



The happy household

Rosanne Bersten visits the SuperHappyDevHouse, where geeks prove the benefits of togetherness and tinker with the future.

CHAINED TO A DESK, DAY IN, DAY out, the creative mind starves. Systems and processes, production and efficiency may be the keys to getting material out the door but they do not feed genius.

Where is the caring and sharing that creativity thrives upon? Inside a company, there may not be a critical mass of creatives for true brainstorming to occur and hobnobbing with the competition is frowned upon. Most of the time.

Perhaps it's time to get back to the good old days, not only of 'do it yourself' but also 'do it together'.

For the children of Silicon Valley's Home Brew Computer Club era, the tinkerer in the garage has become an urban legend in which any kid smart enough can become the next Bill Gates or Steve Jobs. For that matter, it wasn't that long ago that David Filo and Jerry Yang were PhD candidates who turned their campus idea into Yahoo. Now everyone is on the lookout for the next Facebook or Google-killer.

But modern complexity means it's rare for one person to be able to develop the next big thing on their own. That's where SuperHappyDevHouse comes in.

Held every other month at one of two rambling mansions in Los Gatos, California, SuperHappyDevHouse at first appears to be an enormous party with a preponderance of men and far too many laptops. It is designed to be a space for the exchange of ideas and rapid prototyping of projects

among the cream of Silicon Valley's young and young-at-heart developers.

The atmosphere is invigorating, inspiring, intense. This is essentially play. Asheesh Laroia is 21 with a day job at new intellectual property darling Creative Commons. He's sitting with "TV", 30 and they're laughing every five minutes. They are, in many ways, the heart of SHDH. For both of them, it's the first time here. They met each other for the first time about four hours ago. Now they're working together on "three projects, maybe four".

"It's more about trading what we've already done," says TV. "Like the anti-spam thing." Laroia says, "It's handy because he can tell me it's impossible." They fall back into talking with each other.

"It's always fun to be asked to write something but it's sad to say 'you're doomed,'" says TV.

"It's something I've been thinking about for ages. And now you've told me why it won't work. Using all the same arguments I would have given myself if only I had the knowledge, which is a bitch," responds Laroia.

"The interesting things about gatherings like this is the backgrounds are different but the interests are the same. You have combined intellectual strength that doesn't exist otherwise," says TV. "The reason I came here is because there's a bunch of people I knew online and wanted to meet them in real life but I also met others." He turns to Laroia again. "I saw on the wiki that you were from CC, so that's why I hunted you down."

The hope is that this playful exchange will result in real-world benefits, but that takes time.

Post-dotcom cynicism is rife in many places. It's hard to get VC investment without a working model or a beta test of what you're offering. The Googles of the world run innovation camps where the prize for the winner is VC funding. Pacific Gas & Electric, San Diego Gas & Electric and Southern California Edison co-sponsor the California Clean Tech Competition, whose prize is US\$50,000. For the true entrepreneur, though, the idea that one of those big companies will have a finger in their pie is anathema.

In the 28 months the House been running, there's been only one project that everyone knows about that's on its way to reality, assuming that's defined as funding and measurable outcomes.

David Weekly, who was there at the beginning, had a start up company already but brought a side project to the first event. "He bought a domain that night, finished it that night, and a few days later had 1000 users," says co-founder Jeff Lindsay, 21. "Supposedly it's now the biggest PBWiki collaborative site on the net. He recently raised a lot of money from a VC firm that now funds this party."

Come into the house

There's a semblance of structure to the 12-hour party. As people arrive, they mill around networking. To make this easier, guests are issued with name tags on entry and coloured spots to indicate which



ROBERT S, 26

Lives: San Francisco, California

Regular job: Declined to say

SHDH status: first timer

Working on: Trying to integrate Java and Bluetooth.

Reactions: "It's been a frustrating day, because I'm working on something that isn't really working out. But I've learned a lot. The event was great, fantastic. I just needed information on what I want to do. It's something that's not well documented online because it's usually done by companies. ... Lot of interesting ideas floating around. People working on anything and everything."



MEREDITH L PATTERSON, 30

Lives: San Jose, California

Regular job: CTO of her own company, Osogato

SHDH status: Old hand (5th time here)

Working on: Showing people the Defcon badge she and her friends hacked at this year's Defcon Conference. There was a contest for hacking the badge. "We hacked the badge so it was a line level meter for a song playing through an iPod. It ended up being really simple: only one input we needed to find and constantly update."

