BIG SPACESHIP®

Our Manual

FIRST EDITION

OUR MANUAL

A Big Spaceship book
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1. Digital insanity. 2. Farming - Technology and brainpower.
3. Brooklyn.

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’SUP

Big Spaceship is different. The weirdness makes it special, but it can be a bit jarring if you’re used to another way of working. We wrote this manual to give you everything you need to survive and thrive here, whether on day one or day one thousand.

This book won’t provide details about your 401(k), show you how to access the internal server, or help you set up your email account. It will help you begin to understand our values and the way we make decisions as a team and as a company.

Our manual belongs to you. Read it. Share it. Change it. Keep it close when you swim into the deep water.

THE 4 PRINCIPLES

1. TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER

2. COLLABORATE

3. PRODUCE AMAZING WORK

4. SPEAK UP

SECTION ONE

WE ARE HUMANS

We act like humans, we talk like humans, and we think like humans. And we call out anyone who does the opposite.

YOU ARE NOT HERE BY ACCIDENT

We hired you for a reason. There's no need to prove yourself or worry about "fitting in." You're here. You made it. You get it. Let your work do the convincing.

WE HIRE DIFFERENTLY

Most companies operate under the premise that employees should be replaceable like parts of an assembly line. We choose our people more carefully. We bring them in if we think they're a good fit, regardless of whether we have work for them right away.

What that means: You are more than your title. Bring yourself (rough edges and all) to work each day, not your "producer" or "designer" costume.

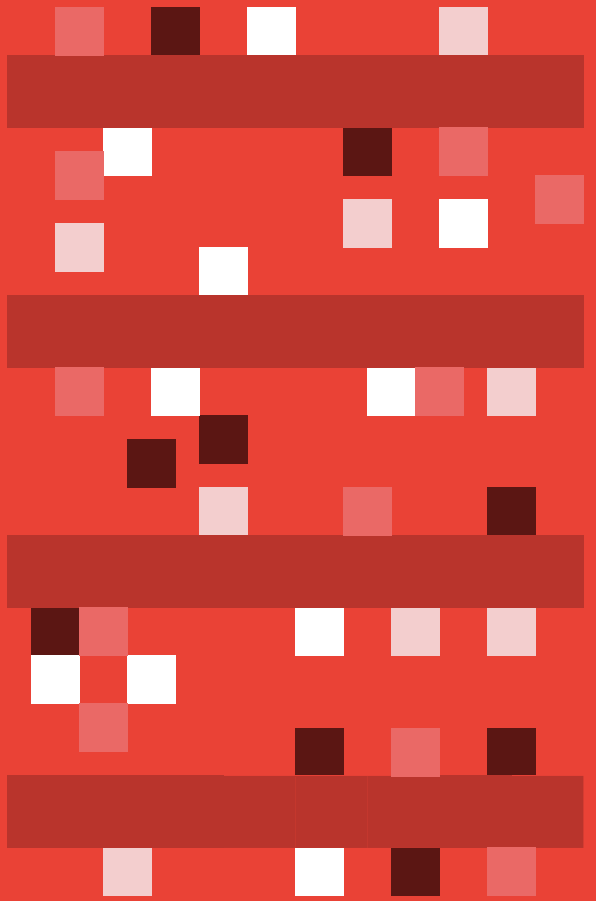
GET AUTONOMOUS

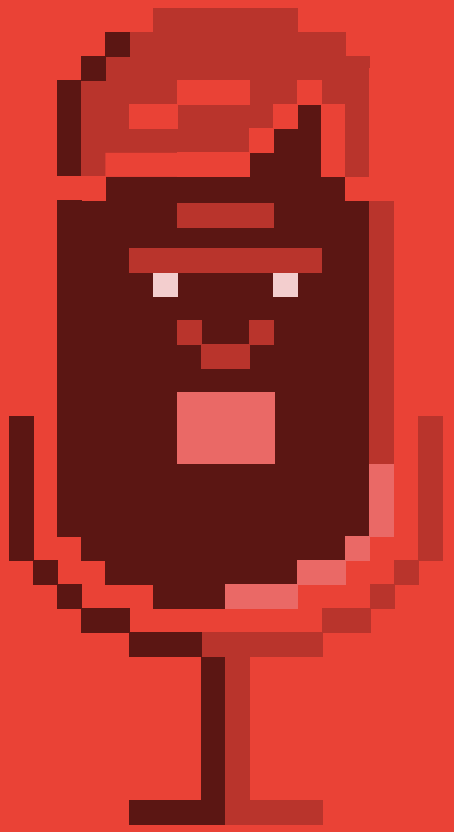
You're given an incredible amount of freedom and autonomy at Big Spaceship. That goes for everyone – from interns on up. It's up to you to figure out how to approach a problem. No one is going to make you do it their way. We know that sounds awesome, but here's the rub: With freedom comes a ton of ownership and responsibility.

