



Player ID:
Vladimir Funtikov

Classification:
CEO and
Co-founder



Player profile

Player history

Vladimir Funtikov is the CEO and Co-founder of Creative Mobile, a dynamic and vibrant indie studio that's known for hits such as Hot Wheels Infinite Loop, Drag Racing, Zoocraft: Animal Family and Nitro Nation. Before co-launching Creative Mobile with Sergei Panfilov and Serhiy Slyeptsov, the Estonian CEO worked as a software engineer and Android developer at Mobile Post Production Inc.

Studio

Tallinn
59°43'N 24°75'E



Founded
2010



Employees
100+





People, Games, Wheels, Passion (and cats)

When the 2008 recession hit, Vladimir Funtikov, Sergei Panfilov and Serhiy Slyeptsov lost their jobs. Their loss was the mobile gaming industry's gain. Instead of settling into safe careers working for other companies, they decided to follow their shared dream of building their own—Creative Mobile. Drawn by the thrill of self-publishing and distributing games worldwide, the founders stepped into an industry and onto a learning curve that would define their company culture and their successful future.

In 2020, Creative Mobile celebrated ten years of mobile gaming success. The company has grown from just three men working long shifts, to a stable of more than 130 employees. Their timeline is a litany of success: In 2012, they won the Estonian Startup of the Year Award and celebrated the success of Drag Racing, a game launched in 2011 that went on to become one of the most downloaded on Google Play, with more than 350 million downloads globally. In 2013, 2014 and 2015, the studio was awarded the PocketGamer Top 50 Developer award, and in 2014 the company achieved the significant milestone of 200 million game installs on Android.

This success led to Creative Mobile publishing a string of mobile hits that also includes Nitro Nation (2014), Zoocraft: Animal Family (2017) and Hot Wheels Infinite Loop (2019)—a game created in collaboration with Mattel Digital Games. AWS is the cloud provider of choice for the studio, providing the scale, machine learning tools and cost-efficiency that helps them build increasingly relevant and challenging games, putting gamers at the heart of its DNA.





“At our core, we believe the difference between success and failure is the ability to trigger emotions, tell stories and create pockets of excitement.”



“I wanted to work with people I liked who shared an audacious spirit”

In the beginning, we were just three gamers of different tastes and ages who’d lost our jobs in the recession. I was 23, I had a good resume and an appealing job offer from an IT company. I turned it down because I realized that if I accepted the offer, I’d end up with a comfortable career ahead of me, but this would close the door to running my own company. I took the chance to do something I loved, with people I liked, and who shared an audacious spirit. We were excited about self-publishing our own games, being able to distribute our creations across 150 countries overnight, and seeing the results in the morning. And we were inspired by close collaboration with our gaming community and finding that secret sauce that makes games immersive and engaging. Eighteen months later, we were making money and our business was growing.

We started Creative Mobile because we were passionate about games. This hasn’t changed. We have a strict mission statement to enrich people’s lives with magical moments. At our core, we believe the difference between success and failure is the ability to trigger emotions, tell stories and create pockets of excitement. This is really ingrained in our culture—focusing on emotion and talking to the players and adding something special to people’s lives.

“Nobody understood what we were doing”

Gaming is not a sexy industry in Estonia. Nobody understood what we were doing and they would laugh at us; even magazines mocked us. Now that we’ve created a precedent and won some awards, attitudes have changed a bit, but mobile gaming is still not something people naturally gravitate towards even though it’s

such a cool industry. This sits at the core of one of the biggest challenges we had when starting our studio, which was a lack of access to talent.

We didn’t have connections to the wider industry—we didn’t know what conferences to go to or how to hire people remotely, or even where to locate them. We had a huge talent shortage even though we could offer competitive salaries and had an amazing culture. For the first two years, we hired anyone we could find—even writing them a blank check to get them to enter the industry as a career path. It’s been very slow progress and for nearly seven years, we’ve struggled to match our ambition with the right talent. When we established ourselves as a capable company with financial stability, we started investing into the local ecosystem and universities to create a foundation for more engaged talent.





