore you didn’t really have to fully engage.” Now, Ribbins says, “we can trust [staff] to put as much love into it as we do”.

When studio heads talk about employee passion, it can often be a euphemism – but along with this restructuring came a vow to never crunch again. On *OlliOlli World* and *Rollerdrome*, they stressed that staff should only work a certain number of hours, and when they saw people working late, they’d step in, reminding people of the policy and tweaking workloads if necessary. It appears to have worked. **Jacob Mills**, a senior 3D level designer who joined early in 2021, says he questioned what a “no-crunch culture” would mean in practice during his job interview. He’s “relieved” that it’s as good as it sounded. “The only times I ever do any extra work is when I’m in the middle of something, I’m in the zone,” he says, adding that he extends his days by 30 minutes at most, and then takes a long lunch break the next day. Rather than push people



Founded 2008
Employees 55
Key staff John Ribbins (co-founder and creative director), Tom Hegarty (co-founder and co-studio head), Simon Bennett (co-founder and co-studio head)
URL roll7.co.uk
Selected softography *OlliOlli World*, *Rollerdrome*, *Laser League*, *Not A Hero*
Current projects TBA

beyond their limits, he says that producers scale back projects to fit everyone’s schedule. “It should be basic, but it’s so valuable.”

And despite the studio being fully remote, Mills feels a strong sense of belonging to what he characterises as an “eclectic culture”. While there are regular in-person meetups, a lot of the team’s self-expression is done online, through memes, GIFs and Slack channels where staff discuss their love of space, plants and food – or make and share custom emojis of the founders looking confused. Even during busy periods, Bennett says, this isn’t discouraged. He says it’s about recognising that “we’re not doing rocket science,

we’re not solving cancer, we’re making videogames – it should be fun”.

The idea is to create a supportive space where people don’t take themselves too seriously. Anything that threatens that – particularly ego – is stamped out. “Where we see people speaking in a way that we don’t think is representative of our culture, we will then jump in and be like, ‘Hang on a minute, this looks a bit like bragging – can we rein that back, please?’” That leads to difficult meetings, Bennett says. “Some people are like, ‘Well, hang on, that’s just how I am’. And we’ve had to have these conversations. That’s how you are, but that’s not how we want this studio to work. And therefore, either you change, or you’re maybe not right for the studio.” He recalls one incident in particular, which did lead the person in question to turn their behaviour around. “It was a really tough conversation.”

Bennett hopes that creating an inclusive atmosphere will help Roll7 improve the diversity of its workforce. He admits thinking, nearly a decade ago, that companies focusing on diversity and

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Being a multiple-game studio for the past few years has led to Roll7 being split into two broad teams, each focused on a different project. Now, with no active projects, staff are having the opportunity to mix with colleagues they may not have worked with before

inclusion was “nonsense”, a “fucking woke brigade” that wouldn’t make any difference. He was “stupid” to think that, he admits, and now recognises both the importance of a more diverse workforce and its benefits for Roll7. The studio has made some efforts in this direction – including the removal of gendered language from job ads, and taking part in the government Kickstart scheme to employ young people who receive universal credit payments – and has had some success, including in hiring more women. But the founders are fully aware that the majority of staff are still white men.

Having staffed up quickly and shipped two games since 2019, Bennett says they haven’t had the “headspace” for as many diversity initiatives as he’d like. Now, the team is preparing to launch a graduate scheme that’s open to all but encourages applicants from underrepresented backgrounds. And Roll7 is trying to take advantage of its newfound size and stability to hire flexibly. For example, instead of advertising a senior designer role (which, by requiring experience, can reinforce the lack of opportunities elsewhere in the industry), they’re able to advertise for a junior designer and train up the right person.

The founders know there’s more work to do – and feel a return to their roots might help. Roll7 was spawned from RollingSound, a multimedia company working for societal change, including making a game about knife crime with young people in London. Through public policy shifts and funding cuts, that sector has been destroyed, Bennett says, and he feels “guilt” that they no longer work on similar projects. “Basically, the Tories destroyed our business,” he says. “They destroyed the education sector and destroyed the third sector in this country, but there’s probably never a better time to actually go back to it. Just talking about it, I’m thinking about some of the things we’ve got coming up, and I’m actually quite

excited.” Bennett doesn’t specify what he means, but says he wants to “allow those communities to have access to this space”.

Part of what allows the founders the time to come up with ambitious ideas is that they don’t have to worry about funding. Their decision to accept an offer from Private Division, which was publishing *OlliOlli World*, came from a desire to stop doing “publisher Tinder”, and settle down with a partner that shared their values.

Nonetheless, the founders tried to shield the studio from corporate creep, tasking HR director Nisha Minhas with “protecting” Roll7’s culture during the acquisition. Rather than allowing Take-Two’s HR department to lead, Minhas “translated”

make what we want to make, but just with all of that money raining down from on high,” he laughs.

This, it seems, is exactly what Ribbins and Bennett are aiming for: “indie spirit, corporate money”, as the latter puts it. A company with better salaries, better job security and the budget to take the team on a trip to Tuscany, but one that also understands that “you can’t put too much bullshit or process” around making games. “We’re still the same people who had a tiny little dive in Deptford. If we lose that indie philosophy, Roll7 isn’t really Roll7 any more.”

So what exactly is Roll7 making next? Having released *OlliOlli World* and *Rollerdrome* within the same year, it will remain a “two-game studio”,

“IT DOES REALLY FEEL THAT THE NEXT THING WE PUT OUT WILL BE THE MAGNUM OPUS, THE BIG GAME”

messages from the new owners into language that staff would respond to – less corporate, more informal and creative. At times, Minhas’s role went beyond translator to “gatekeeper”. Bennett explains that he recently asked Minhas whether the studio should invite the head of Private Division to a Roll7 town hall. She said “no” – not because of any issue with him individually, but because it might “give off the wrong message”.

Mills, a self-described “corporate-sceptic”, says he had his doubts when the deal was announced during a team day in London – but says Hegarty “went around and personally spoke to every single person asking how they felt about it”. Mills says the studio has retained its independence while gaining job security and a “swanky office in London” with free food – and the “Bond villain” marble table. “We feel small and agile, and we

Ribbins says, but it currently has no active projects, and is experimenting with different concepts. For many staff that’s been difficult, and Ribbins has had to help them to feel comfortable throwing away ideas they’ve worked on for weeks. It still wants to make fast-paced “flow state” games, where every action leads into another, but that doesn’t mean it needs to make more skating or sports games. It could even be a puzzle game, Ribbins says.

“It does really feel that the next thing we put out will be the magnum opus, the big game,” Bennett says. “*OlliOlli World* was a sequel – it was the best game we ever made, but it wasn’t a totally new IP, and it’s been a long time since we’ve been in that headspace. To be able to do that with a team that is so fucking amazing, and with that backing of Private Division – holy shit, we’re going to make something really big.” ■



1 *Rollerdrome* was Roll7's first major 3D game, and that ambition yielded mixed results.

2 *OlliOlli* is the studio's flagship series, and 2022's *OlliOlli World* its most accomplished game.

3 *Not A Hero* started life as a side project called *Ur Not A Hero*, built by Peanut Butter Fingers – aka Ribbins.

4 In 2021, Roll7 transferred the development of *Laser League* to China-based CE-Asia, and it's now free to play

