



GameChangers
Season 1: Episode 3
Bryony Cole

Seth: 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 travelled, and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson.

Brony: I think this is a skill that's completely underrated, and especially in Australia, where we suffer from tall poppy syndrome and not wanting to talk about ourselves.

Seth: Today, we're joined by Bryony Cole, a University of Melbourne alumna who has gone from working with some of the world's biggest tech companies to becoming the world's leading authority on sex tech. She's the host of The Future of Sex Podcast, a keynote speaker, a jet-setting entrepreneur, and she's with us now via Skype from New York. Bryony, thanks so much for joining us.

Brony: Thank you so much for having me. It's fun to be chatting on another podcast.

Seth: Absolutely, I imagine that hosting your own podcast, you're feeling quite experienced behind the mic at this point.

Brony: Yeah, I'm used to it now. Everyone says I've got a good voice for radio, for podcasting.

Seth: Absolutely, I totally agree. So, tell us a little bit about what it is you do.

Brony: So, I started Future of Sex almost three years ago now. It started as a podcast, exploring the evolving worlds of sex and tech, or sex tech, which we'll get into in a second. But, the podcast quickly moved into live events and live podcasts which then moved into speaking gigs, so speaking around the world, mostly at tech conferences about The Future of Sex. And then, hosting hackathons, which posted in Australia, Asia, and the U.S., which bring together people to use technology to solve problems around sex.

Brony: And when I talk about sex or sex tech, I'm really talking about sexuality. So, not just the physical act of sex, but anything from sex education to health, to crime and

violence reporting, the #MeToo Movement, of course, as well as pleasure, dating, and relationships.

Seth: So, it really is a huge area that you kind of been exploring over the last few years, it sounds like.

Brony: Yeah, it's big. You know, the industry evaluation for sex tech is 30 billion dollars, and it's growing very fast. And I think one of the misconceptions about sex tech when I say that word, is people often jump to, "Oh, my God, that's video porn, or that's sex robots." Which, of course, it is. And they're the ones that get the most media headlines and attention. But it is everything under that umbrella of sexuality, mixed with anything related to technology.

Brony: So, we could be talking about apps, websites, emerging technologies like virtual reality, of course, augmented reality, artificial intelligence. So, really, just marrying together those two categories. So, there's infinite content for podcasts, as well as just creating events around. And it's such a under-exposed area, primarily because sex is such a taboo topic, and we have such trouble speaking about it.

Seth: So I guess, as part of that, do you kind of see your role as someone who's breaking down those walls to communication? I mean, being an authority on any area is really, quite the mantle to carry.

Brony: No pressure there. And you know what? I started the podcast because I thought it was a safe way to be more anonymous about this topic because I also felt the pressure of, oh my goodness, what am I doing? You know, my background was in BCom, so commerce and also, I had worked at Microsoft. So, I was pretty protective over coming out and starting to talk about sex tech. But I soon realized that in order to talk about it and normalize it, which really is the mission behind any of this, is normalizing this conversation about sex. Well, you're probably going to have to put your name behind it.

Brony: And so, I went through my own personal journey of becoming more public and talking about it, as a public identity. And as you said, an authority, and I think actually, that's where the real power is. Because when you talk about sex normally, you give other people permission to talk about it normally. And it is a totally normal thing. It's kind of how we all got here, and everyone does it.

Seth: I guess you mentioned there your background. You know, you came from a Bachelor of Commerce, which I believe you graduated from in 2006. And then, you did kind of go, I won't say traditional, but you went into a pathway that is not uncommon for Bachelor of Commerce graduates. You did some consulting and some communications and that sort of thing.

Seth: Was there kind of a moment or inciting incident in your story that made you want to transition from that more traditional path to talking about sex tech and looking at this very future-facing industry?

Brony: I think it was confidence, to be honest. I think we all come out of university fresh graduates and want to get some experience under our belt before we really trust

ourselves to make our own way. And so, all those other roles leading up to this were kind of giving me the wings to be able to go, "Okay, I'm going to do my own thing."

Brony: Now, I always knew I wanted to do my own thing, but I wasn't really sure what that was. And then, opportunity just opened up for me, I guess, when I was ready. So, it had a background of working in government, working at Lonely Planet. Also working a bit for Deloitte. And then, moving across to the states with Yama, which was an American company that I'd worked for in Australia, and then moved to New York for to open their New York office. And they got acquired by Microsoft. So, I got kind of thrown into the big tech company path and didn't really anticipate that.

Brony: But, getting off that came about really, because I got let go of my job at the next gig I did after Microsoft. And that forced me to go into this freelance role, and I was like, yeah, I kind of like the idea of making my own hours. And now, I think it's a lot more popular, and we have this rise of digital nomads. And people are a lot more ready to jump in a lot sooner than probably, I was. But, it was about confidence to be able to do that, and experience. And then, just identifying something that really spoke to me.

