

**Making** space

for great ideas



How do you support creative research and development projects in a way that feels open, supportive, equal and enabling of risk?

# Hello

Over the last eight years Watershed has shaped and refined a talent development programme that supports brilliant people to try out new ideas with generosity and rigour. We call it a Sandbox. Throughout this time we have benefitted from open exchange with people working in similar ways, and experienced growing demand to share our learning with others. So, we have decided to publish a guide on the approach, tools, values and methodologies of Sandbox - for others to share, copy, edit or clone.

Sandbox was first created by Watershed in 2008, because many small creative companies were not able to develop their most brilliant ideas, due to lack of support for speculative R&D in both the cultural and commercial sectors. We know that ideas are fragile but also that they improve from coming into contact with different perspectives, experiences and opinions throughout their development. We designed Sandbox to support innovation by combining talent, product and creative development in a fundamentally relational process.

Since our first Media Sandbox we have run a further eight thematic programmes exploring open data, theatre and performance, heritage, publishing, documentary, children's media and internet of things, the last five of which were a collaboration with academics, through REACT.

We have experimented with the design of Sandbox programmes, adapting it for different sectors and honing our approach. We are now keen to share our model and learning with others, and are excited to see how it might evolve and what we might learn. You may wish to run your own Sandbox, to borrow from it, change it or ignore it.

If you run your own Sandbox (or borrow heavily) please do use our creative commons licence, and most importantly get in touch, so we can share ideas.

Good luck,



**Clare Reddington**  
Creative Director Watershed



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# What is it?

Watershed's Sandbox programmes support brilliant people to take creative risks within a carefully curated community, providing individuals and small companies with space, money and time to work on their most exciting ideas.

"Other funders are just 'here's the money, we'll see you later', whereas Sandbox is working with you, they actually care about what you're doing, they are with you every step of the way. They actively take an interest because they want it to succeed as much as you do. Everyone is really motivated about all the projects—lots of energy around. It wouldn't have been like that if they'd just given us the money and sent us off, and told us to come back having produced something."

Sandbox participant

A themed Sandbox programme engages around six teams in a cohort. Each team has an idea, which they are supported to prototype.

"What's made it is that it's tied to a kind of community. That makes you feel more part of an infrastructure rather than just receiving some money and going off and doing something by yourself. Being able to meet other people either at a similar stage or more established in the industry, realising that they believe in your project too and feeling people want you to succeed, it feels very genuine."

Sandbox participant

Further reading:  
[Media Sandbox book](#)  
[Sandbox Evaluation](#)  
[REACT Sandboxes](#)

# What is it?



# Why run one?



# Why run one?

“It is no exaggeration to say that in five months the Sandbox has delivered as much as some mainstream publishers have done in five years.”

George Walkley, Hachette

The core aims of running a Sandbox are threefold:

- 1** To produce a slate of original prototypes that have both commercial and cultural value
- 2** To explore new digital practices which have the potential to change audience experiences, develop new creative forms and challenge industry status quo
- 3** To support talented people to make the most of their ideas and develop their skills, knowledge and capabilities

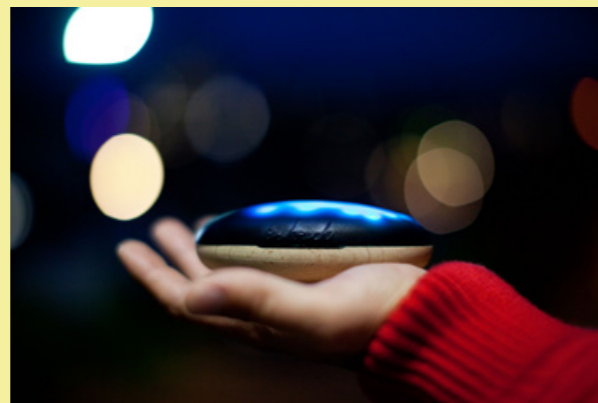


Photo Credit: Max McClure

# Why run one?

“Play Sandbox has been one of the best funded projects I’ve ever been involved with [...] it combines meaningful financing, sensitive support and input, and a laser focus on good commercial product design. It has enabled me to create real momentum and excitement around my new business from industry partners and investors alike.”

