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How to Work with Your Brother and Survive

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OK. I can see you out there rolling your eyes! “There’s a reason they tell you not to work with family,” I hear you say. Or, more succinctly, “Are you insane?”

Well, here’s my defense: I’ve worked collaboratively all my life. My career, until very recently, has been in advertising. Advertising demands close collaboration. More than that, it demands close collaboration with ornery personalities in hostile environments. I’ve handled it! I even have a reputation for being able to put together cohesive teams within these pits of vipers. How hard could collaborating with a favorite brother be?

I’ll admit, it did occur to me that this might be a mistake. My brother and I share too much in common. We have very similar aesthetics, very similar work ethics. But we are very similarly control freaks, used to running our own shows—I now as publisher of Goosebottom Books; he as president and executive creative director of the new media company Trigger. This fact did give me pause.

But what is a pause in the face of an idea? Ideas can topple governments, unleash revolutions. A little pause can’t hold out against an idea.

My brother, Jason, passed me his iPad with the camera on. “Look at this.”

He placed a picture of a spaceship on the table in front of me. I looked. Spaceship picture...on table... and then all of a sudden, floating above both in three dimensions, the spaceship itself. I could hear the thrum of its engines. I could move around it, examine it from any angle. And when I tapped its guns, it fired green lasers with an exhilarating sound effect.

“@*\$%!!”

My brother grinned. “Don’t you think this would make a great ghost book?” he asked.

What chance did the poor pause have?

As if a) being family, and b) being control freaks, weren't enough, we didn't know what we were doing. Nobody knew what we were doing. Nobody had done it before.



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As if a) being family, and b) being control freaks, weren't enough, we didn't know what we were doing. Nobody knew what we were doing. Nobody had done it before. We were about to create the first commercially available book+augmented-reality app in the U.S. and market it—somehow—so that distributors, wholesalers, retailers, book buyers, book sellers, librarians, parents, and children would be convinced to change their established notions about how one buys, sells, experiences, and enjoys books. It was a challenge.

And we seem to be meeting it so far. *Horrible Hauntings: An Augmented Reality Collection of Ghosts and Ghouls*, book+app, was safely launched in time for Halloween. We've received reviews and accolades from *Publishers Weekly*, *Wired*, *School Library Journal*, XM Radio, and NPR. Among hundreds of international entries, we won the Best Children's Book

Award from the 2012 Halloween Book Festival; and *Horrible Hauntings* was featured as "No Ordinary Book" in the Children's Book Council's Winter Showcase.

But the going was tough, and here's what we learned:

1 :: Before you even know what you're doing, decide who's going to do it.

A clear delineation of responsibilities really helps. This shouldn't be a list of tasks, but a set of high-level buckets so that as unanticipated tasks appear, assigning them and absorbing them into the workflow is clear-cut. In our case, it helped that we were building a book+app. Everything "book" went to me; everything "app" went to my brother.

2 :: Most of your problems will come from border skirmishes.

There will always be things that fall between buckets. Take the time to think the entire process through and identify what those might be. Decide how these issues will be handled before they arise. Otherwise, resentment will build if someone feels unfairly burdened with an unanticipated task. Or, in our case more commonly, someone might feel frustrated that the other person is swiping more control.

3 :: You might be responsible for only one part of the project, but the whole project is yours.

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In the making of *Horrible Hauntings*, although I had control of the book and its contents, we worked closely together to pick the 10 ghosts that would best showcase the app's capabilities. We looked not only for the best stories but for ghosts that would allow movement along different planes or that could use sound effectively. We looked for ghosts that could interact with finger taps, screen flicks, camera position. And on the opposite side of the table, Trigger had to work to make sure that their depiction of the ghosts stayed true to the stories—Katherine Howard moves as described by witnesses; the Whalley monks wear the correct habits; and President Lincoln looks like President Lincoln.

4 :: Seek first to understand.

In any collaboration, multiple stakeholders will be around the table. No two perspectives are ever identical—and in a collaboration like ours between two businesses from two different industries, the gaps in knowledge can be immense. What did I know about high-tech mobile and gaming technology? No more than Jason knew about the book business. And yet it is human to project your established knowledge set onto a new situation—leading to gross errors.

For example, I didn't know that an Android app and a seemingly identical iOS app are two very

different animals. It's not like releasing a book in hardcover and then releasing it as a paperback. Creating an app for a second platform requires a pretty fundamental rebuild, not merely an adaptation.

Another hurdle: The new media industry thrives on just-in-time delivery. The app is posted on a certain date, and BAM!—you're in action. But publishing requires much larger gaps between milestones. You need to be ready well before launch date, so that reviewers and buyers get a chance to inspect and fall in love with the product, and the product gets a chance to be sold onto shelves.

So, first try to take stock of what you don't know. Try to understand what the situation looks like from the other side of the table. For a good collaboration, everyone needs to understand the cause of everyone else's anxiety. Only then can good, mutually beneficial decisions be made.

5 :: If all else fails, remember it's only a project.

This might seem an odd way to end a list of key learnings, but sometimes it's the only guide wire back to sanity. With the best of intentions, things go awry. Frustration can turn to bitterness. Life's too short. Let it go.

Shirin Yim Bridges is an award-winning author. Her first book, *Ruby's Wish* (Chronicle Books 2002), won the Ezra Jack Keats Award and was named a Publishers Weekly Best Children's Book. *The Umbrella Queen* (HarperCollins/Greenwillow 2008) made TIME/CNN's Top 10 Lists 2008. Shirin is also the head goose at Goosebottom Books, whose first series, *The Thinking Girl's Treasury of Real Princesses*, won an IPPY Award and is on the Amelia Bloomer Project's list of recommended feminist books for youth. *The Thinking Girl's Treasury of Dastardly Dames* repeated both these achievements and was additionally named an ALA Top 10 Nonfiction Series for Youth, 2012. *Horrible Hauntings*, released in October 2012, was the first book from a U.S. publisher to use the latest in augmented reality and was named the Best Children's Book 2012 by the Halloween Book Festival. Last but not least, Shirin has a new picture book, *Mary Wrightly So Politely*, to be released by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2013.

Seek perfection, and you will find insanity. Seek excellence, and you will find fulfillment.

So how did we do?

A beautiful book. A novel use of technology. A revolutionary new way to be thrilled and fascinated by ghosts, created by two people who used to pore over ghost books together as children.

Good enough.

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