



GameChangers
Season 2: Episode 3
Nina Liew

Seth Robinson: Welcome to GameChangers, the show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who have taken the road less traveled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson. This season, we're taking some time out to reconnect, exploring the ways our gamechangers are forming connections in the world by creating new communities, spaces and technologies.

Nina Liew: I think a lot of people have really come back to what is important to them, who they want to make time for to connect with and the importance of that in their lives.

Seth Robinson: Today, we're joined by a globetrotting guest who has braved the pandemic to pursue her career. Now, she's working in a role of many of us might not have heard of in an organization that's blending art, commerce, and technology to facilitate conversations around the world.

Nina Liew: My name is Nina Liew, born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, and daughter of two migrants from Malaysia. I currently live in New York city, though, where I've been for the past nearly two years. Yes, mostly during the pandemic. I am currently the chief of staff at an organization called Shared Studios.

Seth Robinson: Perfect. So I guess to kick things off, can you tell us a little bit about what it is Shared Studios does?

Nina Liew: Absolutely. So yeah, Shared Studios began as an art project in 2014 and it was founded on the idea of bringing strangers together around the world across distance and difference. So the way we do that is we use immersive technology, which we sometimes nickname portals, to connect people and curate conversations which challenge you to see and engage with the world differently. The reason why we do this is because despite any distance or

differences between us, each of us has an overwhelming desire to connect, to learn, to get to know each other.

Speaker 3: We're in a world where people are retreating into their own little bubbles. They see and hear things that are given to them, but don't often get the chance to talk to someone halfway around the world, or talk to someone who they hear about all the time.

Speaker 4: Through portals, you can connect with people that you're separated from due to distance, and really learn about their realities in a very simple way, through a simple conversation.

Nina Liew: So in an increasingly globalized and technology saturated world really, it becomes even more important that we make time to talk to one another, to listen and share stories and perspectives. From this, people realize that we have so much more in common than we realize. It becomes that much easier to bridge differences, build connections, and develop empathy through very meaningful and human ways. So fast forward to now, Shared Studios now has over 20 sites around the world, including New York City, Berlin, Kagali, Gaza City, and Milwaukee, Erbil in Iraq, and many, many more. So really diverse places. We partner with organizations like the UN, Twitter, companies, connecting their teams and customers, universities, and schools and so on to run these immersive and transformative conversations every day. So yeah, that's Shared Studios in a nutshell.

Seth Robinson: That's awesome. For you as chief of staff, what does that mean?

Nina Liew: Yeah, honestly, I don't think I was really aware of it when I was back at Melbourne Uni as well. The chief of staff role was a little bit different for every company or every CEO and chief of staff match. So, in summary, a chief of staff is often the right-hand man or woman to a CEO. There are some companies like Macquarie or Vox Media have a chief of staff for different executives like the CTO or the COO also have their own chief of staffs. I've seen it a lot in America and gradually more Australian companies are getting them. But, at Shared Studios, as a chief of staff, I mostly do three things. I work very closely with the CEO and other company leaders as a sounding board. I plan and run leadership meetings. I keep us on top of goals and connect different teams across projects. Then I also lead and work on strategic projects and, then also as a small team, I oversee our business operations.

Seth Robinson: So how did you find that what you'd studied and your skills as a business student, and I guess going on and doing some graduate study in the US as well, how did that equip you for that role?

Nina Liew: There are some chief of staffs who are two or four years into their career like I am. But there are also some type of staffs who are two or three decade into their career. So there's a big spectrum when it comes down to it. But yeah, definitely a lot of my experiences built up to it. Before I was promoted to the chief of staff role, I was a strategy and business operations manager. So, yeah, just in general, I was working and consulting before, and that really

helped, being a really good problem solver and systems thinker, and just always being a sponge and learning and understanding what the bigger questions are and driving those projects through to the end. All those things are very similar to what chiefs of staff often do.

Seth Robinson: You've been living in New York largely through this pandemic in 2020, and you work for an organization that's all about building human connection. Obviously, this is one of the times in history when building human connection and occupying the same spaces physically has been incredibly challenging. But we've also seen some incredible tech advances in that space. I mean, we're talking to each other from the other side of the world right now. What has that kind of meant for your organization?

