

# J.E.D. Gibbs - MAiP Proposal for Final Major Project

## Concept

This project comprises the creation of an interactive DVD supported by a Web site. These will promote a new children's animation called 'Imps!' and assist applications to fund its filming and development, and to pitch for eventual broadcast or distribution. The linear animation episodes will not be complete but parts will be developed in order to contribute sample scenes and story boards as content for the DVD and Web site, which will also feature characters and sounds from the series.

Imps! will combine stop-motion and computer generated animation to present the adventures of a band of souls and one or more of their imp 'minders' as they seek to flee Hell and obtain redemption. Their escape attempts take them through the realms described in Dante's Inferno and into contact with some of the milder demons portrayed by Hieronymus Bosch. They will also pass through the cosmopolitan underworlds of other cultures including the Egypt of the Pharaohs. Lighting will be important to the look of Imps! - the models will be lit from below to make them look more unusual and potentially sinister.

There will be some educational content on both DVD and Web site outlining the inspirational historical and mythological background. The technical process of creating the animation itself will also be documented as a behind-the-scenes feature.

An option being tested from the outset is the use of sign language by the animated characters as their prime means of communication, supplemented by captions, commentary and possible dialogue. Additional picture-in-picture signing where required could also be performed by one of the animated characters, and space left for the signer's box in the planning stage for each scene's composition. Tony Hart's 'Vision On' was originally conceived as a programme for hearing impaired children so there is good precedent and if feasible is likely to prove an extra selling point.

## Context

Imps! will be produced for a core market of children from 6 to 11, taking them on as they mature from **Pingu, Noddy, Bob the Builder, Postman Pat and Thomas the Tank Engine**, all very successful broadcast features and franchise operations.

Aardman Animation in Bristol are one of the companies that I will approach once the DVD and Web site are ready. Aardman produce 'claymation' plasticene creations including **Morph, Creature Comforts, Wallace & Gromit, Rex the Runt and Chicken Run**. Their claymation style seems to appeal to all ages but is particularly to a wider age range of children than will tolerate actors in 'Teletubbies' or 'Fimbles' suits. Imps! also aspires to provide interest for parents to reduce the chance of them switching over or off.

The proliferation of satellite and terrestrial digital channels provides opportunities for the creators of original content. If Aardman, Channel4, BBC or Sky do not take up Imps! the World Wide Web alone can be sufficient to promote a fledgling project. This is evidenced by Rustboy - which obtained private funding and big studio interest as a result of a good Web site at [www.rustboy.com](http://www.rustboy.com) and clever positioning in magazine articles. The little animation called 'Alien Song' showcased creator Victor Navone and elevated his career from minor games developer to Pixar animator on Monsters Inc. and the Oscar-winning Finding Nemo.

The Imps! Web site will include links to the manufacturers of products and software used in the making of the animation. It is hoped that some may reciprocate, for instance the producers of the coloured beads used to represent lava and water might feature a page about the use of their product in Imps! and link back to [www.imps.tv](http://www.imps.tv). As well as getting Imps! some visibility these links can assist ranking in search engines such as Google.

## Rationale

I have long wanted to create a stop-motion animation. Finding a project in which my son can be a willing participant rather than a distraction is proving very rewarding. Undertaking this project has led to my being offered the opportunity to teach two National Diploma animation units at Southampton City College next academic year. Imps! will give me first hand experience and provide a wealth of copyright free material with which to illustrate the course. The underworld scenario lends itself to first student projects as there is plenty of scope to create models in all manner of styles and even to incorporate historical figures.

The proposal will allow me to develop my first Flash based Website, explore 3D computer packages and produce my first interactive DVD.

## Research

Areas of research include children's television, sources of film funding such as Screen South and Southern Arts, potential buyers or development partners for Imps! such as Aardman and Channel4, and the technical aspects of producing an animation for broadcast such as wide-screen aspect ratio and video colour temperatures.

If I am to incorporate sign language support I need to research the UK and US national variations, caption creation and Web site accessibility guidelines.

