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IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE SAW A UNICORN. EITHER IN 50 YEARS, IN FACT.

That vision came early one morning, a Saturday, over some dippy eggs and soldiers. A splendid white beast with flowing brown mane, it was ridden to full power by a part-time princess: *Sike-Ra*.

Cut to now – tumbling to the bottom of Sydney's Martin Place, across George Street and into a 1920s building of marble and banking. It's here that Australia's most celebrated unicorns live – their lair on the sixth floor of the historical site, above the tatted-up bank branch and beyond the federal Department of Industry, Innovation and Science.

That there was once a shooting range on the building's roof (for bank employees to practise their aim in hours of leisure) prompts a smirk on entering the three-storey set-up – foam, orange-tipped Nerf gun pellets wedged into the folds of a welcoming blue-flanne couch. The presence of these 'bullets' speaks of an office of youthful play, of creativity.

It's a theme that continues as we wander past the free staff bar, Charlie's (four local

tags, inclusive of a niche cider), ping pong table and poolroom.

The latter's as lifted from an undergrad share house – the central, green-felt table surrounded by a standard selection of battered couches, complemented by a random mix of *dyed*, random, except that on closer inspection, the 12 hobble-headed dolls sitting pride of place are miniature, nodding interpretations of key company employees, including the unicorns we've come here to meet.

Into another lift – the place is labyrinthine – and we arrive at an airy main hub smacked by natural light. A nearby white wall has 'Simply written large across its length.

It's a word (albeit twisted into an adjective and correctly spelt), well used to describe the sartorial approach of the workers in view – most sporting an unofficial uniform that doesn't go far beyond boot-cut jeans or shorts, paired with blue-white company logo T-shirts. Shoes, it seems, are optional.

Men dominate the space – generally wary, often bearded,



Scott (left) wears blue cotton

Think Richard D James, minus the niche sense of cool, memorable limo and arse-shaking of Aphex Twin's defining 'Windowlicker' video. The air they work in is heavy with the tiny heat of the many machines, lightly spiced with a scent often found clinging to passionate, all-night gamers.

It's at this point we first sight our unicorns – two Sydneysiders, each sliding towards their forties – who late last year became Australia's greatest ever start-up success story.

It was in 2002 that university mates Mike Cannon-Brookes and Scott Farquhar founded Atlassian. That they did so with a \$10,000 credit card is now tech folklore.



Today, those same two guys

are worth a billion-plus each; Atlassian is valued at more than \$7bn and the company's suite of software products is used by more than 50,000 global customers, from companies including Facebook, NASA – yes, that NASA – Twitter, Tesla, eBay, Amazon, Cochlear, Virgin Media, Audi, CISCO, LinkedIn, Skyscanner... seriously, we could be here a while.

The bulk of the company's 1500 employees work out of Sydney with a few hundred spread across global offices – namely a jawst, San Francisco site, one in Austin, Texas, London and smaller spaces in Manila and Amsterdam.

In tech teams, Mike and Scott,

Australia, adds to a larger discussion about what can be achieved by the local sector; about the glaring necessity for the country to reposition itself as a viable, globally recognised and attractive tech player.

In a time of federal political chat that, when not dominated by what Pea and Tony may or may not have done with a fork in Canberra, is littered with words like 'innovation' and 'ideas', what Atlassian represents, what these two unassuming men have managed to achieve, is not only inspirational, but very important.

THEY SET UP ATTESSIAN IN 2002, FUNDING THE COMPANY WITH \$10,000 CREDIT CARD.



well, Atlassian, is what's known as a unicorn – a start-up valued at US\$1bn or more. Once little more than a desirable tech myth, there's now a growing list of largely disruptive global players – Uber, Airbnb, Snapchat, SpaceX – company that, again, highlights the achievement and positioning of this homegrown outfit.

For all the money and success, the tale of Cannon-Brookes and Farquhar runs well beyond the fact they've built a business that rests on an equal financial footing to Qantas, worth a slice more than James Packer's Crown Resorts and which easily eclipses 'Twiggy' Forrest's Resources and Coca-Cola Amatil.

