

# How *The Amazing World of Gumball* developed

A CONVERSATION WITH BEN BOCQUELET, MIC GRAVES AND ANTOINE PEREZ\*

## How did it all start?

**Bocquelet:** The show started when I was working as a developing artist for Cartoon Network in London. They had a development studio which was very interesting for Europeans because it was the chance to present cartoon ideas to a big network. I worked there for a while and after a time I was asked to pitch my own idea. It didn't prove a very successful direction for my career, I kept pitching and pitching new ideas and characters and it never worked out. So I had all these characters in my drawers that have never been used before. And I decided I will do something with them and I came up with the idea of a remedial school for cartoon characters which would happen in a real world. It was a mixture of designs and techniques. We discussed this with the producer Daniel Lennard and he thought this was too dark a topic in the context of school. Instead we revised the whole concept and I pitched it as a sort of archetype of a sitcom with the classic family, the oafish father, the crazy siblings, the school bully and the town sheriff and all these guys. Instead of them being normal humans they would be colourful characters (Ill. 1) and creatures like Tina-Rex, as T-Rex is the king of the tyrants, and that would be the bully. And the cop would become a donut and the whole world started assembling itself that way.

## How did you create the main characters?

**Bocquelet:** Personality-wise, all the main family members are based on

my own family. My dad's name is Richard, my mum is called Nicole – just like mum and dad in *Gumball*. I guess Gumball is not really me; he's more like a character that can be many things. But I suppose there are parts of ourselves.

**Perez:** Quite often, when you see a scene and the way Gumball delivers it, it reminds us of Ben quite a lot. I think a lot of him is in that character.

**Bocquelet:** Well, you know, you put a lot of your own personality into the writing. But I'm not that stupid ... (They all laugh).

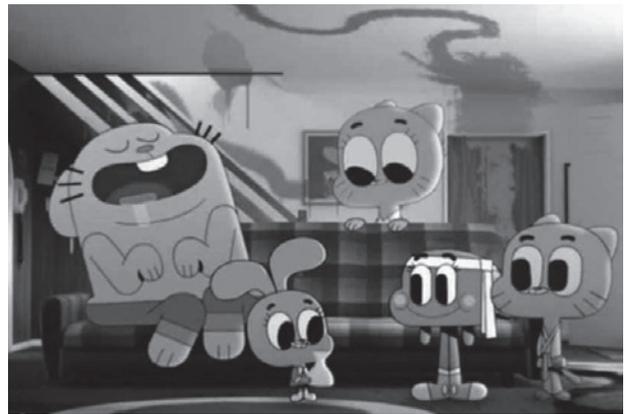
Animators tend to all be introverted actors basically. But we're not pretty enough to be on cameras; so, we just learn how to draw. But inside, this is what we want to give the world.

**Gumball is not really a typical boy, and he's not a hero or superman.**

**Bocquelet:** No, he's a loser.

**Graves:** He's an optimistic loser.

**Bocquelet:** Yes, he's an optimistic loser. And I think this is what most people are really like in life. I wanted him to be closer to what a boy would really feel like. So, he's not the hero who always wins or is always right. He's quite often wrong as well. If anything, I think Gumball is his worst enemy and this is kind



Ill. 1: A creative melting pot: in *The Amazing World of Gumball* characters originally developed for other series were put together

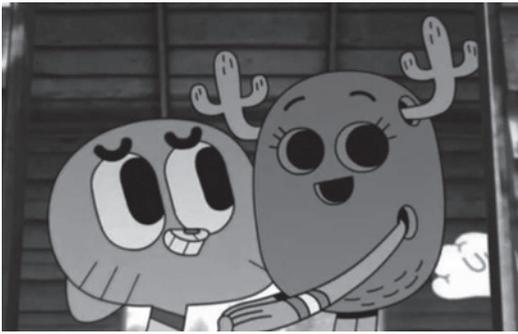
of how the character functions. And to be honest, a lot of the things that happened to him are based on some things that happened to us. So, I think we all are Gumball, somehow.

