

Jeff Melanson – Transforming Creativity: Unity and the Future of Innovation

Host: Maggie John

Overview:

Jeff Melanson joins us to discuss how creative industries are leveraging technology to stay innovative. Jeff Melanson is renowned for his inventive approach to disruptive innovation, blending bold strategy with practical vision. As Strategic Partner for Unity Technologies, Partner at the Stratagem Group, and Advisor at Lansberg Gersick Advisors, he excels in identifying hidden talent and growth opportunities. Melanson shares his favourite example of a company staying innovative and changing to keep up with current technology—Nintendo!

Highlights from our conversation include:

1. The importance of encouraging people from a young age to embrace their creativity and thinking outside the box.
2. The necessity of using less technical jargon to make technology more accessible to a wider variety of people.
3. Why being open to change is an important leadership quality for guiding organizations through digital transformation.

MAGGIE:

We are here, Magnet Network Live. I am your host, Maggie John. I'm now being joined by Jeff Melanson. He is a leader in technology and creative industries known for fostering innovation, collaboration, and unity across sectors. He advises on digital transformation strategies while focusing on creativity and leadership in times of rapid change. Welcome, Jeff.

JEFF:

Thank you. Nice to be here.

MAGGIE:

Tell us what Unity is up to these days.

JEFF:

Well, Unity is a game engine. So it's the world's most largest game engine. % of games are built on Unity. Most of your mobile apps are built on Unity and so on. And what we've done is taken the modality of a game engine and started to apply that to the rest of the world. So, you know, four years ago, five years ago, before Mark Zuckerberg rebranded his company, the Metaverse was a conversation and we're basically the software of the metaverse. So building immersive worlds, building training situations, and capturing real-world environments in a game engine so you can actually interact with these things. So in many ways, it's like taking the technology we've all gotten accustomed to using from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional interactive model.

MAGGIE:

Okay. So then how do you see creative industries leverage technology to remain innovative while fostering unity and collaboration among diverse teams?

JEFF:

Well, you know, it's funny. I was thinking about that question, and I'm old enough to remember going into record stores. Yep. And you go into a record store. MAGGIE: I'm old enough to remember that, too.

JEFF:

Okay, all right. And you'd have these different sections, right, and labels. And I always wondered, like, because there's some things that didn't fall into one bucket or another. And I find, you know, whether we're talking about creativity or technology, like, people will say, well, I'm not technologically inclined. Yeah. Or our company's not a tech company. If I hear that, I get worried because we're living in a world where

everything is technology. And, you know, over the course of human history and human evolution, we invent things, right? Like, you know, whether it's electricity or whether it's buildings, like the constructs we live in, at one point were new technologies. So this idea, whether you're talking about creativity or technology of opting out. Like, while you do know that the history of human evolution is about change and reinvention and reimagination, and I really think that in systems and individuals, we have to awaken that sense of possibility in everyone because you're a creative of your life. You're creating your life on an ongoing basis. So I think a big part of what we have to do, not only in industry, but in our own individual lives is encourage people to see their own creative potential and their own innovative potential rather than saying, oh, there's a special group of us that know what this means and you should just trust us.

MAGGIE:

How do we do that?

JEFF:

I think part of it is, ideally you start in school. And this idea of measuring talent the way we measure it is pretty inadequate because the reality is whatever your tests are, you know, and those of us, generally speaking, not always, who've been successful in part were successful because someone said, hey, you're good at this thing, and that bolstered our self-esteem and then that poured over into other areas and so on. And I wish our school systems were more about finding that ability in everyone, because everyone has it, right? Like, you know, we all know people in our families or friend groups who have a very atypical expression of genius.

MAGGIE:

Yeah.

JEFF:

But it wasn't recognized in the school system. And I would hate to imagine how much wasted potential and how many people leave those systems thinking, well, I'm just not talented. Or I'm just not smart. Or I can't do this. Or I can't do that. I would rather

flip those narratives around. So I think we have to look at our education systems a bit differently. I think in terms of opportunities, technology is opening up new worlds, whether it's artificial intelligence or digital transformation, where we can create much more accessible opportunities for everyone than has historically been the case in the past.

MAGGIE:

But in the scope of technology, I think there are people that are a little bit more wired towards technology than others, maybe lean into it a little bit more than others. They're probably those who are just like, well, I make the widget and I do the widget every single day. And so how do you change that narrative so that people are more, they embrace it more? They don't see technology as this overwhelming thing that I just don't want to get close to because it's overwhelming. It's scary. It's change, all of the things and see it something to embrace more.

