

Creative secrets behind *Angry Birds* animation

A CONVERSATION WITH ERIC GUAGLIONE*

Can you tell me a bit more about your personal background and your work at Rovio?

Guaglione: My personal background is a long history that begins with the fascination in animation as an art form. I happened to grow up in Los Angeles where a lot of Disney animators lived. There was one retired Disney animator, who lived just down the street. And it was this wonderful experience as a child, to have somebody who drew pictures in front of me, which were meaningful because they were characters that I grew up with, that was a huge inspiration for me.

So, at a very young age I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. For me the path to where I am now has always been a very clear one. I

have had some interesting turns along the way, doing feature film animation and also visual effects for feature films. More recently, with Rovio Entertainment, I am involved in the creation of shows in series form and individual short films.

Where does creativity play an important role in your everyday work life?



Ill. 1: Creative decision in the development process of the *Angry Birds Toons* series: staying faithful to the look of the game or following a new direction?

Guaglione: Well, I would like to think that we take a creative approach to everything that we do. Firstly, it becomes an issue of critical thinking skills and how you use creativity to solve everyday problems. In a way, film making is very much like that, too. We frequently have to ask questions like: How do we tell the story as clearly as possible? How do we develop characters that people

would love, and be able to make an emotional connection to? Every step of those challenges are met with the need to be open-minded and come up with creative solutions. Additionally, we have what we would call "creative artistry" which is the artistry of how something is ultimately represented on the screen. A visual interpretation of ideas.

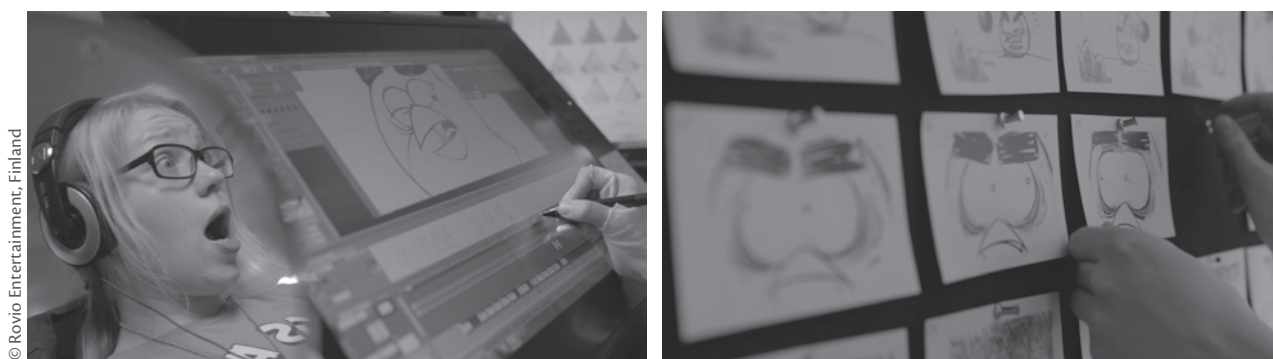
Can you give us an example when your team had to make a creative decision?

Guaglione: In the early days of the *Angry Birds Toons* series (Ill. 1), the first series that we produced, the challenge we faced was: Do we stay faithful to the look of the game or do we take it to a new level, a new direction and for what reasons?

We decided to advance the look and feel of the world, mainly because the characters themselves

were very simplistic in the games and we needed them to be more expressive in order to be able to emote and tell stories.

Secondly, the environments themselves needed to be defined further. We featured various locations within the games but we wanted to make the whole island more understandable to our audience. However, we wanted to



Ill. 2 and 3: Creativity through limitation: the simplistic design of the *Angry Birds* animation gives crucial importance to the characters' facial expressions that display their feelings

maintain the same essence as in the games, something that is in a way timeless and classic. And we also wanted something that would be appealing to a wider age-range. In a time with most productions being CG (computer graphics) we ended up choosing a very classic, hand-drawn look.

