



It's more than just fun and games at tombola... it's tech and R&D too

Nigel Wright's Andrew Openshaw catches up with Chris Shepherd,
Principal Client Developer at tombola

Chris Shepherd has just grabbed two coffees from tombola's free staff canteen and brought them through to the boardroom where I'm waiting to meet him. He jokes about how tempting it is for employees to just go ahead and eat four meals a day if they wanted, but added that directly above us is the tombola gym, so they can always 'work it off' if they needed to.

It's Friday afternoon and I know we're pushed for time. tombola's in-house development team are currently in the throes of a major transformation project, phasing out Flash, which is a central feature of its vast array of online games and apps, and replacing it with AngularJS.



Chris Shepherd, Principal Client Developer at tombola

The team are very excited as according to Chris, 'not only is this a chance to work on a complete refresh with a new technology stack, but it also involves replacing tombola's native app with a hybrid app, using the Cordova and Ionic frameworks. It's a huge project that encompasses the UK, Spain and Italy, and it's only just started - things are kicking off big time!'

I'm here to find out from Chris, tombola's Principal Client Developer, why he thinks more people should consider joining the multi-award winning Sunderland based online gaming firm. The company is currently one of the largest employers of game and web developers in the North East, yet within the region's vibrant tech scene it still seems to be relatively unknown. With plans to double its size over the next four years, the business knows that this perception needs to change quickly.

Chris thinks tombola has struggled to attract developers because, historically, the sixteen year old company has always been widely known as an entertainment services provider. On the contrary, Chris argues, 'it should actually be recognised primarily as a tech company. If I was to do a talk about the kinds of technology we are using at tombola it would probably last for a month - this business is completely driven by delivering cutting edge and best practice tech solutions.'



It seems there is indeed truth in what Chris is saying. As well as using Angular JS for its in-house framework, tombola is employing a bespoke build system with Gulp at its core, alongside a suite of unit and end-to-end tests using Sinon, Mocha and Protractor. Once built using TeamCity, the company release apps using Octopus Deploy. Longer term, the code base will be upgraded from ES5 to ES6 and Angular 2.

As Principal Client Developer, Chris is responsible for decisions on high-level architecture, coding and solution stacks for the company's UK and International divisions. Joining as a Client Developer in 2014, his career has advanced rapidly in just over two years and Chris is positively adamant that quick progression through the ranks is 'available to anyone who joins.'

Since acquiring his degree in Business Informatics and Information Technology, Chris explained that, prior to joining tombola, he'd been on a fairly typical journey. For seven years he worked as a full-stack developer at two IT services companies, one in the north east and one based in his native Chesterfield, where he gained the opportunity to engage in various aspects of front and back end development. Chris explained that he learnt early on how there is a tendency within the industry towards 'cost effective off the shelf solutions' and had pretty much conceded that unless you were at the 'top of the tree', your chances of getting a sense of ownership over the code you were working on or indeed opportunities to bring new ideas to the table and have an impact on product development, 'were virtually non-existent.'

In 2013 Chris began to take an increasing interest in front end development work, experimenting with the technology at home, and decided he wanted to pursue a career solely in front end solutions, due to the fact that it's 'more challenging and varied.' The problem was, he noted, jobs in pure front end were very rare. When he saw tombola were looking for front end developers, however, he decided to investigate this fairly unique opportunity.

Going in to his first interview, Chris admitted he didn't know much about tombola - 'it wasn't selling itself as a tech business afterall' - but following two hours of informally discussing software development with peers, he left the interview with a great feeling about the company and convinced that the people who worked at

tombola clearly shared his passion for tech. He officially joined in January 2014 and hasn't looked back.

When I asked Chris what was different about tombola compared to other companies he had worked for, he was very clear; 'Everyone is listened to and has an equal say and you feel like the products you're working on are actually yours.' He elaborated by telling me how in many tech firms, 'senior or principal developers always take the lead and make decisions, but at tombola it's not like that at all.' Within his first two weeks, Chris found his ideas were being taken seriously and implemented without any resistance. 'That blew me away, I was thinking 'hang on, people are actually listening to what I'm saying here, this has never happened before!'