JEFF:

That's a really good question. I think part of it is language, like the language we use around things. Like I remember when I, I was trained as a musician when I was young and then I went to business school and my first month in business school, I was like, I am an idiot. So I was listening to all this terminology and I was like, I don't know this term, like I don't understand the language, I can't decode it. And then once I figured out what the words meant, I was like, oh, they're not really talking about anything, but this plastic language of that, I'm not being critical of just business every sector has that exclusive framing around it that keeps other people out. Tech is really bad for this like there's so much jargon that really is kind of unnecessary like their acronyms and things and and even someone like myself, like my background's all in creative industries last five years i've been pretty much exclusively driving large-scale digital transformation projects and the value I bring is the ability to communicate the tech simply so that people who are not technical can understand it. And the thing that's amazing, like when I first got involved with Unity, you know, employees, large scale company. And I was like, there's surely there must be a ton of people like me that are good at sort of taking this to the market and telling regular people what it's all about. Not really. So I think there's lots of different ways that people can engage with technology and you don't have to be an engineer to be involved in it. And whether it's

in marketing or in a way, having the imagination to think about how technology can create new possibilities in our communities and our businesses. That's exciting. And that's the legacy of life, right? Like if you think of the cities we live in, you think of the city of Toronto, even where we're sitting right now having this podcast, the thousands of human inventions that have made this moment possible, like what you and I are doing. Like, we're living around a whole bunch of people that came before us, their ideas. We have these ideas and we should empower people to explore that for themselves.

MAGGIE:

That's good. What leadership qualities are essential for guiding organizations through the challenges of digital transformation and automation?

JEFF:

Uh, I think a big aspect from a, from a leadership position in a period of technological change, a big part of it is going to have to be creating a community within your organization where ideas can truly come from anywhere. And people say that they're like, "Oh, we're all one team. We're all one family. Everyone's voice matters." But then we have built everything in hierarchies and silos, even though we say we're not, that is how we've organized it. And there's so much happening right now, especially now, like with the convergence of technologies, I think a lot of people use the term, like let's use Artificial Intelligence as an example. They'll use words like that or digital twinning without really knowing what they mean. And it creates this kind of complexity. So I think there's within organizations a need to create more of an egalitarian approach where ideas can come from anywhere in the organization. I think the real nuance challenge, and this is probably true, it's probably a psychological individual application of this as well, but whatever we did in the past that worked, we get attached to. Right? So we did something successfully, that becomes our new MO.

MAGGIE:

Why change it?

JEFF:

And when conditions change around us, we're not usually all that good at saying, well, but three years ago we did this and that was really good. And so I think part of it is how do you, at the same time, hold together pride in your legacy with an openness to new possibility. And I see this a lot in family business systems, for example, where you have a founder and many of these systems, you know, people, regular people who had an idea and their idea took off, and, you know, years later, they're worth a billion dollars. Wow. Obviously, those people are really, really proud of that idea. And sometimes I have to say to them when I'm working with those those systems you know imagine if you were born today into the system that you've created and you had an idea and your dad or your mom was saying well no no that's not the way we've always done things, right? So from a leadership position, coming back to your question, I think you really have to balance out that sort of pride and identity and legacy and all those things that you've created together as a team, while at the same time saying, well, we could be totally wrong. Like all that stuff may no longer be relevant, right? And that's that the humility attached to being able to do that is I think a challenging leadership.

MAGGIE:

Have you seen that done well in an organization?

JEFF:

The one that's actually, this is kind of, it's one of my favorite case studies. As an example, because most people know it, would be Nintendo. So most people don't know is when Nintendo was created, it was a playing card company. It was the top playing card company in Japan. And it was a family business for about, I don't know exactly, I can't remember the dates exactly. It was about years where they made these Hakanuta cards, which they developed a reputation, Nintendo, as the best playing card company in Japan.

MAGGIE:

Interesting.

JEFF:

And they ran it that way for a couple generations. And then electricity and technology started to emerge. And they're like, well, you know, maybe we could go from playing cards into board games. And so they got into board games. And then electronics came in. And I think the game was called Duck Hunt. So it was this game.

MAGGIE:

I remember Duck Hunt.

JEFF:

So Nintendo was involved in that. Yeah. And then they're like, oh, well, maybe this idea of arcade games. So they kind of went from playing cards to board games to electronic games to arcade games. And they're like, well, what if everyone, instead of going to the arcade, could take a device home? And then they got into like creating characters like super mario and so on so you see this one family system where it's like if they'd held true to the well we're a playing card company we don't do any of this, none of that would have happened. And you know you fast forward years it was like an billion dollar company that this family had built together by in a way staying true to the foundational principle of we're there to build community through games but just finding different applications of that kind of ability so i think they're a great example but i think in large ways and small, every individual has those opportunities in life. And sometimes we get stuck and we're like, oh, we keep trying to do the same thing. We're not getting the results we want and so on. But looking at your communities or your families or your relationships or your working environments the same way and saying, well, how am I co-creating, co-designing an environment that again, holds the best of what we were together with the best of what we could be.

MAGGIE:

Jeff, thank you.

JEFF:

My pleasure.

MAGGIE:

That was Jeff Melanson. He is the strategic partner at Unity.