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Flash As a Big Ball of Clay

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This interview is a resource of DesignMaster Training, an online professional training and development website for working design professionals. Mudbubble.com founder (www.mudbubble.com) and Flash

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Article Body:

This interview is a resource of DesignMaster Training, an online professional training and development website for working design professionals. Mudbubble.com founder (www.mudbubble.com) and Flash Animation class DesignMaster instructor, Chris Georgenes, has created a cross-platform career as an animator for Web and broadcast media. He shares his "ah-ha" moment as a Flash-based illustrator and animator.

Location: Connecticut (check)

Clients: Sesame Street , Lucas Arts, Macromedia, and Macmillan. (check)

Area of Specialty: Flash trainer, animation for broadcast or web, illustration (fill in this area)

Scott Chappell caught up with Chris between clients to discuss where Flash animation is today, where it's going, and how to animate a rap star.

PULLOUT QUOTE

"That moment changed my whole outlook on art and, in some ways, life in general. It took four years and that very moment for my eyes to be opened as an artist. It changed me. It taught me more than I ever thought I would be able to know and it's a lesson I carry with me to this very day. Being subtle is powerful. "

Chris Georgenes , Founder, Mudbubble.com

Q: Much of your Flash work involves developing characters that act as avatars (hosts or tour guides) to a site. Why do Web visitors find avatars so compelling?

Chris: If done well, avatars have enormous branding and marketing potential. Few things are more engaging to Web viewers than an interactive character that helps them navigate a site. An avatar not only reflects the company's image, but also shows that a company is willing to make the extra effort to deliver the best experience possible.

Q: One of your highest-profile projects was to create an online avatar for the rap artist Nelly. What was the key to making that character believable?

Chris: (Chuckle) As a 37 year-old Caucasian, and a father of 3 children, I am pretty far from having any mannerisms commonly associated with any "hip-hop" personality. As an animator, you sometimes have to act out what you are animating in order to learn specific gestures and body language. Along with watching a lot of BET (Black Entertainment Television), I tried to mimic Nelly's hand gestures while animating. During one somewhat intense animation session, I was acting out my best Nelly impersonation just as my wife walked in. Pretty embarrassing. She still laughs about it.

Q: Back in the day, cartoons were only used to market to kids. Has something changed? Are companies more open to using animation for a broader demographic now?

Chris: The Web has changed everything in this regard. I have a client right now who runs an online business manufacturing and selling products for kitchens. The company is trying to redesign its self-proclaimed "corporate" site by adding some Flash animation that features not only the products, but also company representatives as actual animated characters. To see grown adults giddy about the prospect of adding a "cartoon" to their Web site is amusing, to say the least. These are people who probably haven't sat down to watch a cartoon in 35 years. So yes, from my perspective (and first-hand experience), companies are more willing to explore the use of not only cartoons, but motion graphics of any kind to help sell their products.

Q: You've talked to a lot of Flash developers about animation in the last couple

of years. What are the big questions that people have?

Chris: Surprisingly, most questions are about the most basic techniques in Flash. Most questions pertain to animating something specific—stickmen, a certain effect like fog, or an iris transition effect. Of course, if you don't know how to use Flash, then even these effects can be daunting. Once people see how an animator makes these kinds of effects, it opens up their creative minds to explore other effects and animations using the same techniques.

Other questions are more global in nature. Where is Flash heading in the industry? Hand-held devices and television is my guess. Flash is very versatile and it can be implemented in so many ways and in several mediums.

Q: What are the main challenges Flash developers have in creating convincing animations—or finding their style?

Chris: That's just it, finding their style. It took me years to find my own "style" and I didn't even really realize I had one until after I discovered it. It's like tripping over a dinosaur bone—at least for me it was. Whenever I set out to create something new and unique, it never happened. I've learned that style can't be forced; it will expose itself in time if you dedicate yourself to experimenting long enough. I approach Flash as if it is a ball of clay, pushing and pulling it into what I want. Many animators get too hung up on the mechanics of the software program and rely too much on only what the interface offers. Flash is just a tool, like any other animation or graphics program, and it should be used as such. Never should the artist allow the tool's limitations to dictate what can and can't be accomplished. There's more you can do with a hammer than just driving nails.