Life is easy when someone is telling you what to do. It's also boring, and it prevents you from being invested in what you're doing. Since you control your own destiny here, you'll likely be more emotional about your work. We believe that's better than the alternative. Can you imagine coming to work each day and not caring?
We can't.

WORK TOGETHER

Our flat structure calls for it by necessity. Being a leader may feel unnatural at first, but we expect everyone to step up and own part of the project. It's kind of like playing basketball: When someone passes you the ball, you're in charge of what to do with it next.





TALK LIKE A HUMAN

There's a lot of bad work out there. One of the culprits is the way we talk to each other. In an industry that requires a ton of communication between clients, agencies and vendors, it's important not to let acronyms, "proprietary processes," and buzzwords lead to confusion and time lost.

HERE'S WHAT WE MEAN:

- Instead of saying "leverage," say "use."
- Instead of saying "action item," say "to do."
- Instead of saying "empowering consumers," just go home and try again in the morning.

TO AVOID ROBOT SPEAK, FOLLOW THESE THREE SIMPLE RULES:

1. PRETEND YOU'RE TALKING TO YOUR MOM.

Your mom doesn't know what "CPG" or "propagation planning" mean. And it's not because she's not a smart lady. She's just not entrenched in industry jargon.

2. DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK.

Sometimes you need to stop and ask the room to define what exactly "responsive design" or "social business" means to them. It's OK.

3. GET ON THE SAME PAGE.

Sometimes the words don't matter as long as everyone's speaking the same language. Try to acknowledge when words are getting in the way and do something about it.

THINGS YOU SHOULD SAY

- "Why are we doing it this way?"
- "Is there a better alternative?"
- "_____ worked really well last time. Can we do it even better on this project?"
- "Let's get a drink and discuss it."
- "Foos?"

THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T SAY

- "It is what it is." No, it's not. It is what you make it.
- "That's not my job." If you ever hear someone say this, start flipping desks. It's all your job.
- "Who cares?" Well, we do.

YOU'RE MORE THAN YOUR TITLE

Most workplaces (intentionally or not) train people out of normal human behaviors. They want you to be predictable. They want you to be replaceable. They don't want you to challenge the status quo.

But humans don't work that way. Humans are unpredictable. You can't replace one person with another the same way you swap tires on a car. Workplaces that try to control human nature become miserable fast.

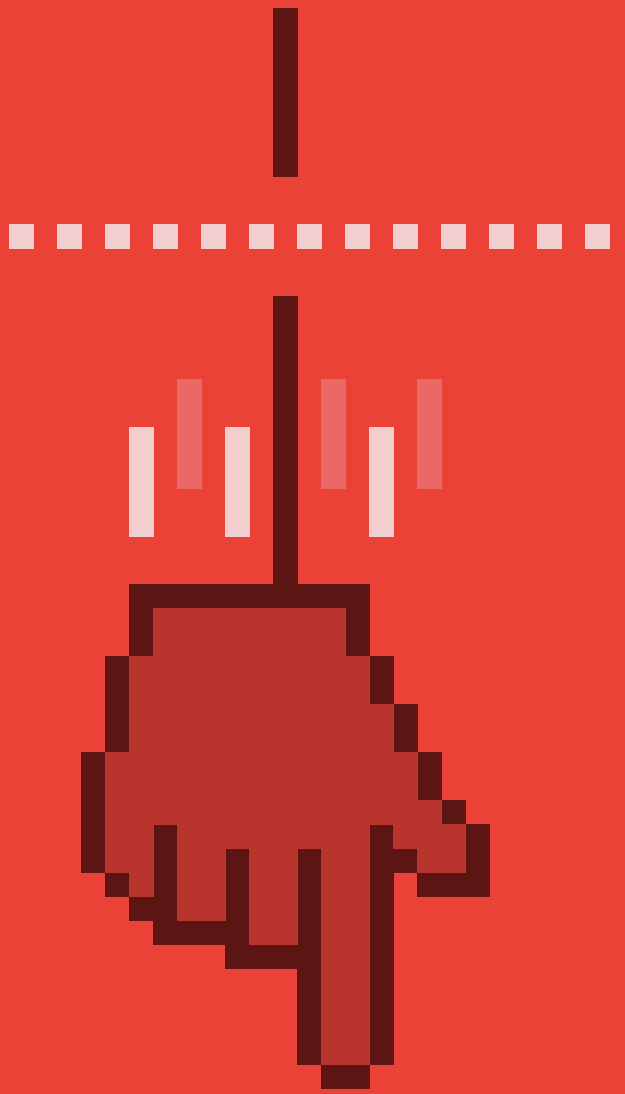
People who talk about themselves in terms of their title freak us out: "I'm a producer, so I do things like this." No. You're a person first and a producer second. Show your true colors.