**Gumball looks like his mum, his sister looks like their dad. Has this anything to do with your family?**

**Bocquelet:** Well, yes. I guess I am a little more like my mother and my sister is a little bit more like my dad. Don't tell my sister I said that, ok? That's really important. She's not anymore now; she's her own thing anyway; she's grown up. But as a kid she was quite like my dad. And there's the character Darwin, who was Gumball's friend and then became a family member. My parents used to be like a haven for all the kids of the neighbourhood; and so, these guys would just like hang out and they would pretty much be part of the family. My dad would call them his adopted sons ...

## INTERVIEW

Screenshot from *The Amazing World of Gumball* © Cartoon Network, UK



Ill. 2: Gumball has a crush on Penny, the sprouting peanut. She symbolises girls who dare not show their real self

### *How did you get the idea for Penny, the peanut?*

**Bocquelet:** I really liked the idea of this weird-looking peanut with holes (Ill. 2). And after that I was like: "Oh, that's interesting because that's the archetype of the pretty girl with glasses, like in classic teenage sitcoms: the girl that takes off her glasses and then she looks fantastic." And then it became something else. We started thinking about her in different ways, like a teenage angst issue going on: she's in her shell and she doesn't dare come out of it. There's a whole episode about that. I think it's a quite cute sort of message for young girls and young boys having to accept who they really are and maybe sometimes having to fight their family for that.

So, we usually start with something without knowing what we're doing and then we go: "Alright, let's make sense out of it." And then it's there and it makes sense and we can play with it.

### *Let's talk about the creativity in design. Why is the protagonist Gumball a blue cat which does not really look like a cat but rather like a balloon on long sticks?*

**Bocquelet:** Design-wise, for the family, we thought it would be great if they had this kind of lovable, almost edible quality. But what would come out, though, is this kind of design which is very bubbly and round. It clashes really well in terms of design with detailed background; so, you can always

read them quite easily. They're very silhouetted characters. This is what we had in mind when we did that.

**Perez:** They are also very Japanese-inspired in terms of the design. I suppose that this is where the very stylistic drawing comes from and the very graphic nature.

### *Can you remember the moment when you thought: "That's how he looks like!"*

**Bocquelet:** At the end of the first series. Too late, too late. After drawing him and drawing him again, he finally comes to the right proportions and the right expressions and we sorted out all the little design kinks and things.

**Graves:** And the animators play with the characters as well. They test it to the extremes of what it can do. Then its design becomes defined by what it has had to do – what it shows is its best.

**Bocquelet:** I guess it is a little bit like *The Simpsons*. The first season of *The Simpsons* was quite different from what it is now. And I think from practice you refine the design and then you land on something that you really like and then you just try and retain this.

### *How do you ensure that the creative core, the basic idea of the character survives throughout the whole process? Is Gumball still Gumball?*

**Graves:** You're there in every stage. You're there in the writing. You're there in the story boarding. You're there in the construction of the animatics, the designing of the characters, all the way through the animation. You're just overseeing it all the way through. It's the only way to do it, I guess.

**Bocquelet:** At every stage, you're trying to push it. You're

trying to add a little more idea, a little detail that will help the personality of the character happen in animation, for example like this little specific design on the character's T-shirt that will give you an idea of what kind of character he is. It gives a little depth to the thing. And all these little details add up over and over as the production goes along and in the end it feels rich, I guess.

**Graves:** It is. It's like a thin layer of polish, each time you go through the whole thing.

### *And in practice: How did you realise the show?*

**Bocquelet:** We sat down and we had this list of characters. And we had all the secondary characters that I came up with.

**Graves:** Which were just designs at that point.

**Bocquelet:** They were designs like characters populating the school. And then we were like: "Alright well, now there needs to be somebody. What would provide an interesting story? What would children enjoy watching?" And we were trying to make it work that way. So Tina, for example, she is a bully, so she is a T-Rex. Clayton is the ball of clay and he is a bit of a pathological liar who morphs and changes. Teri, who's the paper bear, is very fragile and light. She's a bit of a hypochondriac. She's worried about germs and hurting herself and stuff. So, we developed the characters that way by trying to have



Ill. 3: The universe of characters in *The Amazing World of Gumball*: the outer appearance reflects a character's personality

Screenshot from *The Amazing World of Gumball* © Cartoon Network, UK

their looks work with their personality (Ill. 3) and also making sure that they would open up to interesting stories where Gumball and Darwin interact with them.