Alex Fleetwood, Sensible Object



Significant research and evaluation has been undertaken on the Watershed Sandbox process by the University of the West of England, the University of Bristol and Annie Warburton, which has allowed us to understand the outcomes that Sandbox produces. In summary Sandbox schemes have a proven track record in delivering:

- Cutting edge, well regarded new products and services (evidenced by positive press, successful crowdfunding campaigns, major new commissions and industry awards)
- High levels of growth and productivity among participants (evidenced by new jobs, new companies and increased investment)
- Companies better equipped for innovation (this includes iterative prototyping, user testing, relationship management, IP development methods)
- Dynamic relationships that continue beyond the funding programme (participants reference new ideas, ongoing collaborative projects and new companies formed)
- Insight into new trends that established sectors can learn from (demonstrated through high profile speaking engagements, think pieces and advocacy)

These benefits emerge over time and across a portfolio of projects. By giving teams freedom to experiment, change their minds, abandon ideas and respond to opportunity without the burden of heavy reporting requirements we have found that the rewards are far greater than the sum of their parts.



# Values

Making exciting new work means taking risks. So too does supporting exciting new work.



# Values

## Supporting risk

Risk operates at several levels in a Sandbox; it is there as you design a process in which people will invest their time, it is there as you select projects with unproven business models that rely on new technology and unpredictable audiences and it is there as you push those teams to experiment harder and faster in order to make the most of the opportunity. Taking risks is hard so Sandbox requires resilience and commitment in the Producer who must bear some of the risk themselves, so that participants feel safe enough to be brave.

"It's given me the time to do R&D and to fail. That's the key thing: to be able to fail and fail really hard and there to be no fall out from it. [Sandbox is] a chance to just explore an idea. I want absolutely to get something really good out of it but to be truly innovative you do need to try things and have room to fail."

Sandbox participant



Photo Credit: Max McClure

# Values

## Curating diversity

Problems are more effectively solved and higher quality work produced when people with diverse backgrounds work together. Sandbox commissions a slate of projects which together meet the criteria but which vary in terms of their skills, perspectives, experiences, motivations and networks. Participants are expected to be generous with their contributions to and robust in their critique of each other's projects. Diversity should be reflected in the commissioning panel, theme and funding call.

## Sharing process

Being open about ideas and their development yields greater returns than being protective. The Sandbox process encourages sharing at workshops, in blog posts and through early public testing of prototypes. In this way ideas are sparked, designs refined, connections made and interest generated. While the specifics of what to share is for project teams to judge, participation means agreeing to the principle that the benefits gained from sharing outweighs the potential risks of losing competitive advantage.

"We've had loads more people feeding back on the ideas. It prevents us being closed off, bringing in outside opinion – and it's people who are the right people to get the feedback off, the experts. A real opportunity for us, that we didn't have before, to get really sound advice from someone who knows what they're talking about."

Sandbox participant

# Values

## Building community

Communities are the most sustainable and productive structures for supporting people. Sandbox aims to engender a sense of collective enquiry among projects. By making the skills, experience and talent in the projects visible, making useful connections across the teams and by establishing a permissive environment the cohort develops its own momentum; intensifying the learning potential, sharing capacity among small companies, galvanising industry attention and developing an audience for the work.

**"... it's the emotional needs being taken seriously and knowing that there's a platform there that actually wants you to succeed and is there to help you, this was very, very important "**

Sandbox participant

## Caring for people

Taking risks, curating diversity, sharing openly, making quickly and building community is only possible if people feel cared for. It is the role of the Producer to host Sandbox participants well. People should feel that their ideas and aspirations are listened to and taken seriously, that their concerns are considered and that their story is told well. The people are always more important than the projects or products.



Photo Credit: Max McClure

# Essentials

Watershed's method for running a Sandbox programme has been to assemble the right combination of conditions, resources and talents. Before you run a Sandbox, make sure that you get these elements in place.



# Essentials

"It's like being in the middle of something special, you can feel lots of ideas bubbling together in a kind of mixing jar of wonderful things that are fermenting and taking shape."

Sandbox participant

## Theme

Sandbox works best when it commissions projects around a theme, delivering collective learning and a sense of shared endeavour. Watershed has chosen themes where digital disruption is enabling creative and commercial opportunity but there a lack of innovation from established industry.

A good Sandbox brief takes a positive but challenging position in the world and will have been shared and checked widely (by potential participants and industry advisers). Sandbox producers should not pre-imagine what exactly will be made, but should have developed knowledge and taste around the theme as well as a few ideas about the things that don't excite them/have already been done.

## Talent

All commissioning schemes are only as good as the people that participate. To make a contribution to the sector you must be able to draw on a wide range of talent and be confident that you are well placed to bring old and new expertise together. In order to achieve the best results, a Sandbox should proactively curate a diverse mix of people and projects (see Sandbox Values); artists, technologists, researchers, established companies, entrepreneurs etc.