“We focused on core gameplay to bring players back”

We realized we couldn't be as competitive on Apple's App Store as we could on Android. The App Store was already more established, but Android—now Google Play—offered us an immediacy that really drove us in the beginning. We had no prior game dev experience, but we had distributed games ourselves. My first few apps had achieved several thousand downloads when they were first released, so we knew we had something special and that this was the platform for Creative Mobile to kickstart its future.

I still have a hard time explaining how we make money and why people spend their money on mobile games, even today. Back then, they were alien to everyone—a black

magic that few understood. Our strategy was to take a chance, work hard and iterate, iterate, iterate. Our first game was a complete mess. That's when we realized that games should follow some basic rules: be as easy to learn as possible, speak for themselves and bring people back time and again because they're immersive and engaging.

We figured out this business model where we made games fast and focused on the core gameplay, adding progression between sessions so players wanted to come back and move deeper into the game. We monetized with ads and ensured that every game was optimized as much as possible—our loading times were kept to a minimum, and we focused on value and gameplay. All the things everybody else

knows today, we figured out by trial and error back then. We implemented our basic strategy of ensuring organic discovery, and this is how we found our first success in Basketball Shots 3D. It made us enough money to put food on the table and carry on.

We kept following our strategy until we created something really big—Drag Racing. The statistics and numbers we have for this game are huge. It's had around 450 million downloads since its launch in 2013, and has the distinction of being one of the most downloaded games on Google Play. It became a cultural phenomenon.



WHAT IS DRAG RACING?

Nitro Nation Online takes drag and drift racing to the next level with a 3D world full of stunning cars, amazing racing physics and unlimited in-depth gameplay.



CREATE

Customize your car with different colors, visual effects and hundreds of decals!



PLAYER COMMUNITY

Start a team, win tournaments with your crew and work your way up the leaderboard rankings.





“We lost our identity as we grew”

We lacked experience in building and scaling a studio of this size. We thought that because we were this down-to-earth group of guys focused on making awesome products that it would translate into an amazing company culture. But as we grew, we realized we’d lost our identity. We had an uneasy mix of awesome people who saw great things in us, people who saw us simply as a company to put on their resume, and others who just came for the money.

We started thinking about how the studio was structured and what defined our roles and disciplines about five years ago. We asked the hard questions and challenged roles, even our roles as founders. We wanted to understand the DNA of Creative Mobile, and what values we would live by.

It was a nightmare at first, but we’ve really focused on defining our DNA, why we work on specific games and what we want to achieve. Ultimately, the image of a company is shaped by the people who are part of it, and we couldn’t change this overnight. It was a slow process. We entered the next phase about two years

ago, when we formulated our vision and mission. We defined what’s welcome, and what’s not, focusing on changing our culture and cementing our identity.

We elevated our HR people to the status of founders—a symbolic move that put talent management into a position that highlighted how important it was to the company—and we built an extensive hiring framework, with a recruitment process that hires people that are aligned with our goals and mission. Today, we have more than 130 people in the company and we’ve grown way beyond our original vision.

We’re also more open. We discuss what’s profitable, we encourage people to ask questions and we are transparent about our finances, mission and investments. We’re also more collaborative than ever before. We want to develop games where everyone in the company takes pride in them, and this requires a lot of horizontal collaboration and cross-team engagement and support. But our original DNA is still here—a strong passion for games and gamers and giving people things they’ve never experienced before.





“Gamers are part of our identity”

We’re really good at talking to players—this has always been part of our identity and is something we haven’t lost as we’ve grown. It’s still something I want to dedicate my life to and we all feel this way. We appreciate the players, being able to connect to them and get their real-time feedback, and use this to give them what they really want in a game. Our customer communication teams are integrated throughout the company and they’re involved in everything; from marketing to game design.

We believe that everything is a funnel—we attract the player, we onboard them, we talk to them and we get to know them. We want them to stay with us for years, which is why we have a customer support depot that talks to marketing and sales and everything in between. We are proactive with our customers and really care about their experiences.

“Hot Wheels Infinite Loop is Hot Wheels through and through”

Our most recent launch is one that really showcases our deep understanding of

brand DNA. Hot Wheels is a huge brand that’s been around for more than 50 years. There’s a history behind it, and a big following.