I think this is a good example of how a lot of the creative choices were made towards a specific end goal.

Limitations can lead to a different level of creativity

The *Angry Birds* are, so to say, balls with faces. They have no bodies, no real language. What does this limitation mean for creativity?

Guaglione: To have balls with faces is very difficult. We are trained in this industry to think about the entire body and how our body communicates feelings. If you look back upon the classics of silent movies, such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, they were able to express so much without the use of words. They did that through their bodies, and, of course, through their faces.

Here we are also extremely limited with our characters. We do not have dialogue, but we have ways of using audio to communicate how the birds are feeling. We created a kind of "language" of an *Angry Bird*. But in fact, we mostly

rely on facial expressions (Ill. 2 and 3) and types of movements. This has been a huge challenge for us, but has worked out very well. Sometimes when you are forced to work with limitations a different level of creativity emerges.

So conceptual limitation can foster creativity in animation?

Guaglione: Yes. One limitation is the simplicity in the design. It provides the clarity, but at the same time makes it difficult to draw. I was experiencing the same thing with Mickey Mouse when I was working at Disney. Even though he is made of circles, Mickey is a very difficult character to draw because he is so simple. You can't hide behind any details, it is just all out there. And it is the same thing with our *Angry Birds*. You have these big broad eyebrows, and all the while, you have to make them look angry or sad. Trying to get them into a wide range of subtle expressions is a bit of a challenge.

Humor from conflict

The characters are very different from each other. How did you realize that?

Guaglione: A lot of humor results from conflict. The way we tend to develop characters is to look at one character's personality and make sure that we have another character that represents the exact opposite. In the case

of our *Angry Birds* characters, when we were developing them, we would put them all up on the wall and make sure that each opposed one another really well. If we have one who is an absolute control freak, then another character is an absolute slacker. And how those characters struggle to live together is what creates all the humor (Ill. 4). It's very much by design that we looked at the characters and made sure that their values and traits really contrasted with one another, so that as scripts are written, you immediately find opportunities for humor because of that conflict.

So one of your creative techniques is to put the characters up on a wall and search for conflicts?

Guaglione: Yes, we do. We have done that in a number of projects now. You start thinking about the positive and the negative traits, what the characters' obstacles are, what they want, and what they do in order to get what they want. And then you start asking: Okay, does this character want the same thing as another character? Is it a good thing? Do they want the same thing but achieve it in a different way? Is there a conflict that way? If they want the same thing, and they want it in the same way, then the opportunity for humor just isn't there as much as when you have a conflicting viewpoint. So by literally putting it all up on the wall and stepping back and looking at it, it



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Ill. 4: Humor through conflict: the characters' contrasting values and traits offer opportunities for humor in the birds' communal life

becomes very clear where you are not taking advantage of opportunities for contrasting conflict.

One of the ways I describe it to people is to think of it like a wheel. If you start with all the characters in the center of the wheel you can see how to balance out what their supreme traits, flaws and behaviors are. If they are too similar then they all sit near the center, the hub of the wheel. But the more extreme you make the characters, the further they go out towards the rim of the wheel. In that way you can visually test whether the flaws and traits are extreme enough.

Journey of character development

What are other creative techniques you use?

Guaglione: In developing characters for feature films, what you want to explore is how characters are flawed or blinded at the beginning of a film, and in what way they have a realization to finally discover who they are at the end of the film. A character that becomes "whole"

and self-aware is a classic hero's journey, as described in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.¹ In doing development for a series you don't necessarily want everything to resolve. You want the feeling that it's just about to resolve but then, Oops, there is that flaw again and the character hasn't yet found his/her way ... Back to the flawed state for the next episode!

What is the journey of character development? I take each character and spell out: What are the characters after? What is their goal, the external goal that they are trying to achieve? What is preventing them from getting to that goal? Repeat, until you have strong goals, and stronger obstacles.

What are the most creative moments in your team, like when everybody bursts with creativity?