Another refreshing change for Chris, and one he was adamant would be very attractive to other developers is 'the freedom you have to investigate different technologies and present a business case for adoption of new technology.' Many developers working elsewhere, in Chris's view, will be used to rules which discourage the acquisition of new knowledge because of its tendency to result in a decline in production output. 'In these firms there is a resistance to change; they won't push the boundaries because of the associated risk.'

tombola is the opposite. Chris highlighted that R&D is very much seen as part of a developer's job and if a technology that someone has sponsored is adopted, that person is then responsible for disseminating knowledge across the business. Ownership in general is also very strong at tombola according to Chris. Because employees are made to feel that the products they're working on are actually theirs, this 'really motivates them to want to make them better.'

Furthermore, at an operational level there is little restraint. tombola's two divisions, Bingo and International, although having to adhere to underlying standards of code quality, can otherwise be flexible in other areas and not constrained by having to do things in a certain way. For example, as Chris explained, 'if they want to use Agile or Kanban, they are free to make a decision which best suits the needs of the division at that time.' Lead developers from each division then feedback to Chris who has visibility of both. He continued, 'the amount of trust we are afforded to spend time as a group to troubleshoot problems or plan new features is just brilliant.'



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All in all Chris believes these factors, central to working life at tombola, are the reason why he has been so successful in his career with the business to date. In his words, 'Your basic everyday job is challenging enough, but add to that the R&D side of things as well as the flexibility the teams have to operate in the most efficient way, means that your skill set improves rapidly.' He added, 'since joining tombola I've become a far better developer – I wouldn't have necessarily gained these types of skills and experiences elsewhere.'

Perhaps the elephant in the room for anyone thinking about joining tombola is the ethical aspects of the job, being that the company operates in the online gambling industry. Chris, however, was quick to respond to my query, explaining that 'gambling responsibly' is at the forefront of every decision the business makes. Any new application or feature added to the tombola site is only done so once the business is satisfied that it's not in any way breaking its moral code. 'Features like promoting 'self-exclusion' and 'cool downs' is indicative of the fact that we care about our players wellbeing.'

Before I left I was keen to know what was next for Chris, now that he'd been appointed Principal Developer. His answer was simple, 'I want to

be a Chief Technology Officer.' Of course, this role doesn't currently exist at tombola but with the rate it's expanding, Chris is sure it will within the next four years. He noted, 'the way in which the business is allowing me to develop is certainly positioning me to be a contender for the job.'

Due to its expansion, tombola has recently introduced a personal development plan for all staff. This involves regular catch-ups to discuss a person's strengths and weaknesses and working out how each individual can develop their skills in a particular area to get to the next level in their role. Chris believes it's a great way of challenging people and getting them to improve and it doesn't just include technical skills, but rather encompasses 'project management, product launches, people engagement and so on.' In addition, tombola pays for its staff to attend conferences and also allows them to leave work early to attend tech meetups, such as Frontend North East, a monthly event that takes place at The Bunker in Newcastle, which tombola became a sponsor of this year.

Chris enthusiastically concluded by stating that any developer who wants to work with exciting new technology, expand their horizons and be challenged everyday should consider a career with tombola. 'There's always something new happening and a business decision that you think 'oh man, that's going to be really difficult to do, but let's do it anyway. It's all about teamwork, collaboration and taking ownership of ideas and making them work.'

It's Friday and some tombola staff are off to play basketball later. There's also a Haxball tournament taking place upstairs, as well as plans to go to a local pub. There's a genuine family vibe in the building and Chris highlighted that even after two weeks with the business, he felt like he'd 'been there for years.' I left him to get back to the pressing Flash-replacement project...taking a slight detour via the free canteen before heading back to Newcastle – I just couldn't help it!

