

The adventures of Mortimer and his creative process

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When she finished her degree on Technical Industrial Design Engineer, she moved to London to study Design Crafts in Middlesex University, London. Her interest on visual culture has brought her deeper into graphic design and illustration, working on a number of projects for different clients. She is currently living in Valencia, where she combines graphic work for advertising projects with textile design.

Tackling a new project as a cross-discipline team has always meant an enriching experience. If the goal of the project is educational, then the result will double its interest. “*Les aventures de Mortimer i la història del cinema d’animació*” (The Adventures of Mortimer and the History of Animation) was the title of the project developed for the cultural centre Espai Rambleta, Valencia, to bring the history of animation to the general public, in an educative, fun way. This project is also one of the pieces developed within the course on Didactic Animation taught by David Heras, in the Master on Design and Illustration by the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (Polytechnic University of Valencia). It can be seen at <http://lrambleta.com/mortimer>.

KEY WORDS: ANIMATION/DIDACTICAL ILLUSTRATION/INTERACTION/ADVERTISING

The client initially asked for a piece of design or media that would allow to promote all the animation-related activities in the program of the cultural centre. It also had to be an educational tool to communicate the landmarks in the history of animation and its different influences. There were no initial restrictions with regards to format or approach. The product had to be educational, addressed to children and teenagers, while not appealing exclusively to these groups. The initial briefing was quite open and free of limitations.

The question we asked ourselves is, what can we contribute to make this project an interesting, original one? We decided to design a playful, interactive product. To that end, digital formats seemed to be the logical option, since the main segment of the target public is strongly influenced by digital technology.

Thus, we decided to develop an interactive game that would provide relevant information on animation cinema, while learning about its evolution throughout time. The game can be found in the cli-

ent’s website. However, we considered that, even though many members of the audience attending the film projections at Rambleta are familiar with the animation cycles through its website, there are other members of the audience that hardly use its website. Thus we thought that printed media, distributed in the centre itself, could be a promotional tool for the game and the website. Thus, we had to work along those two lines: the digital media would be the main element, with the printed media as a complementary element.

The next challenge was to form a team sufficiently qualified to tackle such project. The cross-discipline team would have to manage all the elements of the work: graphic, documentation and technical. To that end, the team was comprised by Gonzalo Gironés, BA in Fine Arts, Marta Tortajada and Isabel Pérez, technical engineers specialising in Industrial Design and Rubén Ballesteros, IT engineer. Such diverse profiles have been key to the project since it allowed for very different perspectives. They are enriching and they imply that vast possibilities for the final media to be produced.

Planning and studying

With the work team formed and the goal of developing the project in its entirety, the game dynamics had to be defined: what would be the game about, which its objectives and what type of interaction would the user have to develop to achieve such objectives.

The first condition that we find is that the game could not be based upon very complex interactions, since among the target audience we have young children who may not be able to understand those interactions. To solve this, we decide that dressing a character with different costumes could be a dynamic to be used. The costumes would come from key characters in the history of animation. The user would have to put together the different pieces of the costume correctly. This will allow them to move forward in the narrative.

What would happen once the user matched two garments? We could not forget that the project had an educational function, so it had to provide relevant information on the history of animation. This is why we detected that the interaction had to continue somehow. We decided that once the user had dressed the character correctly, he would move onto a sort of background which would match the costume. Once in that setting, they would be presented with the relevant information to that time in history. To add interest to this section we had to hide such information behind some elements of the setting. It had to be the users who explored and discovered them, so the information would be completely integrated in the game dynamic.

The second main factor defining this project was its graphic character. This would be crucial for developing the character, costumes and the backgrounds. From a graphic point of view, it had to be appealing. The application had to attract the target audience, and in doing so, not only the design, but the graphic environment of the game was essential. We decided that the tone of the communication should be humorous. Seeing the character in all those different costumes should be sufficiently appealing for the user to be drawn to the challenge. This could only happen if we had the interest and curiosity of the user.