Nina Liew: It hit us really badly, in terms of the economy and all public spaces being closed down and whatnot. So a lot of our sites that you have to visit in person to be able to use the technology have been closed almost since March in 2020. So what we've had to do is that we've shifted into a fully virtual environment and we built a custom platform that allows us to have some very cool conversations. It's not the same as our usual technology, which allows you to walk into a room and see someone's full body and make eye contact and that kind of thing. But it does allow us to still connect a really diverse global network and have people connect, especially all the shared experiences of isolation, of having loved ones get sick and even pass away. All of those things have been captured in some of the conversations we've hosted and helping people to work through those things together and share good practices and stories and things like that, which I hope does help a little bit.

Seth Robinson: An international move is a challenge at the best of times, but taking on a new job in a city like New York only to have the whole world veer off course six months later gives a fresh take on living through unprecedented times.

Nina Liew: So grateful that Australia has kept it largely under control. But of course, the lockdowns and the isolation has been its own challenge, right? So yeah, I mean, being here by the time I might be able to make it back to Australia will be over two and a half years since I've seen friends and a fair bit of family. It is harder to make new friends in a city when you've mostly been in lockdown. So that's been tricky. I definitely think the main thing, though, is taking it easy, being kind to yourself. I actually just today wrote a list of things to look forward to and I keep trying to find things to add to that list to keep the sense of time moving. So we'll see how that goes.

I wonder what I would've done if I had moved six months later at the beginning of the pandemic. I can imagine that, even I have friends making similar decisions just six months after me and they have decided to postpone their trips. Some of them have decided to go ahead and it's interesting to see that. Another thing is that, this is kind of tangential, but I think it was funny when I moved to New York, I remember a lot of people telling me, "Oh, it must be your dream." Or, "It's, everyone's dream to move to New York City." Don't get me wrong, I really love it. I'm so lucky to do it. But I was actually planning or hoping to move to Beijing and I had applied to

two master's programs and gotten rejected from both. So I openly share that story because I think it's important to kind of just show how non-linear life is. I don't want people to think that, "Oh, New York was like an easy kind of my first plan and all that kind of thing," if that makes sense.

Seth Robinson: Absolutely.

Nina Liew: Yeah. But in terms of launching yourself into a new city, I mean, talk about pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, saying yes to everything, to meet new people, to try new things, America and New York City is a difficult place to live, even if you do have a job and that kind of thing. So I think you really do learn a lot about being self-sufficient, asking for help and doing all that in a new city.

Seth Robinson: I think often we really idealize these kinds of career trajectories and life plans. So it's kind of nice to hear that even if it doesn't go the way you think it will, it can still have a positive outcome overall.

Nina Liew: Definitely.

Seth Robinson: So you spent some time studying overseas as well. You did exchange at the University of Hong Kong when you were doing your undergrad. I think you've now done some study at the University of Pennsylvania as well. Did you always have aspirations to go study and work and live overseas?

Nina Liew: Good question. I think I always wanted to travel, but honestly, it's been a huge snowball effect of the first time you travel, you get the travel bug and you keep going. So I definitely always have been curious about the world and learning about other worlds and that kind of thing. So for example, having studied and lived for a few months in Hong Kong, exactly one year after the umbrella movement, I mean, I really enjoyed my time there. I made a lot of friends there. As a result, I pay so much more attention to what's happening there, the politics there and all the implications of that.

I think more and more in the world as the world becomes more globalized and everything is connected, I think traveling and being able to be curious about the world and aware of all these things and how they relate to our decisions is so important. So yeah, I mean, I was always interested in traveling overseas and studying overseas. Then as soon as you start, it's kind of no going back from there.

Seth Robinson: Would you come back, do you think? Or are you internationally focused forever now?

Nina Liew: That's a good question. If my parents listen to this, I may not be able to answer that. The answer to that is TBD. I mean, I definitely enjoy things here now. I'm hoping to study here and work here a bit longer for sure.