Reactions: "The idea of repurposing stuff is just fun for me. I like doing things that people just wouldn't come up with. There's always somebody [at SHDH] with some project I've never heard of before and it expands my knowledge for what can be done. Before Defcon, I'd never hacked a micro-controller before. I end up meeting new people and finding out what they're doing and finding out how their projects have synergy with what I'm working on."

programming language they work in, black for Perl, blue for Python, green for PHP, red for the trendy newcomer Ruby on Rails.

After a while, they get down to business. The myriad rooms of the house have been completely reorganised: rows of tables are festooned with power boards; whiteboards adorn most walls (they start out with "use me!" emblazoned on them but by the end of the night, someone has altered this to "abuse me"). The living room has people on all three couches and on the floors, intently working on projects.

Later on, there will be lightning talks, five-minute presentations on a variety of cutting-edge topics on the lawn.

One of the talks is a demonstration by Sigurd Magnusson, visiting from SuperHappyDevHouse New Zealand. His company, SilverStripe, produces extremely simple-to-operate, open-source content management systems that are now being used by the New Zealand government. For him, being here is the ultimate networking opportunity.

"I was in the USA specifically to get the right people interested in our open-source project," he says. "San Francisco has a concentration of influential programmers, and I couldn't ask for a better means for getting on a level playing field with them. I can showcase what we're doing with SilverStripe and have them on board as a peer or friend, rather than some pesky sales person making a cold call"

For Magnusson, SuperHappyDevHouse was better than an introduction. "We were sharing ideas, technical knowledge, and demonstrating stuff for technical merit rather than asking people to buy my product."

The result, he hopes, is wider than just a single sale. It's viral marketing: other influential geeks will blog about the company, or "at least recall us so when we do some more great stuff, they are receptive to our achievements and will boast about it to their friends, colleagues, etc," says Magnusson. He's looking forward to returning - all the way from Wellington - for the next one, where, he says, the plan is to "actually work on some neat technology, wherein I have 50 per cent of the skills and idea, and someone else will have the other half."

There is a critical mass of developers in Silicon Valley. Geeks have crossed the country to be part of the mythos. By the height of the party, around 9pm, there are more than 145 attendees. Co-founder Tom Harrison, 25, doesn't think there's anywhere else you could get more than 100 people every six weeks to a party like this "that don't all work at your company".

The co-founders, young as they are, are very aware of their heritage. Harrison's uncle was a member of the famous Homebrew Computer Club of Cupertino in the 70s. His father, whose house we're in now, was the founder of Quantum, the hard drive company. Harrison senior is a self-confessed "start-up junkie", but in the House, as his name badge attests, he just "The Dad".

Tom went to high school with Steve Wozniak's kids. Woz used to work the audio for some of the school plays - it's a small community.

"Throughout high school, Tom was involved with hosting LAN parties," says Harrison's father. "He could accommodate 100 people. It evolved into this."

"One of the earliest things about Silicon Valley was [that] the early hackers came from a communalistic hippie mentality: the early 60s and 70s, the Homebrew Computer Club," says co-founder Lindsay. "People would be very cooperative. That's what bootstrapped Silicon Valley into being a tech bleeding edge area. I think DevHouse contributes to that and keeps Silicon Valley healthy."

"People move here because of stuff like this event," says Harrison.

'Stuff like this event' is permission to step outside the boundaries of the everyday. It's outside the rules of the sales book or even, temporarily, the bottom line. It's the new collaborative garage.

Eric Tiedemann, a 41 year old with grey-streaked hair working on an entirely new programming language, sums it up. He speaks quietly but intensely about what it means to design. He quotes Nassim Nicholas Taleb: discovery doesn't come through design, it comes through tinkering.

"Go forth and tinker, SuperHappyDevHouse," he says, quietly. ★



KIRRILY ROBERT, 32

Lives: Melbourne, Australia

Regular job: Just quit working at realestate.com.au

SHDH status: first timer

Working on: Perl programmer interested in a variety of development. Looking to move to the Bay Area, so interested in networking and making contacts. Currently installing an instance of Lambda Moo for two friends as a training exercise, because she's "gratifying a whim". "It's retro Second Life," she says.

Reactions: "I was really excited to be somewhere with a sufficient density of geekitude to pull something like this together. I guess the attendees really made the event happen. I knew almost nobody when I showed up, and I left at midnight having made a bunch of new friends."