The simple fact they've achieved so much, from

a hard strider," says Cannon-Brookes, a tall man who looks like you'd imagine a techie called Mike: baseball cap slung low, a soft, bearded jawline, white T-shirt and jeans. Shoes removed, he's sporting a pair of kaleidoscopic socks.

"I'd do just enough to get by," he continues, "and with natural ability, I did pretty well, though I would pick subjects that I enjoyed, so it wasn't such a problem."

He opted for two-unit maths and computing and claimed the school's technical drawing prize "a few times". It suited his proposed future path – eyeing off life as an architect. Interestingly, poetry was also a "thing".

"Yeah – I liked it, and used to write a bit of it back then. I enjoyed it more than literature, there were fewer words and it was more about meaning so you could make up all sorts of bullshit..."

The recollection sets a smile across the lightly stubbled, lithe face of Farquhar, himself in navy T-shirt and jeans (maroon sneakers, mind). He's perched next to his billionaire buddy in a nondescript glass office that really shouldn't accommodate four (the other, beyond GQ, a PR woman eagerly taking notes – or maybe she's just doodling?).

"You liked it cause you have the attention span of a goat," jobs Farquhar. "That and an ability to bullshit."

The 36-year-old came from Sydney's working-class west. An early interest in computing saw him claim a year-6 technology prize before landing at the selective James Ruse Agricultural public high school. It was geeky (his words) and he continued to dominate a subject list inclusive of maths, English, physics and chemistry.

It was in 1998 that Farquhar and Cannon-Brookes first came together – freshmen in business information technology (BIT) at the University of New South Wales. Each had been offered placement, on scholarship, ahead of completing the Higher Schools Certificate (HSC).



FOUNDING THE CANNON-BROOKES AND SCOTT FARQUHAR START-UP ATTESSIAN IN SYDNEY.



Like (left) wears olive wool/lignora felt coat, \$2995, by **Bully**; gray cotton, "Ditch Explains Slim," jumper, \$170, by **Saturdays NYC**; black cotton "Van Jones, \$380, **Acne Studios**. **Scott** wears black wool-blend black jacket, \$1299, by **Hugo Boss**; black cotton "Boozy Open Mouth" sweatshirt, \$160.

by Saturdays NYC, navy jersey shirt, \$390, by Giorgio Armani; indigo cotton "Punk Standard" jeans, \$250, by APC.

Grooming: Gavin Amsbury at Vividix Creative.



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t's December 10 of last year and Cannon-Brookes and Farquhar are riding on a sack of mixed emotion. They're also riding in the back of a stretch limo, belting towards downtown Manhattan after opening on the NASDAQ.

They're content. If tired. After ringing the bell and watching the stock launch, the day was spent in back-to-back media interviews – interest coming from here and abroad.

Lunch meant a 10-minute break and whatever pizza slice was available from a joint across the road.

Still, it was a good day – Cannon-Brookes and Farquhar confirmed billionaires and Atlassian ending the day's trade with a cool \$7.87bn evaluation, well up on forecast.

That said, there remains one small, nagging issue. For all its tacky fluoro lighting and various TV screens, the ridiculous car is lacking one key ingredient – booze.

On sighting a pokey liquor store, Farquhar, familiar with the grog runs of his uni days, instructs the driver to pull over. He heads from the car and asks the bloke behind the counter for his most expensive bottle of champagne. On eyeing it, he decides to ask for the most expensive bottle that's actually cold – a \$30 bottle of non-vintage muck, it turns out.

Consumed, it's on to dinner with family and the dozen staff – most instant millionaires – they flew in for the float.

"Look, the IPO [Initial Public Offering] hasn't changed

anything about the company, though it's obviously big for some employees; those people who've been here 10 years realised some of the value they've created," offers Cannon-Brookes, adding that he likes reading various staff letters he's received, thanking him and Farquhar for allowing them to pay off the mortgage or "have my wife stop work and pursue her art, that kind of thing".