EVERYONE IS CREATIVE

But nobody is *a creative*. Creativity is a quality, not a title. So don't ever say, "I'm not creative." We will find the creativity inside you and drag it out, kicking and screaming.

We don't put our energy into questions like, "Whose name goes on the award entry?" Instead, we ask questions like, "Is this project right for us?" and "How can we do something unique and innovative that works for the business[1]?"

[1] http://spcshp.it/zx



NOBODY'S GONNA HOLD YOUR HAND

This is a busy place, and you'll often be on your own to figure things out. Don't be afraid to ask for help, but don't rely on others to hold your hand.

You might be tempted to say something such as, "It would be nice if someone would organize the [server, kitchen, furniture]." At Big Spaceship, you are that someone. If you want to update, change, or fix something, go for it. Seriously. Every awesome thing you see is like that because someone like you decided to do it.

HUMAN TRUTHS

TRUTH #1: Humans are not perfect.
Don't be afraid to fail. And when you do, you might as well fail spectacularly. This is how we grow and learn.

TRUTH #2: Humans have voices.
Yours is as valuable as anyone else's. Use it. Singing out loud is encouraged and it happens often.

TRUTH #3: Humans are unique.
Do you love Norwegian death metal? Do you prefer your desk covered with sunflowers? There's no need to hide it. Be yourself. That's how you'll fit in here.

WE HAVE FIVE DISCIPLINES

- **DESIGN**
- **TECHNOLOGY**
- **STRATEGY**
- **PRODUCTION**
- **ACCOUNT**

We tried to write a definition for each one, but we couldn't do it. Our disciplines aren't slots into which we can drop an identical replacement. All we know is that if you put them together, amazing shit happens. If you want to know more about what someone does, just ask 'em.

HUMANS ARE NOT "RESOURCES"

Human resources. What an awful phrase. We don't have an HR department. New hires are interviewed by the people who will actually be working with them. This ensures that we're hiring for the right team and the right reasons.

So get ready to care a lot about the people you work with.

SECTION TWO

WE WORK TOGETHER

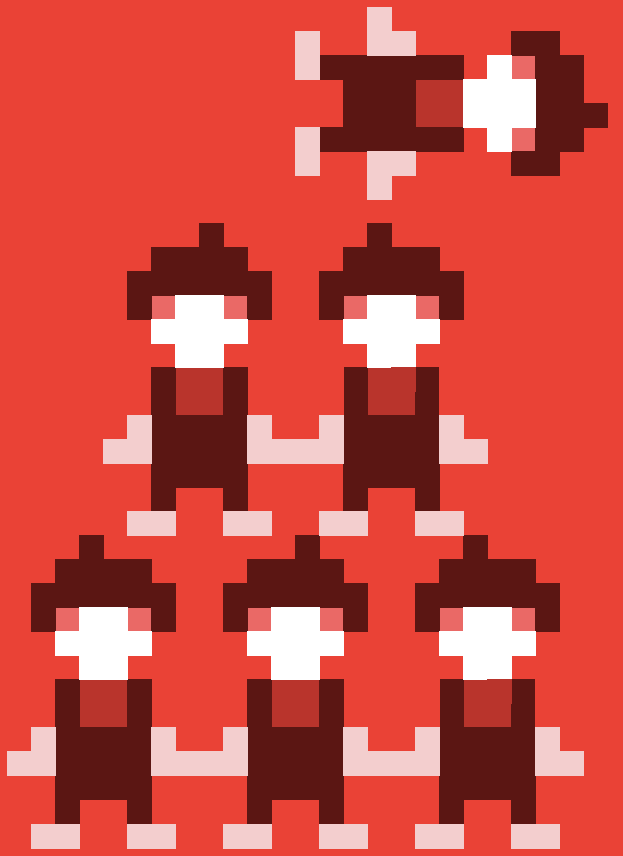
We insist on working collaboratively. No rockstars. No departments. The whole team owns the whole project, together.

WE AREN'T BIG ON HIERARCHY

We don't have an internal "org chart." The reason is that a traditional hierarchy forms a bottleneck: One person has to ask someone else's permission to do something, and then that person has to ask someone else's permission, and so on. The whole process is just a waste of time and it prevents people from building things quickly.

You have mentors and collaborators, not commanders. In other words, you may have a boss, but you'll never get bossed around.