Guaglione: We have some sessions where we get together and brainstorm different story ideas that we would like to explore. This story brainstorming is usually in a very fun, very open environment with a lot of laughter and chatting. We discuss, for example, what would happen if we put this character – who is normally behaving in

this way – in a situation that would be very uncomfortable for him/her. What kinds of stories could we get out of it? And another type of meeting is one that Pixar uses and called a directors' brain trust (see Catmull in this issue). We adapted a very similar working mode here where we get all directors together in a room to review each other's work. It is designed to allow everything to be openly discussed, how something is progressing, how the different characters are working. And in a no-fear environment. What I mean by that is you can be critical in the room and say, "This is not working or maybe it could be this or that", but with the idea of sharing, making suggestions and supporting fellow directors without compromising the director's authority. It's really a win-win situation. However, we are all passionate filmmakers and we all think that we are right! (He laughs)

So it becomes a very passionate environment where people are making a very strong argument for why they think their ideas are the best. It's quite a lively scenario and sometimes we have to be careful to make sure we don't beat each other up too much with all those ideas brewing in the room.

Fostering creativity in the craft of animation. Imagine young animators standing in front of you. How can you make them go beyond their actual drawing skills?

Guaglione: That's a great question and I wish, to be honest, that young animators came up with that question. Too often they come up with a question like which software they should use. And I tell them that it is not about that, it is all about creativity. What they need is to work on their foundations as much as possible, become really adept to doing quick sketches, with pencil and paper, but also try painting and other artistic media so that they get a feeling for each. So as they work towards using different kinds of tools, whether they



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Ill. 5 and 6: Tools of a successful animator: a broader view, knowledge about human behavior and an understanding of the foundations and structures of a story

are digital or not, they become more comfortable and be more fluent in expressing themselves creatively.

Acting skills are needed

Secondly I think a lot of animators – I am talking about animators specifically, not all people in animation – need to be actors and they really should take some acting classes. Most animators choose to be animators because they do not want to be on the stage. They are acting through their characters. But in reality, I think it would be incredibly helpful for animators to learn acting skills from trained teachers.

Why would acting lessons help animators to be more creative?

Guaglione: It's because you develop a lot of skills on how to act only when facing particular scenarios as an actor, plus you also learn how to behave in a particular way resulting from reactions. From my experience, the reactions to actions are often more important than the actions themselves. As a result, I think that people in animation really need to understand the "acting" part of that response. It becomes a process about understanding how characters think and how characters react (Ill. 5 and 6). Animation becomes a lifelong study in human nature and human behavior.

I remember reading a book of Carl Jung's works and my daughter came up to me asking: "Why are you reading that?" And I answered, "I want to know more about how people work." She thought I was crazy, but it was actually a very interesting read. I am constantly picking up things that make me understand more about what makes people tick.

Understanding the structure of storytelling

So open-mindedness and a good understanding of the whole story would foster creativity?

Guaglione: Yes. I think a lot of artists are very interested in a particular creative discipline in which they are involved each day, but they may not have much understanding of what filmmaking or storytelling really is about. In some cases maybe that is okay. For instance if they want to be a particular type of artist in a creative process in visual effects work, and that is what satisfies them, then maybe they don't need to know what makes people think the way that they do. But, if you are working as an animator, you really need to have a broader view and learn as much as you can about human behavior and how you can apply that to animated characters.

An animator should also understand the structure of storytelling. When I, as a director, brief a scene, I must be able to communicate to an animator in a way that really justifies my thinking – what is going through that character's mind and why this is important for the story. It helps animators a lot when they understand this context and it is even better if the animators have actually studied a little bit about storytelling themselves. They need not be scriptwriters, but if they at least understand the foundations and structures of a story, then, when I provide that context, it becomes meaningful to them. Then they apply their own skill and it all leads to even higher quality. ■

NOTE

¹ Campbell, Joseph (2012). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Novato: New World Library.

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