Brony: So, the way I stumbled into Future of Sex and creating a podcast, because I'd never done a podcast before was, I was doing, I was on another consulting gig with Absolut Vodka, researching the future of night life. And speaking to a hundred artists across the U.S. who were considered night life influencers about, well, what is the future of night life? And how will technology impact our ability to out in like, 2025?

Brony: And I met these two guys in L.A. that were in their garage. They were creating virtual reality scent releases. So, when you smell, this attachment on your VR headset would release scents. What happened there is, though, explaining how creating this technology because they wanted to be able to simulate being in a hot tub with three super models. And I was just like, "Wow, that's so crazy, and definitely nothing I had heard about at Microsoft."

Brony: It was something to me that I was like, "Wow, like, what are the implications for this in my own life?" Like, how am I going to date or go out with a guy that on Saturday night, just wants to sit home on the couch and you know, watch a VR headset. But I thought, "Oh, wow, this is such an interesting area of technology that no one seems to be talking about." Or, it just really struck me. And by that time, I feel like I'd worked up enough confidence in my career to just try different things, and certainly moving to New York helped that as well. Because you have to be pretty strong to survive here.

Seth: Yeah.

Brony: And so, I just thought, "I'm going to replicate this study that I did with Absolut, but I'm going to do it on instead of future of night life, I'm going to do it on future of sex."

Brony: And that's really how it all began.

Seth: You know, it's a pretty out there story, but I mean, I guess the best things always kind of come from the strangest beginnings, don't they?

- Brony: Yeah, I think so. I think, it's just like learning to identify those opportunities that sound totally weird, but you're like, "Oh my gosh, that speaks to me. I'm just going to do this one thing."
- Brony: And I remember at the time, I thought it was so interesting and I was like, "I'm going to record using my iPhone, and just put this thing on Sound Cloud." And I met my friend for coffee. And I'll never forget it. He said, "You have to be accountable for this project. You can't just say you're going to do it. You have to do it."
- Brony: And he said, "You should ask people for some money to donate to your podcast, to keep you accountable." And I think this was probably one of the biggest things for me, that actually made me do it. And it was so scary and so cringe-worthy. I put this video up on Facebook and I was like, "Hey, guys, just leaving my job. I've decided I'm going to research this new project, and I'm going to do a podcast. And I'm asking you for five dollars to keep me accountable."
- Brony: The point was yes, people donated some money to support the project, but it was really, now I had to do it. And so, now I wasn't just responsible for myself for doing this artsy, cool project. I actually had like, these backers that were interested in it and wanted to see me do the project, which were, you know, friends and family. And yeah, that made me do it. And that was the spark which I am thankful for. Meanwhile, the podcast sounded like absolute garbage because it was just on my iPhone. But that was the catalyst, right, that got me to actually go and start the project.
- Seth: And I guess, you know, kind of taking a slight step back to what you were talking about, you being the age of digital nomads and that sort of era. You know, there's this idea that we're all creating our own work. But I supposed in a lot of ways, it's not work until you're being paid for it. I guess it's, you know, a point at which a project becomes employment.
- Brony: Yeah, you know, that's very true. And sometimes you just have to create it for the sake of it. I think if I'd gone into this thinking I was going to make a bunch of money, then I would have failed by now, for sure. You know, I had to pick up jobs in between and be really scrappy and think about ... I mean, this is why the podcast has evolved from being just a podcast. Because I felt like I couldn't really crack the nut, so to speak, of podcast advertising at the beginning.
- Brony: I ventured into events, and then, I did speaking gigs. And the speaking gigs were really when it become something that could sustain and keep the lights on at home. But that took awhile, and this sort of general wisdom of like, if you're starting your own thing, it's going to take two years before you're profitable. And I would say that's absolutely true. And there's ways that you can get creative with paying yourself in other manners other than directly seeing yourself get paid for work from a customer.
- Brony: And in my instance, one of the great things about Australia and the support we get with grant programs is, last year I applied for the Hot Desk Program, which is out of Queensland, Queensland government. And they sponsor you for six months to bring your project to Queensland state as part of a stimulating and innovation economy in

Brisbane and around. And so, I could pay myself. And, I had to be based in Brisbane, which is also pretty awesome.

Seth: Yeah, it's not really a down side is it?

Brony: Yeah, and so, I think it's worth investigating other options other than the obvious of like, I'm going to sell something, or I'm going to get ads and like, think about grant programs and other things that, if you have a creative project that you'd like to see come to life, how can you do it without the obvious? And also just thinking, okay, well, if this doesn't pay me, what other work can I get to do that in the meantime? And thinking of it within that two year period. And how really test your commitment, right?