And we all make things here. If you've come to climb a ladder, you're in the wrong place. Those who show up and tell other people what to do don't last long.



PLAY IS IMPORTANT

When you walk through our doors, you enter an environment where work and play often intertwine. But there's a difference between being childish and child-like. We are adults. But that doesn't mean we can't have fun.

There's no reason to pretend you're busy. You don't need to hide the video you're watching if someone walks by your desk. No one is monitoring the websites you look at. We aren't going to report you for taking a long lunch. Just do great work.

WE DESIGN FOR PEOPLE, NOT AT THEM

We make things for people. Not for consumers. We always ask ourselves (and our clients), "Would I want to use this?"

SHOW DON'T TELL

This is something we tell our clients all the time, and it's important that we live by these words as well. A better way to put it might be: *Don't talk about it, do it.*

TAKE CARE OF YOUR CREW

Much of the work we do is technical. But there's another skill we all need to have: the interpersonal kind. It isn't optional. Some people like to pretend that the technical work is all that matters. They're wrong. This isn't Rambo[2]; there are no teams of one here.

We know that sometimes it can be difficult to work with others. Our solution is simple: Get to know everyone. No one is just a designer or a strategist. They are people with many dimensions. Understand who they are and it'll be much easier. You are part of a team, and the health and harmony of your team is part of your job.

[2] http://spcshp.it/zu

WE ARE SMALL BY DESIGN

Every decision about how to structure a company has some upsides and some downsides. When you encounter something that's a little frustrating about how we work, remember that it's likely the result of something else about this place that you love.

We've kept our company small for more than 13 years, which allows us all to sit in the same room and know each other intimately. It also means we've had to sacrifice the economies of scale that come with hundreds or thousands of employees. Sometimes things break or get dirty. We don't have a maintenance department, so it's up to you.

DON'T MAKE A 70-PERSON COMPANY FEEL LIKE 700

We're glad we don't work at a place where the tech team is in another city. Try not to over-formalize communication. There's no need to send an email to the person sitting one row away.

WE ALL SIT TOGETHER

At some companies, they make you go to a different floor (or building) to talk to someone outside of your team. That terrifies us. And it's why we have an open floor plan.

You're surrounded by smart people from every discipline. Talk to them. Learn from them.

TAKE CARE OF THE SPACE

We love our digs out here in Brooklyn. We've got dogs scrambling around, ping pong balls mid-flight, and more couches and bean bags than a sixth-grade sleepover. We treat this place like a second home, and we take care of it accordingly.

AESTHETICS ARE IMPORTANT

If you make something that doesn't look good or isn't usable, you're going to get called out on it. Don't worry—this is how we get better. We are ruthless about this, and soon you will be too.

Our code should be clean. Our designs should be flawless. Our presentations should be elegant. Details are everything. Find one and make it awesome.

ALL ARE WELCOME

We've designed our space for us, not to impress our guests. There's no imported jellyfish aquarium in the lobby. We don't have a doorman and we like it that way. Anyone is allowed anywhere, anytime. Make yourself at home.

If someone drops by, they're going to see us working. That means it might be a bit messy. But that's the real us.

THE KITCHEN

The kitchen is stocked with flatware, dishes, snacks, drinks, condiments, and fruit. Anything not labeled for personal use is fair game. Feel free to use any of the items available, just be respectful of the crew and remember to put dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

HOW TO USE THE DISHWASHER:

1. Open it.
2. Insert item in a way that makes sense.
3. Close it.
4. ...No, wait. That's it.

WE ARE ALL STUDENTS; WE ARE ALL TEACHERS

This has nothing to do with seniority. We all snatch the pebble from each other's hand. The idea of student becoming teacher and teacher becoming student is one of the greatest aspects of what we do. We share and learn from each other, daily.

And while we don't expect you to hold anyone's hand, we encourage you to be a mentor as much as possible. Maybe you'll learn something too.

BE RESPECTFUL, BUT DON'T BE DELICATE

We've found that the best creative breakthroughs happen when people can have a good, passionate argument about an idea, not when they spend weeks tiptoeing around each other. Don't be afraid to speak your mind. Just be honest and respectful.

OUR CLIENTS ARE PART OF THE TEAM

Just like we pay our dentist, our clients pay us to do the things they can't do by themselves. Let's do them well. It won't always be fun and games when it comes to these relationships, but we should always work with our clients, not for them, and definitely not against them. They need us and we need them.

In fact, it's best to avoid using the word "client" whenever possible. Use their real names. It'll remind you that we're all just human beings trying to do good work.