When we pitched to Mattel, we educated ourselves about the DNA of the brand, the values it represented and what made people see it so differently from other die-cast models. We wanted to discover the secret sauce that made it work, and we did.

We’ve worked closely with Mattel to ensure we were on point with the messaging and art styles. We wanted to develop something that was modern, fresh and

that would resonate with every Hot Wheels fan, even if they hadn’t interacted with the brand since they were kids. It was hard to marry these elements together, but it was also really satisfying. Everyone loves the final result—a game that’s enjoyable, user-friendly and 100 percent true to the Hot Wheels DNA.





“AWS puts a lot of services in one place and this allows us to control our costs and forecast our expenses more accurately.”

“Real time collisions at high speed”

One of the challenges we had to overcome was around real-time multiplayer, as it introduced complexities around unpredictable latency, real-time collisions and multiple players on the track at the same time at high speed. We also had to manage performance—the constant trade-off between accessibility and looks. We wanted the game to look gorgeous, with high detail and plenty of cars on the track.

We solved our latency and design challenges by using behind-the-scenes optimization and a mix of some of the latest tools from AWS. The team uses [AWS Elastic Beanstalk](#), [AWS DynamoDB](#), [Amazon GameLift](#), [AWS Systems Manager](#), [Amazon CloudWatch](#), and the cutting edge of [Amazon Machine Learning](#) to shave off a millisecond here, add more detail there and deliver the right level of performance. There was a lot of work under the hood, but we used the latest hardware and pushed it to its limits, while always making sure the game was accessible to players.

“There is immense value in tech specialization”

I’m incredibly proud of how the product teams have shared knowledge and developed their skills over the years. In some teams, we have solid automation for day-to-day operations pipelines, shared logic written in C# for Unity and .Net, and other great things.

In the past, we had to use so many different technologies, toolkits and service providers. Over the years, the differences

between the toolkits have become smaller and it’s allowed us to consolidate our efforts around the technologies we really like. This has driven our adoption of AWS—it allows us to work with interchangeable tools that deliver richer competence and more value. AWS puts a lot of services in one place and this allows us to control our costs and forecast our expenses more accurately. AWS also offers a great set of automation tools that are particularly important, as we’re dealing with increasingly complex projects.

“With Amazon Machine Learning, we’re on the bleeding edge of game development”

The greatest benefit we get from AWS is the optimal difficulty curve. This is what defines how the game’s difficulty changes over the course of being played, and is what ensures the difficulty matches the skills of the player. With AWS, this fits both small project requirements and complex infrastructure challenges. Most of our projects use [AWS Elastic Beanstalk](#), [Amazon DynamoDB](#) and [Amazon S3](#), while some use [Amazon GameLift](#), [AWS Systems Manager](#) and [Amazon CloudWatch](#). We’re also sitting right on the bleeding edge of the hottest game development machine learning, with a specialized machine learning team that uses [Amazon Machine Learning](#) and [Big Data](#) solutions that integrate with our gaming apps. We also use [AWS Glue](#), [Amazon Athena](#), [Amazon EMR](#), [Amazon RDS](#), [AWS Batch](#), [Amazon EKS](#) and [Amazon Route 53](#).



“Next up: Cats & Magic”