Fundamental to supporting talented people is the care and respect you show for them and their future potential. Some practical ways this is demonstrated is by contracting fairly, paying promptly and ensuring they have the unfettered ability to exploit their ideas after the programme is over (for us this means any IP created through the project belongs entirely to them - see template contract).

# Essentials

## Industry Engagement

A Sandbox benefits from having a group of relevant Industry Advisors who champion, critique and connect the projects throughout the process. This group support the commissioning process, sitting on interview panels and/or offering feedback on applications. They also attend workshops to help guide, steer, provoke and question the cohort and advise projects individually where appropriate/of interest. Advisers get a lot out of working alongside the research and development process, learning about new approaches and ideas whilst building relationships with emerging talent.

**“What’s most impressed me is the quality of the projects. I’ve been blown away by how far reaching the projects are. The leap in all the projects from when I last saw them to now. And the nature of the ideas – how well formed they are, how far they’ve travelled. I expected things to be less concrete. That’s been really impressive.”**

Sandbox Advisor

## Space

Sandbox meetings, socials, events and workshops bring people together in a physical space. Therefore a flexible, easy to reach, welcoming location is a fundamental requirement.

Our research shows that spaces also have symbolic value. Operating as a ‘third space’ outside of the cohort’s normal place of work, this alternative physical environment allows participants to step out of their usual practice, institutional cultures, hierarchies and assumptions and carve out time and room for experimentation. The Sandbox space is a place where the rules are a bit different, where they can experiment and where everyone is equal.

## Funding

Sandbox supports its participants financially, enabling them to carve out space for research and development. Our model offers a commission of £10k per company to engage in the three month period of research and development. It is expected that this is the beginning of a journey, that this funding is for prototyping and that failing fast (and learning) is as legitimate as being commercially viable. Funding agreements are kept simple with full engagement in the programme the only requirement. In this way money is kept at the margins of the creative process.

In considering sources of finance for a Sandbox scheme, we have been careful to protect the space we are creating for people to make mistakes, so have avoided funding that may (accidentally or purposefully) feel like a delivery contract or client relationship.

# Producer's Guide

The Producer's Guide offers further insight into how to orchestrate a Sandbox.





# Producer's Guide

The Sandbox Producer translates, facilitates, challenges and cares for the project teams in order to yield greater results for all participants.

**A Producer makes things happen; they sit between the creative process and the operational process, orchestrating ideas, resources, people and personalities to make sense of a brilliantly messy world.**

They should be brave and proactive, willing to take responsibility and able to share, reflect and shape an overarching vision. In a Sandbox, the Producer has an intimate relationship to the projects but is acting across the programme, the cohort and the community as a whole.

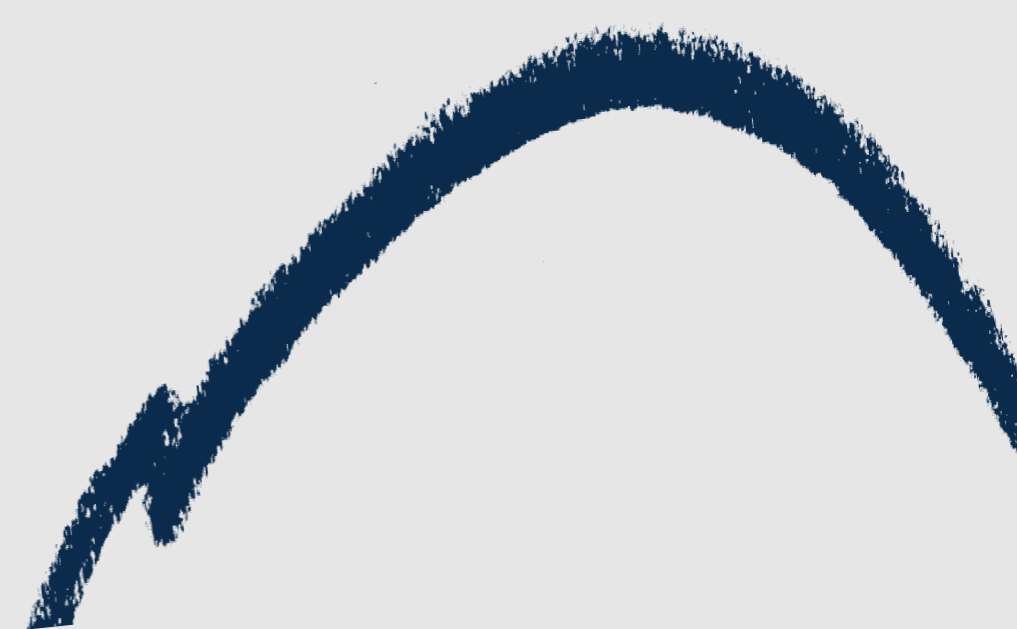
This guide is written from our experience of running Watershed Sandboxes, you may wish to follow it, borrow from it, change it or ignore it.