TAKE YOUR CLIENT BEYOND THEIR COMFORT ZONE

A FEW THINGS WE FREQUENTLY HEAR:

- "We didn't expect that at all."
- "That seems risky."
- "That's aggressive."

No one gets in trouble for pushing the limit. It's your job. It's the reason people look at our work and say, "That's the kind of work I want to do."

WE ARE PROFESSIONALS

But we hate professionalism. Professional means handling your business with respect. Professionalism is when you're so buttoned-up that you stop being yourself. It sands all the edges off your personality.

AVOID MEETINGS AT ALL COST

Meetings are the scourge of the modern workplace. A two-hour meeting with six people doesn't waste two hours. It wastes twelve hours.

If all else fails and you absolutely must have a meeting, clearly state the purpose up front. If you can't think of one, you probably don't need to have it. And if you ever—EVER—find yourself in a meeting about a meeting, lace up them kicks and start running.

We get paid to make stuff, not to talk about making stuff.

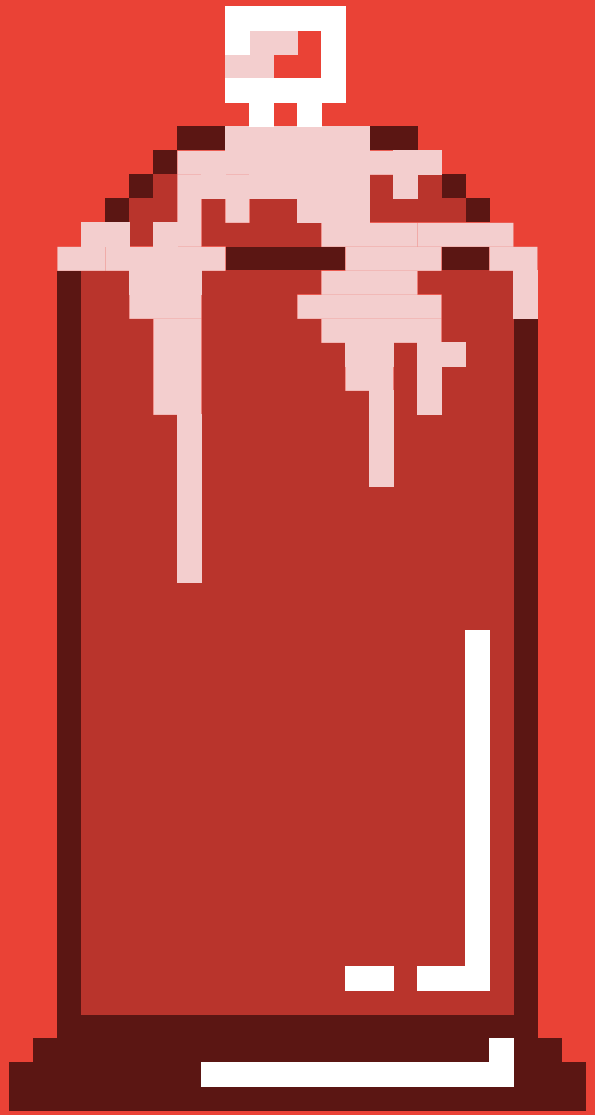
A NOTE ON MUSIC

The one thing we love as much as design is music. That's why we have an anonymous, crowd-sourced office playlist. It's rad.

A FEW GROUND RULES:

- Don't skip songs. Not cool, man.
- Don't kill the vibe. If it's reggae morning, don't make it 80's night.
- No more than a dozen or so songs at once.

Most importantly, participate. Tastes vary widely in this crew, so don't be shy about playing anything you're in the mood for.



WRITE ON THE WALLS

Open spaces mean real-time conversations and solutions. That's why we turned our walls into whiteboards. We sketch out our thoughts as they occur and we share them with the crew. We prefer to work this way: openly and transparently.

WE ARE A QUIET BUNCH

Let's not forget that we're digital natives here, and many of us are stuck nose-deep in code or are simply quiet folks. Once someone's settled in and working, they often don't break their gaze to greet you as you pass by. They're not being rude, they're just plugged in.

NOISE

According to Science[3], the best noise level for a creative workspace is somewhere around that of a vacuum cleaner. Hence, tunes. But if you need some quiet time, don't feel guilty about finding a hideout or popping on some headphones.

Sometimes, you need quiet not for your own peace of mind, but because we have a guest who doesn't want to walk into a meeting and have to shout over the sounds of Wu Tang Clan.

[3] http://spcshp.it/zt

PANISHHH™

Panishhh™ is a physical quiet time indicator we built during one of our hackdays. Think of it like a silent alarm. Once triggered (either online or via the button underneath the front desk), the Panishhh™ quiet light will ignite and you'll know it's time to shhh.