Seth: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brony: You're not getting paid for it, are you going to still do it?

Seth: You've kind of touched on this a little bit, but I was wondering, working in such a kind of future-facing industry where it's all quite cutting edge and I guess, there isn't really a rule book you're following, what are some of the challenges that come with that?

Brony: I think the biggest challenge for me is managing my time now. So, thinking about it, there's a ton of interesting things that you can be doing, especially in the future genre. And, you want to balance it out when you get to a point where you've got enough content and you're not generating new insights and content. You still have to carve out time to do that. So, a lot of my time at the moment isn't like it was in the beginning, which was discovering this amazing world of sex tech and connecting and building my network within the sex tech community, and looking at all different categories, from the robotics industry right down to the women of sex tech that were based in New York, and meeting those people face to face.

Brony: So, a lot of the stuff that you're doing in year one is completely different to the stuff you're doing in year three. But in fact, now, a future of sex, the business is built on being the leading authority in the space. So, one of the challenges is actually carving out time to look at the new innovations that are happening while keeping the business running. And the business side of Future of Sex operating is really now, around the hackathon's accelerated program and the speaking gigs, and also finding time to do the podcast again.

Brony: My God, I have like, 40 episodes in backlog that need to be edited and put out into the world.

Seth: I have just a couple more questions, and I'll let you go. I was wondering, for young Unilever, do you have any kind of advice if they're looking to enter this kind of innovation space?

Brony: I think the usual things are, and it can't be said enough, especially in the digital age, is meeting with people face to face. And starting to build your network. And that always means offering up value first rather than saying ... There's nothing worse

than getting an email that's like, "Can I meet you to pick your brain?" Or, "Let's meet for coffee."

Brony: Like, what can you offer that person that's valuable first? And always give before you ask. I think, and we talk about this a lot in sex tech, incidentally, but face to face contact and getting that time in person is really important. And I think that the way you can get valuable in time person with someone is by giving them something, offering to help them with something or coming to them with a new initiative that you could help support or build for them.

Seth: What can you tell us about your international lifestyle? How does it work being based in New York? Or, do you consider yourself based in New York, and then working places like Brisbane, or coming home to Melbourne. How does that all kind of come together?

Brony: You know, being based everywhere has been a little bit challenging on the personal front, I think, because it's very hard to date and keep relationships when you have one foot in Australia and one foot in the U.S. But for me, I love it, because my family, my school friends, my uni friends, are predominantly in Australia. So, I try and make an effort to come back every year for a couple of months. And then, I also have an apartment here in New York. And part of the joy of being my own boss is that I can get up and move whenever I want to. So, when it gets too cold in New York, I try and make my way to Australia. But I will say that it's not all as glamorous as it seems. And to my point at the start, you know, that comes with a bit of a personal sacrifice in terms of, your friends are going to be on both continents, or spread across the world, which is awesome.

Brony: But also, like, you miss out on important things in other people's lives. So, I'm still navigating how to make that work. But I certainly love traveling, as I think many Aussies do. So, whenever an opportunity comes up to speak somewhere else, especially Australia, I'm going to say yes.

Seth: Well, I guess my last question, and this is one we're asking all of our guests before we sign off with them, but it's, what is something that's not on your resume, that you think helps get you to where you are today?

Brony: Okay, I think this is a great question. And one experience that's really shaped me professionally is actually moving to New York and learning how to tell my own story. And I think this is a skill that's completely underrated, and especially in Australia, where we suffer from tall poppy syndrome and not wanting to talk about ourselves, learning to craft your story in a really compelling way is so important.

Brony: It's like, not to get too Americanized on it all in terms of like, elevators pictures and all this stuff, but I think learning to be able to talk about myself confidently and what I've done completely changed my interactions for potential opportunities with businesses, with communities, with collaborations. And something that I learned coming to New York, where everyone has their story, and they also have 10 different side hustles. And the thing that separates Australians from Americans, I think, in this being able to tell your story is that we're actually very genuine in telling it and very authentic.

Brony: I think learning to tell it well and put yourself in the light and not be ashamed of that, is critical to anything from a job interview to you finding your next business partner.

Seth: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to tell us your story, Bryony. It's been really, really compelling chatting with you.

Brony: My pleasure, I hope to connect with you guys more, and please, feel free to shoot me a message on Twitter at Bryonycollection, or on Instagram at futureofsex, or feel free to shoot me an email, hello@futureofsex.org.

Seth: Thank you so much, Bryony. This was the GameChangers Podcast. I've been your host, Seth Robinson, and that was Bryony Cole from Futureofsex.org.

Seth: GameChangers is produced by Sophie Thomas, and recorded by Chris Hatzis.