Seth Robinson: We've touched on this a little bit. How does it compare to studying or working in Australia? Are there huge differences that just completely caught you off guard?

Nina Liew: I would say it's a much easier culture shift than if I went to a country where I wasn't exposed to their media or spoke a different language. I also definitely think that having Australian accent has made it much easier to be accepted in America compared to if I had a different accent, actually. People will ask, "Are you from Australia or are you from the UK?" People in America have really positive perceptions of Australia. So I definitely feel very lucky that I have that in into getting to talk to people and patiently answer their questions about kangaroos. Also, a lot of people were really concerned during the bush fires of beginning of last year and so on. There are definitely a few things that came as a culture shock. There are two ones that come to mind.

The first one, I think, a lot of people would think about which is just how much of a sense of a kind of go getter and bold culture there is, especially when it comes to people's work. I'm sure that's also exaggerated in New York City. Being bold, asking for what you want, really the opposite of tall poppy syndrome. Then the other thing that really struck me when I moved here and even to today is the inequality in America. It's not to say that Australia is perfect either, for sure. But I think you'll realize the inequality that exists here in a number of different ways. I definitely have a lot of gratitude for the social nets and the healthcare that we have in Australia.

Seth Robinson: It is. It's really challenging. I think you especially see that in a place like New York. I find your first point very interesting as well. We previously on the first season of Game Changers interviewed Bryony Cole who started the Future of Sex Podcast. But that's one of the things she talked about as well, being a Melburnian moving to New York. She said it's almost like you have to learn how to celebrate and tell your own story. That really becomes a part of it. Was that a learning curve? Do you feel like you now have to kind of tell your own story?

Nina Liew: Yeah, definitely. Kind of really owning your achievements and things that you've done. There's something though, because I think that the value of or the trait of humility is still very important. There are some Americans I find that are able to talk about themselves and sell themselves and that kind of thing while still being humble about it and also not being fake humble about it. But it has been a lesson to be able to start to do some of those practices because no one else is going to do that for me in the workplace or in America. So finding that balance, I think, for me being comfortable in celebrating my achievements and talking about being able to sell myself, but not overstepping it more than it needs to be.

Seth Robinson: While she might still be perfecting her technique when it comes to telling her story, Nina has a long history of achievements that she's brought to her career dating back to her time at university as president of the Melbourne Microfinance Initiative.

Nina Liew: I think my time at the Melbourne Microfinance Initiative or MMI was so pivotal to a lot of who I am and what I chose to do since university, and also a lot of the people in MMI are some of my closest friends and collaborators today. A lot of the skills that I took with me into consulting and into the chief

of staff role that I have now, which is organizing a team of 40 people, running different events, running pro bono consulting across the Asia Pacific, really getting an understanding of some of the problems you were trying to solve and all the things you learn from doing that over three years.

Also, one of the key lessons I've learned is that I went into MMI from high school really thinking that microfinance was like a silver bullet for development and eradicating poverty. I learned from my time at MMI that that's really not the case. It is imperfect and there are all these other things to think about in terms of infrastructure and systemic change and so on. I think that really fueled my desire to keep learning beyond university into development and international relations and so on to where I am.

Seth Robinson: Were you always drawn to studying business? Was that always the thing you wanted to do?

Nina Liew: Yeah, I think so. I'm not sure, I think my parents were definitely a big influencer in that. I've always been interested in entrepreneurialism and not necessarily in the big venture capital way. We often talk about it now, but just in building and creating things. I celebrate small businesses, all forms of entrepreneurship as well. Then, yeah, I was also interested in economics and development, which I was able to study at Melbourne Uni as well.

Seth Robinson: Thinking about your work in terms of connection and the challenges that you personally have experienced this year and that you've experienced as a business. Now that when we talk about the future of work and where it's going, do you think there are particular ways that you see businesses going to change and evolve in the future?