#### **How many people are on the team?**

**Bocquelet:** Quite a few, I think it's about 50 or 60 people here in the London studio. And there's even more in Germany.

**Graves:** I think it's 40 people at the studio in Ludwigsburg in Germany.

#### **How do you maintain your creativity? Especially in view of animation being a very industrialised business.**

**Graves:** It is amazing what you can do under pressure. It's just that the schedule is rolling. You have to do it. You know it's there. You've got to sit in that room. There has to be a script a week; sometimes it's 3 storybook pitches a week. Putting a show together is rolling so fast. I don't think you really question it, do you?

**Perez:** It's usually when you have a deadline in front of you that you start to be creative. Because if you have a lot of time you always rethink it. But if you have a deadline you have to think of something quite crazy to make it work quite quickly. And that'll make you creative.

**Bocquelet:** Limitation, to be honest, like the boundaries of what you are allowed to do, because you run out of money or time, forces you to think of something that has to be really good and creative.

**Graves:** Some of the decisions have come out of the fact that production has told us that we have spent all the money. Suddenly, writers were focusing on a small petty thing about a character, which turned out to be a silly thing.

**Bocquelet:** At Cartoon Network, they tend to not try and make the show generic. They really let us do what we want. And we've made mistakes and we've ended up being late and they proved to be very supportive on that level. So, I don't know if another broad-

caster would have been as forgiving. They've been trying hard to have a show that comes out of the ordinary and to give us the chance to do it.

**Perez:** Season 1 was quite a struggle. I think this is one part where creativity comes from. We didn't know how to make a series and nobody had made a series before. So maybe we just thought, "Let's try to do that and see if it works."

**Bocquelet:** And it didn't work. (Laughs)

**Graves:** You're failing on the way and then you work out slowly what does work. It was crazy.

#### **Can you give your young producer colleagues 3 tips on how to create great shows like yours and how to stay creative?**

**Bocquelet:** Well I think trying to do something that you know you will like is the first start. I don't think you should service a network or a company.

**Graves:** Or a commercial.

**Bocquelet:** Just do something that you feel will be great, that you would like to see yourself on TV in the first place or on the Internet or whatever kind of artistic medium you're working in. And try and make sure it is complete; don't keep it all in your head. Make sure it's out and people can see it. And then they can give you advice and help you push it. Because on a show like *Gumball* this is not like me doing it. It's a whole team of people and it's all their work that goes into it and it's all their talent and personality.

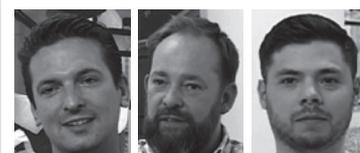
The second piece of advice would be to find people you love to work with and build a team and help them do what they want to do. It's really good to be surrounded with creative people who you understand and they understand you and you can all do something together.

And my third piece of advice would probably be to try and start working for the Internet because this is what's happening right now. The door is open to pioneers to do great projects there and find new business models and so on.

**Graves:** Another piece of advice would be: Just do it for the right reason. Make sure you're pushing on everything for exactly the right reason, because you want it to be great, you want it to be as good as it possibly can. You have to totally believe in what you're doing. You want people to be blown away when they see it. You just want to communicate as clearly and as much as you can. You want it to be seen by as many people as possible. You've got to have that desire. That's why you got into it: you saw good things and that's what you want to keep existing. There's a lot of not very good projects out there and you want to help redress the balance.

**Bocquelet:** I think you put a little piece of your heart in what you're doing. You don't just do it because you think it's going to look cool. You do it because somewhere in there there's something you want to give to someone.

**Graves:** It's just that feeling when you saw something that kind of electrifies you. It's like when you're saying, "*Jurassic Park*, it's a great film like the *Star Wars* movies." You want that kind of buzz to happen – in you, as well as in others. ■



\* Ben Bocquelet is the creator, Mic Graves is the director and Antoine Perez is the art director of *The Amazing World of Gumball* at Cartoon Network, London, UK.

Episode 14 "The Quest" was winner of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012 in the category 7-11 Fiction. The third season of *The Amazing World of Gumball* premiered on Cartoon Network across Europe, the Middle East and Africa from September 2014 and Cartoon Network announced that it has green-lit a fourth and fifth season of the hit series to go into production.