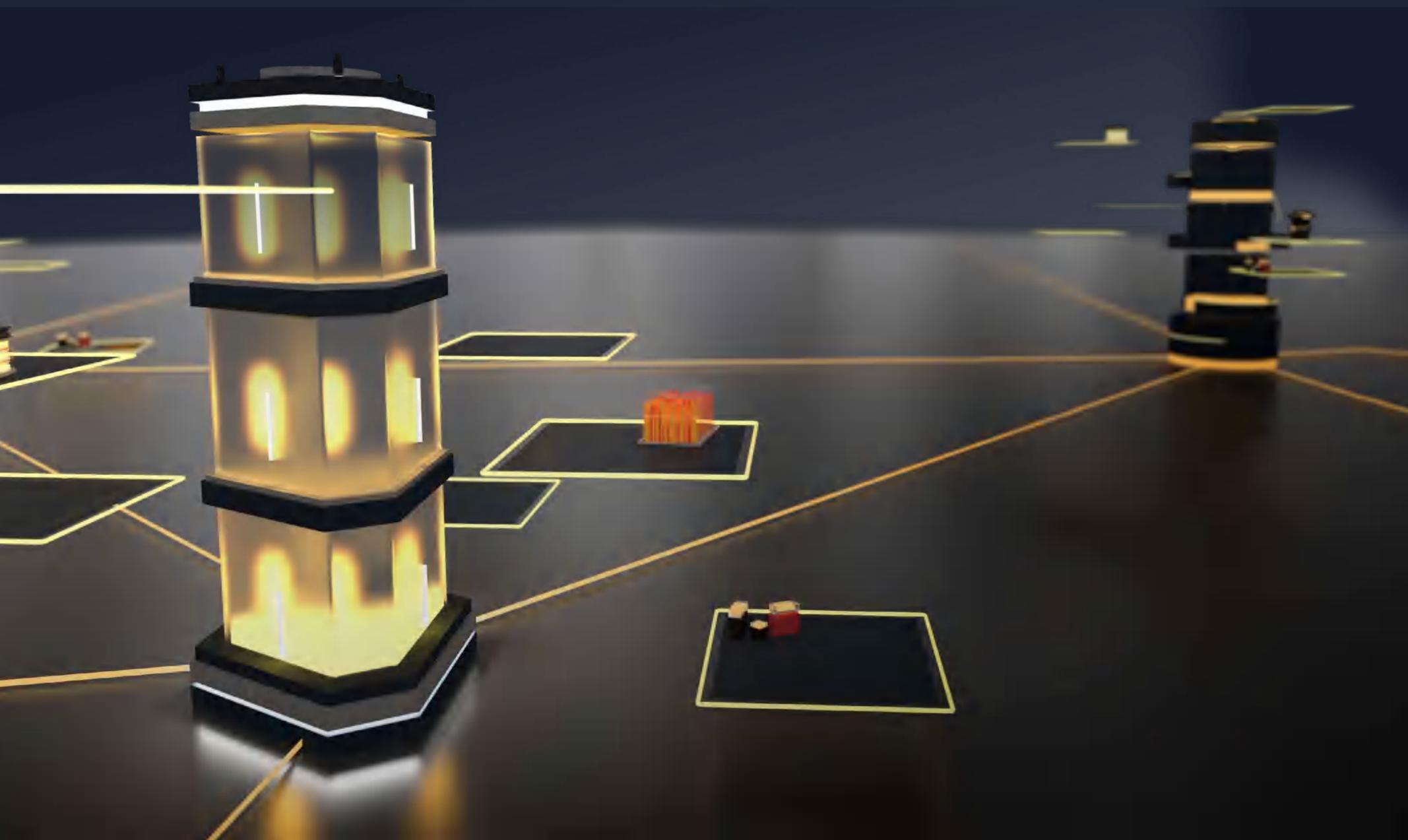
We did a soft launch of a game called Cats & Magic this year—a game I’m really excited about. It’s a game about cats. This particular game is going to be a major part of our portfolio next year and runs entirely on AWS, which makes it a solid game product. There are no great games about cats that really please cat lovers, and we’re seeing some great early metrics on this

title. The game is still not in peak shape, but it comes with great cat characters, lore and technology and satisfies one of my key criteria for a game: we’re passionate about the subject. I love cats.

“Your secret weapon is your business vision”

Focus on your business vision, not your game vision. The secret weapon that will

define your studio and your business is not the mystical weapon you designed for any given game; it is your people and your DNA. The market changes and technology changes and game ideas rarely last, but what does last is the essence of your company, its culture and the core values that define it, regardless of its size or age.



Stats and facts

AWS Services used:

<p>S3</p>	<p>Elastic Beanstalk</p>	<p>DynamoDB</p>
<p>GameLift</p>	<p>Systems Manager</p>	<p>Cloudwatch</p>
<p>Machine Learning</p>		

Key games:

<p>(2014)</p>	<p>(2019)</p>	<p>(2020)</p>
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Fast fact:

Creative Mobile’s Drag Racing series became one of the most downloaded franchises of all time, with more than 450 million installs, and now has several follow-up titles to its name, including Drag Racing: Bike Edition and Drag Racing 4x4.

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