Nina Liew: I think, firstly, from the technology and connection point of view, especially with the recent pandemic, making it so much more difficult to travel or see each other in person. I think a lot of people have really come back to what is important to them, who they want to make time for to connect with and the importance of that in their lives. I do hope that that is something that all of us carry on with us beyond the pandemic and when vaccines are fully rolled out and whatnot. In terms of what businesses are happening, there's a few things. I'm really curious about what's happening with remote and international work. Of course, remote work and more flexibility with that is an interesting thing to explore.

For us as a company, we have gone fully remote and we've also hired a lot of people overseas. So I now have colleagues I work with every day in Brazil, in Uganda, in Rwanda and other places. So I think we're not the only ones to be going to be doing that. It's really just sped it up for a lot of companies. But I do think that not just the pandemic, but just in terms of growing awareness of inequality and climate change and things like that are seeing more businesses moving towards taking more responsibility for their role in society and the environment. I hope to see more and more of that over time with more companies taking an active stance in that, more transparency, more companies working towards net zero and things like that. That's a hope, not a prediction.

Seth Robinson: Well, I mean, it can't be predicted if we don't hope at first, right? So I think those are all good things to be thinking about.

Nina Liew: That's true.

Seth Robinson: In terms of someone who is launching their career in this year of 2021, do you have a piece of advice you'd offer them?

Nina Liew: Yeah, I would probably say that there are two things I would recommend. The first would be on skill stacking, because I think when I was working in consulting and doing education stuff, I remember reading a report by the Foundation for Young Australians on how teenagers today will have 17 jobs over five different careers. I really wouldn't be surprised at all if this was going to be our new reality with how fast the world is changing and how the world of work is changing. Being able to be prepared to change, be able to market your own skills is going to be really important. But I mean, as a part of that, it's also thinking deeply about what you're interested in, what makes sense for you and your lifestyle. I mean, it's kind of all for exploration, right?

Then the second thing I would say is don't always do what people say or think that you should do. If I listened to my parents, I would probably be in a [inaudible] position. I wouldn't be in New York probably, but they're very supportive of me, but I think ultimately, it's thinking about what you're interested in, following your curiosity and just doing a good job at whatever you choose to do.

Seth Robinson: I think, speaking of a world where change is going to be the new normal, as much as I hate to use that term, I think that that flexibility is going to be really key, right?

Nina Liew: Yeah. Which is tough in some ways. I mean, humans are very adaptable, but it's not painless. So I think we're going to have to all learn how to be out and navigate change in a healthy way.

Seth Robinson: All right. I have one more question for you and then I'll let you go because you've been very generous with your time already. But that is, what's one thing that's helped you get to where you are today that's not something you'd put on your resume?

Nina Liew: I think everyone would say this is so many friends, people, colleagues, mentors, who are willing to give you time or recommend you and all those kinds of things, but I think another thing for me that's not on my resume would be intentionally doing things outside of my comfort zone. It's something that I started doing on purpose while I was at uni. Even though I love and I hate it, I really recommend it. So I try to pick things that I really hate, or I always say, "I would never do that," and so the biggest one I did was at the end of uni when I went skydiving with a friend, but it's also been things like traveling alone in countries where I don't speak the language or asking someone out on a date. I think the best way to do it is it's really unique for everyone. So for me, I hate working out. Some people are scared

at going for a run or going to the gym and other people love it. So they might not understand that. But that's the point.

The point is that you're meant to find out something that you really fear, whether it's the failure or embarrassment or whatever it is, and gradually working towards that. Because I think getting over that and building confidence, starting small and building really big, scary things is, yeah, a huge thing of what helped me to get me where I am today.

Seth Robinson:

Thank you to our guest, Nina Liew. We've all had to adapt over the last year. As borders have closed and more of our lives have moved online, but the innovation that has come from that and the opportunities to use the digital space to work, collaborate creatively, and connect with our friends and loved ones has been incredible. When the borders do reopen and we're able to take off once more, those connections we've built will make our lives that much richer. Subscribe to GameChangers for new episodes or catch up at feb.unimelb.edu.au/gamechangers. GameChangers is recorded on Wurundjeri Land. The podcast is produced by me, Seth Robinson, and edited by Michelle Macklem with support from the University of Melbourne.