Getting to know… Alison Bryant

What are you currently working on? We typically have 12-16 research, strategy, and design/development projects going on at any time, plus we run a couple of Sandbox conferences every year. To give you a sampling, right now we are:

- Working with a classic young child brand to reinvent themselves, so that they are developing products across platforms based on cutting-edge academic research.
- Designing a new subscription media-on-demand product for a major global kids brand.
- Evaluating a major American sports league's youth programs, and separately doing a large-scale qualitative study on how kids' engage with sports across media.
- Conducting formative research for a non-profit to help them develop a new mobile app that helps families explore more green spaces.

- Doing user-experience testing in our PlayLab for a new app that promotes empathy (a joint project between a U.S. university and a Canadian developer).
- Conducting all of the concept testing for a major play brand on an ongoing basis (about 10 product tests a month!).
- Helping a new start-up in the play space with their creative roadmap and concept, plus their consumer research.
- Finishing up a project for a cruise line to help them understand how they can make kids' experiences even better (and yes, my team did spend a week on a cruise for this one!).
- Fielding our own internal research on the state of the apps market in Europe for kids.
- Planning for our Sandbox Summit @ MIT in April and our new Sandbox Sports in D.C. this fall.
- And more!!

(Whew! That actually made me exhausted just writing that all down.) We're incredibly lucky to be working on really fun, impactful projects like these all the time. It's a real adrenaline rush!

What has been your most memorable project so far, and why? This is a really tough one for me (as it is for many people who've been doing this for over a decade, I'm sure!). The project that stands out as a real turning point for me professionally and personally was one of the first big projects I did early on when I was at Nickelodeon, which was on preschoolers and the Nintendo Wii and DS. The platforms were brand new and we did a lot of in-home research to understand their possibilities and limitations for this young audience. The result allowed me to work directly with the game designers and producers to rethink how kids could play on these devices (and eventually yielded several top selling, highly rated games). Plus, it was the first industry research that I published in academic journals – and it won top paper in the Game Studies division at ICA, and article of

the year for one of the journals we were published in! (Here and here are a couple of the pieces that came out of this project.)

That project was the one that made me truly realize the impact that research can have on product development, and became the model for the way I (and now my team) partner with creative, producers, executives, etc. to develop cutting edge (and successful) products and services. It also was a proving point to me (and my industry colleagues) that the dialogue between industry and academic research needs to be even stronger.

Which achievement are you most proud of, and why? I'm most proud of figuring out how to meld my academic curiosity with my entrepreneurial spirit to create a successful company that is making a positive difference in what kids play with and experience every day. I couldn't have done this without my (rather odd) career pathway, but I can't imagine doing anything else!

Ellen Wartella, the previous CAMmer, would like to know: What would you say are the advantages of working outside of the academy? The biggest advantages that I've found in being a step removed from the academy are:

1)   The speed with which we can work to gather insights and impact products. We turn around in 6-8 weeks what often take 6-8 months or longer in the academic world.

2)   The flexibility we have to work on a wide range of projects and with a wide variety of partners. Although I'm clearly creating a body of work and scholarship in the area of kids, learning, and play, I don't have to answer to any "higher ups" as to why I make the choices to work on the projects I do. (Of course, the downside to that, I think, is that I am more of a subject area generalist than a specialist like many of my academic colleagues – but I've found that this breadth of inquiry makes me the most fulfilled.)

What would be your work motto?

Find the win-win-win. Every problem has multiple constituencies, and there is always a solution that can work for all parties. Doing the research and creative thinking and finding that solution is the fun part for me!

Which of your publications is your favorite, and why? I did a piece with Amber Smallwood and Ashley Sanders-Jackson in my first gig as an assistant professor at Indiana University on the impact of mediated social networks on real world relationships in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication (*IMing, Text Messaging, and Adolescent Social Network*). It was one of the first pieces of research that looked at this relationship between the online and offline social spheres of youth, and was in the pre-Facebook days (WAY back in 2006!). We used network analysis to look at these relationships quantitatively (something that is still not usually done).

It's funny because this piece didn't get much traction for the first few years (of course, we like to believe that we were just ahead of our time), but now it is probably my most-cited article. It was a small study and done on a truly shoe-string budget; but was also one of the main reasons that Nickelodeon hired me – they wanted an academic who was doing research on the cutting edge of kids' media and could tackle the "new" digital space. So, in many ways, this small research project set me up for a whole career!

If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?
I would do a longitudinal, multinational study that looks at how kids are engaging in all kinds of play across all platforms; and the impact that different types of play (in different amounts) have on long-term academic and personal happiness and fulfillment.

If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be? *You can (and should) define success in multiple ways. Don't let one set of metrics define you.*
Whether you pick a more academic route or a more industry one, there are certain "rules" or milestones that will be part of your experience. Understand what they are and excel in them, but also create your own outcomes that will make you personally fulfilled and happy. Maybe it's creating some kind of measurable impact on the world (or your community) or developing a new product that solves a problem, or any other myriad things.

Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why? I'd love to have Kris Harrison in the hot seat next. She is both an awesome, impactful researcher, and an amazing (and quite funny) human! I'd love to know what Kris

sees as her most critical piece of work that the industry has yet to understand/take note of/heed as they develop content and/or products.