The power belongs to you. If you need some quiet for a conference call or a meeting with a client: don't panic, Panishhh™.

DOGS: WE HAVE THEM

STUDIES HAVE SHOWN:

- When dogs are around, most people feel relaxed and happy[4].
- Being in the presence of a pet, for instance in the workplace, lowers blood pressure and cortisol (stress) levels while heightening endorphins and oxytocin, the hormone linked to maternal bonding.
- It's healthy for a dog to be with its owner throughout the day.

THINGS TO KNOW:

- Dogs will be dogs. Most of them aren't afraid to steal your sandwich, so keep food away from the edge of your desk.
- It's not unheard of for a dog to wander into a meeting and sit on your client's lap.
- In the winter the dogs will wear sweaters. Deal with it.

[4] http://spcshp.it/zr

INTERNAL PROJECTS

Some of our favorite things we've ever made weren't client work at all. One of us had an idea, and they made it real. Taco Finder™. Corpsify™. The Most Awesomest Thing Ever™. In fact, this very manual began as an internal project when a few of us just decided that it needed to exist.

Some companies assign a number for how much time you're allowed to spend on side projects. We know if it matters to you, you'll make it happen.

OUR BLOG

We have an internal blog called Area51. It will become your new best friend.

WEAR A HELMET

We encourage you to get some fresh air and exercise by biking to work, and we've got a nice safe spot to park your wheels. Should you need a quick commute to the dentist, the crew has been known to lend out a ride. Just ask.

A NOTE ON INTERNS

The title "intern" isn't always a glamorous one, but at Big Spaceship it's one of the best jobs you can have. Interns get to make all the fun mistakes.

We value our interns as contributors, not as taskrabbits. We give them real work and real responsibility – and we never send them on a coffee run. They're on the team to help make things and solve problems. Show them the same respect you'd give anyone else. Besides, many of our senior employees started off here as interns.

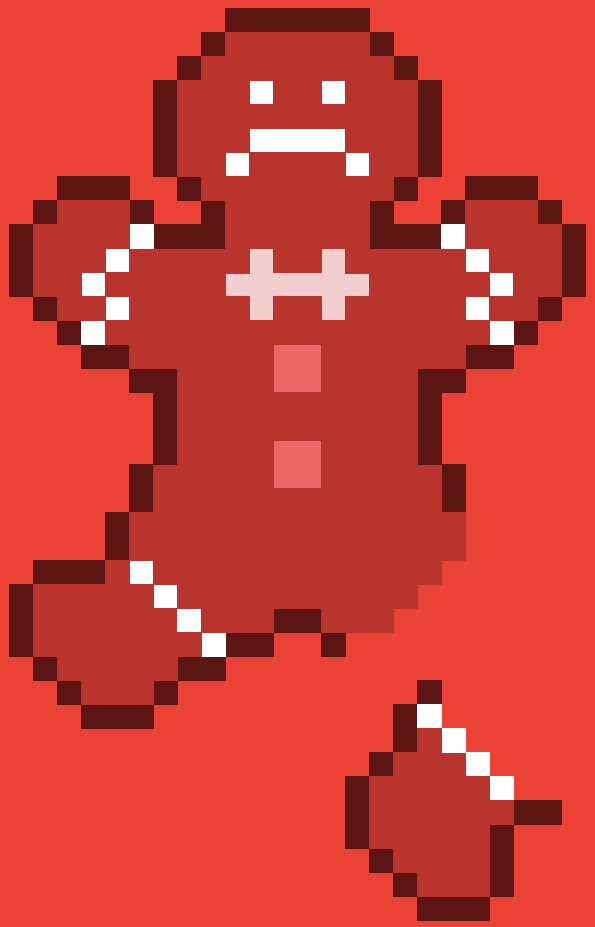
WEEKENDS

Our space belongs to all of us. You're welcome to come by on the weekend. Just be responsible. Lock the doors. Turn off the lights. Take care of the environment, k?

SECTION THREE

WE CHANGE

Nothing is sacred. From our habits to our rituals to our environment. Change is a natural part of human life, and we prefer to embrace it.



NO COOKIE CUTTERS

Every project we make is 100 percent unique, from the team to the discovery process to the design. We're not about filling in blanks on templates with "best practices."

It's like baking bread. You can tell when a loaf of bread was made with love and when it was mass-produced. And it's not about the skill of the baker. It's about the attitude.