The third important factor in the development is content management and general documentation of the project. An extensive documentation and study process was carried out, which allowed us to decide what information to present. Firstly we try and establish the landmarks of animation. We divided the game in nine scenes from the beginning of animation in 1914 to-date. Then we synthesised the symbols that are characteristic of each historic landmark. From those, the costume corresponding to a character of that time was defined. Aside from such costume, the background and its interactive elements would be defined, along with the information contained in them. It is evident that study and documentation work were key at this point. The information provided had to be backed with rigour.

To sum it up, we could highlight three key factors in the study towards the application: the design of the interaction, the graphic aspect of the game and its contents. It was precisely here where the importance of the team being cross-discipline was clearly perceived. The many tasks to carry out were various and they pertained to different disciplines; each one of them was essential for the success or failure of the game development.

Development

At a technical level, a series of key factors had also to be determined. The first one would be to make sure that the game worked correctly in the

navigators currently used. The second would be that, besides navigators, the game had to work on all sorts of devices: mobile phones, tablets, laptops, desktop computers, etc. The interface design was tackled from an adaptive angle, what is known as responsive design. This added another layer of complexity, since the interface (design of elements on screen, detection of interactive areas, etc.) had to be able to adapt to the features of each device and function correctly in all of them. Lastly, the entire game had to be executed from the navigator, with no server keeping or managing the users information. This meant that the javascript engine in the game had to include the user's configuration information, their progress in the game must be retained between sessions, etc. Also, the game has a heavy graphic component, so its performance may be compromised at times. This is why a pre-cache process of all elements on screen is needed, so once the user started a session, the interaction would not be interrupted by any problem of resource loading in the navigator. It is obvious that we had a whole array of limitations to solve and which brought further complexity to the project.

At this point we knew clearly what we had to do and how. The challenge was to put all the pieces together and to develop the game itself. The question was, would we be able to develop it in the short span of time we had? One of the factors against us in this project was the schedule. It had to be entirely developed in a couple of weeks. It was essential that all the members of the team were deeply committed, since the time available to complete the project was so limited.

Also, as mentioned before, the project comprised not only the interactive game for digital media, but also a set of paper media pieces. We wanted to bring to paper the interactivity that is so present in the game. This is why we decided that a good promotional tool for the game could be a collection of postcards in which the character is presented wearing the different costumes from the game, with a brief introduction, its url and QR code. This way, the game was set on paper for the user to collect the postcards, in a similar way to a trading cards collection, which also encourages the interaction between users, who can trade such cards.

Our main character

The main character was clearly essential in the different media we used for this project. It is time to introduce him. The main character of this story is called Mortimer. Why the name? Studying the different landmarks of animation, it is impossible not to mention Walt Disney's role. The most symbolic character of this production company is still Mickey Mouse, although not everybody knows that before Mickey Mouse there was another character,

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precursor to the famous mouse. Mortimer. This way, we aimed at linking past and present through the name of Mortimer, winking at the origins of a timeless icon of animation history.

As stated before, Mortimer had to be appealing, fun-looking, to be liked by the user and earn their complicity. Therefore we chose a “cartoon” approach, not a realistic one. We modified the anatomical proportions of the character. We also had to lend a dynamic quality to the character, so every time it appeared it had to transmit such dynamism and avoid rigidity.

This approach was also extended to the different backgrounds where the character appears. Character and backgrounds had to be perfectly integrated, so a symbolic synthesis is necessary. Such synthesis would determine the key elements defining each of the historic landmarks that we wanted to present to the audience.

Finally, the project was developed and submitted to the client within the set deadlines. Our project presents clearly unique features as compared to the rest of projects submitted. Among them, would be its innovative approach which includes digital interaction, and the low production costs for the complete project. These we believe to be the main reasons that inclined our customer to hire us.

In conclusion, we would like to highlight the importance of a cross-discipline approach to this project, which we consider to be the key to its success. We believe that it has become essential to approach projects from many angles, thus coming up with innovative solutions. This can be done bringing together different disciplines and techniques for the same product, thus enriching it and offering a product that goes beyond the limits of each discipline, which allows to take the user by surprise. Now that you know of Mortimer, you can play and take a journey through the history of animation ●

Find him at <http://larambleta.com/mortimer>

