

We Like Soup, But For Some It's Not Enough

I used to give history lessons for a living.

Not literally — I was a partner in an accounting firm. But that's what it amounted to. Clients would come to us after the fact, and we would explain, with great professional authority, why their numbers looked the way they did. We were very good at it. We could tell you exactly how a business had arrived at its current position, what decisions had led to what outcomes, what the patterns meant in retrospect.

What we could not do — what nobody around me seemed able to do — was tell someone what to do next (you will hear this phrase a lot).

The advice we gave was essentially soup. Nutritious, perhaps. Warm and well-intentioned. But not a main course. It didn't form into anything you could act on tomorrow morning. It was observation dressed up as guidance, and deep down I knew the difference.

This bothered me enough that I decided to do something about it. Not for my clients — not yet — but for myself. I was going to take something to market. I was going to stop giving history lessons and find out what the next chapter actually felt like from the inside.

The Boardgame

I chose a boardgame. I was involved in that market, I understood it reasonably well, and I had an idea I believed in. The game was called Celebrity Head.

The concept was simple — a name is placed on your forehead, visible to everyone at the table except you, and you ask questions to figure out who you are. It was social, it was funny, and it worked. People laughed when they played it. That felt like enough.

So we did all the things inventors do. We made a prototype. We talked to manufacturers. We worked out cost-to-price ratios. We iterated on the packaging. We had meetings. We felt productive.

What we were actually doing, though I couldn't have articulated it at the time, was building in one land while the decision was being made in another.

The moment of clarity came in a meeting with a retail buyer. We had worked hard to get in the room. We were prepared. We had our prototype, our numbers, our pitch. We believed in the product.

The buyer looked at us with the particular expression of someone who has seen this exact scene play out too many times, and said something I have never forgotten. The words weren't quite these, but the meaning was unmistakable:

“You idiot. How did you get in here? We don't care about your game. We care about how it moves off the shelf. Don't come back without a three hundred thousand dollar advertising campaign.”

We left. The prototype went back in its box. And I sat with that moment for a long time.

Here is the thing about that moment that no amount of customer discovery, market research, or business planning would have delivered: it was the truth. The buyer wasn't being cruel. He was being precise. He wasn't telling us our game was bad. He was telling us we had brought him the wrong thing entirely. He didn't want a game. He wanted proof of demand. He wanted something that already had market pull built into it, so that his job — moving product off a shelf — was already half done before the box arrived in his store.

We had built a game. He needed a product. Those are not the same thing.

The Invention Around the Obstacle

What followed was not a tidy pivot. I want to be honest about that because the innovation literature is full of pivot stories told backwards, where the failure is a neat stepping stone and the lesson was obvious in hindsight. It wasn't like that.

The project wouldn't die. That's the part nobody talks about. Every inventor I have ever known or interviewed has experienced this — the moment when the project has clearly not worked, when the sensible thing would be to set it down and move on, but you can't. It haunts you. You keep turning it over. Not because you're delusional, but because somewhere underneath the failure you can still see what the thing could be.

This liminal state is actually important. I didn't understand it then, but I understand it now. When a

project reaches this point — when you're not able to let go but you're also not able to move forward on the original terms — your risk profile has changed. You were once protective of the invention. Now you're willing to give it away if someone will take it somewhere. That shift in psychology is not weakness. It's a commercial signal. And if you're paying attention, it opens doors that were never in the plan.

What we eventually did was form a partnership with Hey Hey It's Saturday, one of Australia's most popular television shows at the time. The 40-year-old who would buy a boardgame for a dinner party or as an easy-to-wrap present — exactly the profile the retail buyer had described — was precisely the audience watching that show on a Saturday night. The partnership gave us the market pull without the \$300,000 advertising campaign. The TV show became the complementary asset that the buyer had told us we were missing. We hadn't paid for it. We had invented around the obstacle instead.

Celebrity Head did well. And years later, without any involvement from me, Ellen DeGeneres built a \$70 million app called Heads Up on essentially the same game mechanic. Different platform, different era, same crossing point — a personality-led entertainment vehicle as the engine of market pull. The trigger was real. It wasn't luck. It was a structure that worked, and it worked again when someone else found it independently at global scale.

I should add, for honesty's sake, that finding the trigger and making the crossing doesn't guarantee you make the most of what follows. We suddenly found ourselves in the boardgame business — and that was a business in itself, one that needed to scale. New markets were opening. The position we had built had real momentum. But instead of thinking like the entrepreneurs we had accidentally become, we thought like accountants. We managed what we had rather than reaching for what was possible. We did fine. The story could have been much better.

My former partner later tried to revisit the opportunity and take it further. What he found was that the contracts we had in place mattered far less than the relationships we had built — or in some cases, failed to build. Relationships are more important than contracts. That is not a soft observation. It is a commercial reality that will come up again in this book.

What This Book Is About

I have spent most of my professional life since that boardgame sitting at the intersection of innovation and commerce, in universities, research institutions, and corporate environments across two continents. I have watched extraordinary ideas go nowhere. I have watched ordinary ideas become significant businesses. I have interviewed inventors and researchers about the moment their projects collapsed and listened to a pattern so consistent it stopped surprising me.

The pattern is not about the quality of the idea. It is almost never about the quality of the idea. It is about what happens next — or more precisely, what doesn't happen next, because nobody told them what to do.

We live in an era of extraordinary innovation advice. There are frameworks and methodologies and accelerator programmes and online courses and business schools full of talented people who can explain, in great detail, what commercialisation is, why it matters, what the stages are, and what the common mistakes look like. Some of it is excellent. Most of it is soup.

It describes. It doesn't direct. It tells you what the landscape looks like but not which path to walk. It gives you a vocabulary for the problem without giving you the next move. And the innovator — the researcher, the corporate developer, the entrepreneur sitting across from their equivalent of my retail buyer — leaves the room no more certain of what to do tomorrow than when they walked in.

This book is not that.

This book is about finding the trigger — the specific moment of commercial truth that tells you what the market actually needs from you — and inventing around it. It is about the two territories that every innovation has to inhabit and travel between: the technical land where the idea lives, and the market land where value gets captured. It is about what