**Around the middle of a Sandbox the pressure often builds, participants' energy dips and it can begin to feel like everything is going wrong. The producer's role is massively important in this moment. By stepping in and getting everyone's worries out on the table, we can realign expectations, lift spirits and help to get projects back on track.**

**Victoria Tillotson,  
Sandbox Producer**

**Producing Sandbox is about energy; injecting it, directing it, sustaining it and getting out of its way. Sometimes you feel like a one person spark plug, which is a tricky role but an electrifying one.**

**Jo Lansdowne,  
Sandbox Producer**



# Producer's Guide

## Making a Sandbox Project

**You support potential participants to understand whether their project is right for Sandbox and then work with projects in a one-to-one way to get the most out of the process.**

### Commissioning

Sandbox works well for people and companies that have an idea that they really, really want to explore. This idea should be novel and risky but with a sense of how it might fit in the world; what it might offer an audience and how it is different from existing products. The process will challenge their ideas and so they should be the kind of people that find that stimulating and are excited by engaging with other people's ideas in return. It is designed for small companies but it is the beginning of a journey which they will need to have some capacity to continue with.

### Contracting

Small companies working on research and development projects need lightweight contracts that are clear, coherent and which don't try to tie down details of a project that is liable to change. They need payment terms which reflect the scale of company and their ability to cash flow projects, the fact that some purchases will be unpredictable and unusual and that equipment bought will probably be hacked apart. They need Intellectual Property terms which allow the results of the project to be exploited (for us this means any IP created through the project belongs to them - we have example terms available on request) but do not assume what that IP might be before the R&D has begun. Contracts should be put in place quickly so that everyone can start work.

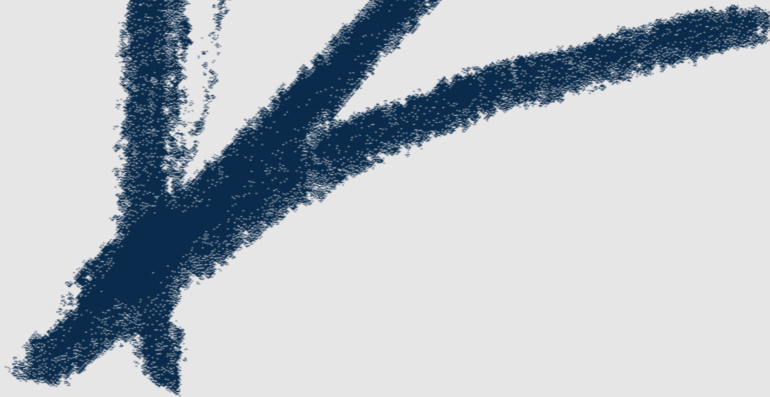
### Iterative prototyping and testing

The Sandbox programme is designed as a framework within which teams are developing prototypes through an iterative design process. They should be encouraged to make, using simple materials to mock up ideas, and test as early as possible. The experience of building, sharing and getting user feedback will help them to refine and improve their concept (and hopefully avoid expensive mistakes). Being supported to work in this way pushes participants to learn as much as possible about their product during the production period, positioning them well for the next stage.

### One-to-One meetings

Each project team has regular meetings to share progress with the Producer and a Business Advisor acting as a critical friend (or their 'commercial conscience'). In these conversations, teams will share what decisions they have made since last meeting, what questions or concerns they are grappling with and what they are planning to do next. The Business Advisor will, over time, ask the teams to consider key elements of business planning but in general will encourage participants to reflect on the potential commercial implications of choices that they make now and to build in simple market testing activities as they go. The Producer is there to participate in the creative and practical development of the project, they try to identify what specific support may be needed and connect the team to it. Overall, the aim of these meetings is to encourage teams to take the path of greatest reward, through cheering and challenging them at every stage.

# Producer's Guide



## Programming Events

**You take the lead in programming the events throughout the Sandbox, bringing in others to help facilitate, give talks, chair discussions etc as you go.**

## Ideas Lab

This is the focus point for everyone who is interested in the theme to come together and share ideas. This takes place soon after the Sandbox programme is announced and before the application deadline. The intention is for participants to gain an understanding of the value of a variety of skills, perspectives and sectors relevant to the theme, to potentially partner up to apply (or not), and to understand the value of working in a Sandbox process. It should be an inspiring, useful and fun day in its own right with an open programme and nice food and drink.