GET OUT OF YOUR SEAT

It's unhealthy to stay seated in the same position for eight hours. It's also terrible for productivity. You aren't chained to your desk. Move around. Grab some coffee. Play fetch with a dog. Meditate. Call your parents. Make a sandwich. Play foosball. Go for a walk. Draw on the walls. Climb a tree. Do yoga. Hit the gym. Get a haircut. Buy some new shoes. Sing a song. Get a snack. Do your laundry. Go birdwatching. Dance. Try LARPing. Write a poem. Learn to juggle. Draw a picture.

HACKDAY

The world was made to be hacked, and our hackday is one of the most beloved Big Spaceship traditions. Every so often, we pause all our usual work and break into small teams. Then we spend all day (and all night) creating something that makes the world a better place. The next morning, everyone presents what they've made. It's something you'll never forget.

SHOW & TELL

We frequently invite interesting people from a variety of backgrounds to share their experience with us. These are extraordinary opportunities.

PHOTO MASHUPS

When you join the 'ship, you'll have your official headshot taken. Shortly after that, the fun begins. Are you a petite female with fair skin? Now you have a beard. Are you proud to have 20/20 vision? Now you have glasses...and someone else's nose.

If everyone around you is tearing up with laughter, you should probably check Area51. Odds are the new mashups have been posted.

CLAPPING

Sometimes we erupt in spontaneous applause[5], for no reason at all. Go ahead, join in.

[5] http://spcshp.it/zv

WE ARE BROOKLYN

We chose to be in Brooklyn instead of Manhattan for a reason. Brooklyn is the blue-collar complement to Manhattan's white-shoe gimmickry. Brooklyn's scrappy ethos defines us. We use plain talk. We get our hands dirty. We don't play by the rules. Like Brooklyn, we're proud to be the underdog.

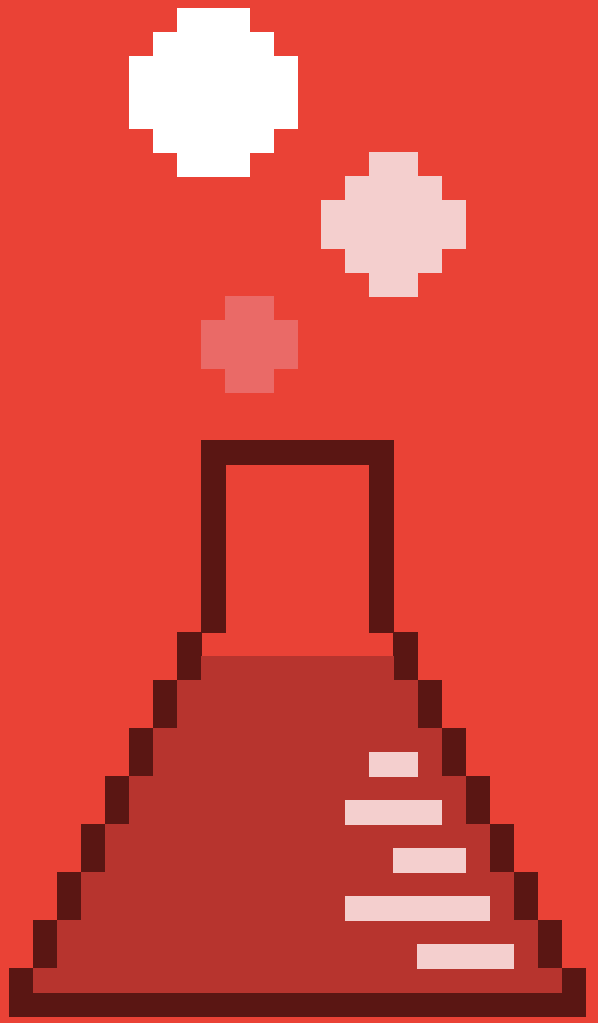
TEAR DOWN THE WALLS

If you don't like something, change it. That goes for anything. Seriously. We used to have a giant wall running through the middle of the shop. It blocked all the beautiful Brooklyn light from outside. A few folks put together a proposal to tear down the wall, and a few weeks later, we did. Let there be light.

SOCIALIZING

We're friends and coworkers here. We believe that it's much easier to work with someone once you get to know them on a personal level. We have many social rituals and they top the list of our favorite things about Big Spaceship.

Every tradition at Big Spaceship was started by someone like you. Whiskey Club. The foosball tournament. Karaoke. Coney Island. Street dice. Ski trip. Game night. Show & Tell. Bagel Friday. Each one exists because someone just decided to do it. Start your own ritual.



AN ONGOING EXPERIMENT

This place is constantly changing. And change is something we humans resist more than anything else. It's nobody's fault; it's just a biological remnant from our caveman days.

Yet as much as we resist change, it's also how we grow and improve. It's the sign of a healthy company. And it's why each team here has a mix of new and seasoned folks. With new blood comes new thinking – and so we continue the ongoing experiment that is Big Spaceship.