While the pair's sloppy attire may, in fact, sport internal labels from Ermenegildo Zegna and Hugo Boss, and Cannon-Brookes last year dropped \$12m on a sprawling, inner-Sydney pile, what they've been working towards has never been about money. And it never will be.

Most billionaires love the sound of their own voice, openly rate their opinion and eagerly splash about in the personal praise thrown their way. This is not Cannon-Brookes and Farquhar. Instead, they enjoy reinvesting in the sector – tens of millions between them – raising their families (three young kids apiece), donating money and time to charitable pursuits and hanging with other two-dude start-ups trying to get ahead. This is the world in which they're comfortable – it's why you don't know their story, and why, today, they remain curious, cautious even, about allowing the 'outside' world in.

"They may live in nice houses and have some nice things, but not to the extent of others," says Scevak. "They've always lived non-billionaire lives – wealth hasn't affected them. And their real ambition is to build Australia's largest company, to build one of the world's greatest companies – something that survives them and which is around for hundreds of years. It's why they've turned down lots of acquisition offers."

The word 'inspiration' is also bandied about quite a bit.

"I certainly think that's the best thing they've done – to create this inspiring story for others, to raise their ambition, to try different things, to forge their own paths,

all with the knowledge that it's completely possible to be done from Australia, because these other two blokes have done it. Also, start-up communities are a function of how many lighthouse companies there are – because lighthouses like Atlassian provide the inspiration for more people to start companies like it; provide the journey that hundreds or thousands of employees go on."

It's sentiment backed by the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull telling GQ: "Mike and Scott should also be applauded for the active leadership role they play in the local tech sector. Their success, combined with their passion and advocacy for Australian start-ups, is helping to inspire young entrepreneurs across the country."

Beyond influence and inspiration sits investment – central to the PM's desire to drive a new techno-train that reroutes current economic maps, pulling away from 'traditional' sectors in favour of a viable future market that's only going to continue to grow.

"I think people still think of technology as this little corner of the world of nerds in a backroom tapping away," offers Scevak. "Whereas Apple's now the world's largest company."

In fact, by market share, three of the top five and four of the top 10 global companies are in technology.

"As a nation we have to be involved in that," states Cannon-Brookes. "Think about it – the majority of jobs are going to be involved in some form of technology in 20-25 years time, and if we're not creating that technology in Australia, or creating some portion of it, we're going to be buying it from overseas and it'll have a bad flow-on effects for our economy. We have to innovate and be creative."

So Australia as a recognised, future tech hub is feasible?

"There are huge opportunities for tech, biotech, infotech – though I'm not sure which one will work out," says Farquhar. "But one of the biggest problems we have at the moment is that we generate a lot of companies but

then they gravitate overseas for a variety of factors – some we can fix easily, some will take time."

Both Turnbull and Cannon-Brookes believe Australia has the resources, the latter adding that they now need to be given greater opportunity.

"Talent-wise we have great universities, we're just not quite orienting them – encouraging people and showing where they can make business in this space. If those two start coming together, there's no reason we shouldn't be able to have a vibrant technology industry – and I suppose that's what the goal is."

Conversation meanders into whether the pair ever steps back, to look upon what they've been able to achieve.

"Sometimes we don't realise just how far we've come, because your journey is different to everyone's perception of that journey," says Cannon-Brookes. He details a "company picnic" for family and friends – that is, a 3000-strong gathering filling a festival site in Sydney's Centennial Park, stacked with rides and amusements that showed up Luna Park for its age.

"You look around and are like, 'Fuck, there's a lot of people here.' I mean, day-to-day it doesn't feel like there's a thousand people in this building; day-to-day you just do what you do and we get bigger and better and are trying to constantly improve. But there are moments where it strikes you a little bit more."

To look down on what they've done also pushes towards another word regularly offered in relation to the pair – Gods. That these unassuming men were able to turn \$10,000 into \$8bn, in little over a decade, is indeed a parable of arguably celestial proportions (dare we suggest close to a man who can turn water to wine), though how does such sit with them?

"If you believe that stuff, it gets in the way of making a difference," says Farquhar. "If you think you've already made a difference then you may as well pack up and go home. Personally, I think we're just getting started." ■