Participants come from a range of backgrounds which the Producer takes an active role in curating before the event and brokering collaborations between afterwards. Sandbox is not right for everyone and conversations in and around the Ideas Labs allow this to be explored and for alternative routes to be identified.

## Sandbox Workshops

The cohort of projects are brought together each month throughout the production process to share and celebrate their progress, discuss any new challenges and insights, and learn skills that will help them in their work. They are an obligatory part of the process for participants. Sometimes this learning comes from outside 'experts' and sometimes it comes from within the cohort and includes both inspiration and practical support. The Industry Advisors are also invited to attend

the workshops, either to deliver specific sessions or, more often, acting as critical friends to the participants. It is the Producer's role to notice what projects may need at different stages and to make those connections - to each other, to the advisors, or to other expertise. Workshops may address areas such as storytelling, user experience, PR or business development and always include a drink together at the end of the day.

The Producer has an overview of the projects and so is able to make judgements about what they need even when they may not recognise it themselves. Participants often don't understand the value of time spent with the cohort until after Sandbox ends so, while this should be balanced with time spent in teams, it is important to programme confidently in order to engender that sense of collective enquiry among projects.

## Showcase

The prototypes are shared with an audience of interested people, bringing together the networks of all participants, the producing team and the Industry Advisors. The project films (see Telling the Sandbox Story) are screened and people have the opportunity to play with the prototypes and meet the teams. This is an important focal point for the projects, it is a work in progress show and the research and development stage of the projects should be made clear. However, the public nature of the event and the opportunity to further test, promote and present creates its own momentum. The Showcase should be appropriate to the theme and may run alongside or within a relevant larger event, festival or season.

# Producer's Guide

## Telling the Sandbox Story

**You hold the story of a Sandbox, working with a professional PR company. You will take an editorial role in sharing the insights of the cohort more widely, and by equipping the extended network to do the same.**

## Blogging

Each of the projects are required to blog on a fortnightly basis throughout the production process. This is a way to share their research and development, generating interest in the work and helping them to crystallize their own thinking. The Producer blogs regularly too, drawing together key insights that emerge across the projects into a digest which makes it easy for an audience to follow the Sandbox as a whole. In this way the contribution that the projects make to the theme begins to be codified and amplified.

## Project films

A short film of each project is commissioned by the Producer, and is shot towards the end of the production process. This tells the story of the team's relationship, the questions that they have been exploring, promotes the prototype and suggests possible futures. This should be a useful tool for the project team to move into their next stage.

## Events and articles

The PR company should develop a thorough knowledge of the Sandbox projects in order to place stories and attract press attention. Team members, the Producer and the Industry Advisors might all be asked to write articles and speak at events about the work happening within the programme. The opportunity for this is increased because the cohort and community around them all bring their relationships and contacts to the conversation.



Photo Credit: Top: Watershed  
Middle: Paul Blakemore  
Bottom: James Richards



# Producer's Guide

## Relationships and Rhythm

**Supporting Sandbox participants means that, as a Producer, you are asked to both care for and champion participants, while also challenging and pushing them. This is a tricky balance and one which each Producer finds their own approach to. There are a number of factors to consider.**

### Relationships

The relationships in Sandbox need attention throughout, as if participants don't feel secure in them their ability to be playful and take risks is compromised. Sandbox projects often bring together new teams of people, or find that established teams are stretched by working in a new way. Sometimes the Producer will need to get involved with resolving conflict, easing tension or suggesting alternative ways of structuring work, sometimes you may just need to give them space. You may need to ensure that the right people in the company are enthused about the project and understand its experimental nature. This is about people, but the practicalities (fair contracts, prompt payments, an evenly shared workload, one person not always having to travel for meetings etc) help set the foundations.

### Pacing

Sandbox is quick and intense. It is designed that way to make it feasible for small companies and to push people to make, test and iterate an idea with energy and momentum. At times the Sandbox schedule will feel at odds with the team's individual development process and sharing progress at Workshops and in testing sessions might be daunting and frustrating. There is an emotional rhythm to Sandbox, and most teams go through a stage of feeling anxious and deflated. They may be reassured by you recognising that stage as a common one, helping them to plan their way through it and by celebrating what they have achieved so far.

### Ongoing support

When Sandbox finishes, projects will face decisions about what they do next. They may have a brilliant prototype that they are not fully equipped to take forward (it was a risky, novel idea after all) or a proof of concept that they aren't excited about. The conversation doesn't end when the Sandbox does, projects will want you to advise on opportunities, support funding bids, listen to their worries, feedback on pitches, test new versions, celebrate their successes and promote crowdfunding campaigns. That's when the fun really starts.



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# WATERSHED

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