SECTION FOUR

FAQ

You've got questions. We've got answers.

WHY DID SOMEONE THROW A PING PONG BALL AT ME?

It's just their way of showing affection.

IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYONE IS READING EACH OTHER'S MINDS. HOW DO I DO THAT?

We use IM a lot. You'll see.

WHY DON'T WE HAVE A CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER?

You already fill that role. If you're not innovating, you're not doing your job.

THAT DOG LOOKS HUNGRY—CAN I FEED IT?

No. Unless it's yours. Then maybe.

IS THIS AN ADVERTISING AGENCY?

It depends on how you define 'advertising.' If you mean TV commercials, then no. If you mean other things that brands make to demonstrate their value, then maybe. Some of the things we make get covered by trade publications with "advertising" in the title.

At the end of the day, who cares?

A magazine once called us "a crack team of digital inventors." We thought that had a nice ring to it.

IS THIS A 'DIGITAL' AGENCY?

People used the word "digital" as a prefix in the days before digital devices pervaded every part of our lives. We're beyond that now and saying "digital" is something our grandparents do. We solve business problems, and because the things people use are likely digital, the solution will likely be digital as well.

DO I NEED TO CLEAN THE KITCHEN?

We aren't savages[6]. Every day, two different people are on duty. You'll know when you're up.

CAN I BRING MY CAT/IGUANA/ WHATEVER?

Probs.

[6] http://spcshp.it/zs

WHY'S IT CALLED BIG SPACESHIP?

spaceship.com was taken. No, seriously.

WHAT'S FAIR GAME TO EAT IN THE KITCHEN?

We get snacks delivered every Monday. If you want to keep some personal food in the kitchen, grab a marker and write your name all over it. Unmarked snacks = fair game. Have at 'em.

CAN I WRITE ON THE WALLS?

Most of 'em.

CAN I ERASE THAT WRITING ON THE WALL?

If it says "DON'T ERASE," leave it be.

DO I NEED TO SIT AT MY DESK?

Not at all. You're free to move about as your please. If you work at a desktop machine, you're going to have a hard time taking it with you. This is why we have notebooks.

CAN I TAKE A NAP?

Sure. Just get your work done too.

CAN I DECORATE MY DESK WITH SUNFLOWERS?

Yes. You are a unique snowflake and we encourage you to express yourself.

CAN I COME IN ON THE WEEKEND?

Yep. Just make sure to lock up when you leave.

I DON'T LIKE THIS SONG – CAN I SKIP IT?

Don't even think about it.

DO DOLPHINS SLEEP?

Yes, they are mammals and they sleep just like the rest of us.

IS IT COOL IF I PUT ON HEADPHONES?

Indeed, we encourage it.

WHO AM I?

You are the universe experiencing itself.

WHO CONTROLS THE MUSIC?

We all do.

CAN I GET A PACKAGE DELIVERED HERE?

Sure.

WHAT DOES DUMBO MEAN?

Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass.

CAN I WRITE SOMETHING FOR THE BLOG?

Yes. We encourage everyone to contribute.

WHERE CAN I GET A GOOD SANDWICH?

Ask the person to your left.

WHAT DO I CALL THE MARGARITA MACHINE?

Margaret, duh.

IS THIS WHOLE THING JUST A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT?

There are theories...

WHAT IS BODYSTORMING? IS IT LIKE BRAINSTORMING?

...

IS BIG SPACESHIP AN ALL AGES VENUE?

Friday afternoons get pretty intense.

WHAT IF I'M ALLERGIC TO DOGS?

How allergic[7]?

[7] http://spcshp.it/zw

MY BOYFRIEND/COUSIN/MOM/ DAD/LANDLORD IS COMING TO TOWN. CAN I BRING THEM BY?

Didn't you read the section on how everyone is welcome?

IS THIS REAL LIFE?

Is this just fantasy?

HOW DO I KNOW IF SOMEONE WANTS TO PLAY VIDEO GAMES WITH ME?

Ask 'em.

IS THIS PLACE A CULT?

Kinda.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS:

Just work hard and be nice to people. The rest will sort itself out.

BIG SPACESHIP BUCKET LIST

Want to really feel like you're a part of our band of misfits? Here's a good way to get started.

- [ ] Post on Area51.
- [ ] Choose a side: egg logs or bagels.
- [ ] Steal someone's chair. Don't get caught.
- [ ] Take a ping pong ball to the head.
- [ ] Spill something. Get a round of applause.
- [ ] Get your face mashed up.
- [ ] Sit in the Eames.
- [ ] Win The Guac-Off.
- [ ] Talk to Dave.