Q: Amen to that. That's a statement that legions of design students should bear in mind. As an illustrator and animator, where did your journey begin?

Chris: I was way into hyper-realism early on—especially while attending the Hartford Art School (Connecticut). I was always creating imagery where objects were flying out from the page in very foreshortened perspective—very dynamic, very real, very "in your face" content. I thought this was cool and would impress people. I would spend countless hours drawing something so

perfect, so incredibly life-like with sharp contrasting colors and delicate gradients of darks and lights which made for extremely convincing imagery. In some situations, people were initially convinced my drawings were photographs. Most of the pieces I created were large in scale, 18"x 24" and even as large as 30"x 40". I majored in printmaking (Lithography and Etching), and printed many images directly from huge limestone and copper plates that took weeks and most often months to make.

One afternoon in the print shop, I had a leftover piece of copper plate that I was about to discard. It was small, about 3"x 7", and tiny compared to what I was used to. Instead of tossing it, I quickly drew a rough study of a figure of a woman. I spent no more than ten minutes on the drawing before throwing it in the acid bath so it could be etched, inked, and ultimately printed. It was a simple drawing, loose in line style, and very much the opposite of the hyper-realistic style I was striving for during that time in my career. I liked it for what it was, but didn't think it was a very impressive piece. I contemplated tossing the print and the copper plate in the trash and going back to my much larger pieces, but something told me to hang on to it, at least for a little while. So I slid it between the pages of a book in my backpack.

At the end of my tenure at H.A.S., like all graduating seniors, I had my gallery showing. Four years of work proudly displayed on four huge walls under glass and lights. While setting up my show, I carefully chose the biggest, most realistic in-your-face drawings and prints I had created during those years. While hanging the last piece, the small etching of the woman slipped out onto the floor. I picked it up, looked at it, and contemplated adding it to the show. I decided to hang it next to the light switch near the exit door, as if it were an afterthought, far from the spotlight and center of attention.

The opening was a success and my show hung on those walls for a week. A few days after my show, my illustration professor, who was unable to make the opening, went with me to view my body of work. Many of the pieces were from his classes, and those that were not were influenced by his teachings. He was the professor I most admired. I adored his skill and dedication to the arts. He quietly and slowly studied each and every piece I had displayed without uttering a word. I was excited he was spending so much time, especially on the larger, more realistic works. I was convinced he was impressed by them. After he looked at the last drawing, which happened to be the small etching of the woman in the corner next to the light switch, he turned and looked at me and asked, "Want to know what I think is the best thing you have ever done?"

I thought he was going to tell me it was any one of the larger pieces. To my

surprise he turned and pointed to the small etching next to the light switch! He went on to explain that its simplicity and essential quality provoked an emotion within him and compared it to Rembrandt or Da Vinci. He told me it was a milestone not only in my career, but in any artist's career to draw like that. It was subtle, and that subtlety made more of an impact than in-your-face hyper-realism. That moment changed my whole outlook on art and in some ways, life in general. It took four years and that very moment for my eyes to be opened as an artist. It changed me. It taught me more than I ever thought I would be able to know and it's a lesson I carry with me to this very day. Being subtle is powerful. That was my greatest influence.

Q: That's an inspirational story, thanks for sharing it. You mentioned the future of Flash in the industry. What other applications for Flash animation do you see beyond the Web? Is there an emerging market for cell phone art? Or iPod art, even?

Chris: Television broadcast, including commercials, interstitials, and full production animated series. The hand-held market is also about to burst open with Flash content. As Flash grows, so do its uses. MX 2004 gave us ActionScript 2.0 and the next version of Flash will certainly give us more powerful tools to increase Flash's penetration across several mediums. The sky is the limit!