Principal among the wealth of literature concerning Hell is *The Inferno*, part of the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri in which he describes a medieval Christian hell peopled with political characters from his own time as well as some such as Virgil from classical Rome. Imps! may update the concept to include some more recent historical figures as an educational element.

Characters and scenery are drawn in part from the Garden of Earthly Delights triptych by Hieronymus Bosch now in the Prado. Much of his painting remains unsuitable for children but some characters can be inspired by details of his works. Contemporaries of Bosch whose works depict useful references and fantastic landscapes include Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci.

The mythology of Ancient Egypt and its rich concept of an underworld populated by animal headed gods will extend the scope of the animation.

## Skills

The project requires a range of skills, many developed on this MA course.

Web design using Macromedia Dreamweaver and Flash featured during Practice 1, which concluded that currently the best way to present video on the World Wide Web is to publish it using Flash. This allows for the creation of a custom user interface and enjoys a higher installed base than any of its rivals. Flash is fully cross-platform and is far less likely to be blocked by school and college firewall administrators than the intrusive Real Player, QuickTime or Windows Media Player.

The same Flash plug-in allows a rich interactive environment which is ideal for multimedia content accessed by children. I have learned the basics of Flash but this will be the first site I have worked on that will rely more on Flash than Dreamweaver. Flash MX 2004 Pro expands support for video and this will be a priority skill set to develop towards the end of the project once there are animation scenes to add to the Web site.

The animation itself will be recorded using one of the following after investigation and testing: iStopMotion by Boinx software, FrameThief or BTV Pro.

3D computer generated scenery, effects and some of the animation will be created or enhanced in Cinema 4D or Lightwave. Professional 3D character modelling is often digitised from clay masters using expensive equipment, the approach used for Lord of the Rings and Blue Sky Studio's Ice Age. MAiP technician Micah Gates introduced the group to RealViz ImageModeller, which can provide a pathway from real 3D sculpting (such as the plasticene imps) to a virtual computer generated environment using a digital camera and sophisticated software. Canon 3D S.O.M., D Sculptor, Photomodeler and Photo3D provide rival options.

Characters will then be manipulated in Poser to create an animatic - a realtime animated representation of the story board to gauge timing for each scene and so inform the stop-motion animation.

The animatic also facilitates the development of the soundtrack, which will be created in Steinberg Cubase and Apple Soundtrack in a similar manner to that produced for our Practice 2 Group Interface. Musical ideas will also be developed in Apple's new iLife product Garageband which provides support for live instruments, midi and looped samples in a more accessible way than Cubase.

Corel Bryce will be employed to create the setting for the animatic since it works well alongside characters from former Metacreations stable mate Poser. Bryce will also be used to create some of the final scenery wherever it would be impractical to make expansive sets.

Final Cut Pro and Adobe After Effects will be used in the post-production of the animation itself and to prepare background animation sequences for the DVD. Video clips may be processed using Discrete Media Cleaner before being added to the DVD or Flash. For the DVD interface Apple's iDVD or DVD Studio will be the first applications explored since I need to learn these for my work, teaching video editing in a Macintosh environment at Southampton City College. If the Apple

applications prove unsuitable Macromedia Director will be investigated along with solutions available on the Windows platform.

## Project Management

The project involves many different software packages and affords as many opportunities to bog down or be drawn from the critical path. To achieve a completed DVD and Web site will require the adoption of a consistent attitude to 'acceptable' quality. The purpose of both DVD and Web site is to illustrate and sell a concept rather than a finished film, so the emphasis will be on overall impression rather than unachievable levels of detail or perfection in model making or animation at this stage. The characters must be developed and models made before animation and DVD can be produced. The historical context and 'making of' sections will run parallel throughout the project. There are many additional skills to be learned in preparation for later parts of the project.

The writers and painters providing inspiration have been dead for almost five hundred years or more so the remaining issues of copyright involve the reproduction of images of paintings or portions of translation\* for the background information sections of the DVD and Web site, and the possible use of some music by Nick Harper, with whom I have worked in the past and who was featured on video (with permission) during Practice 1.

[www.jednet.co.uk/nick](http://www.jednet.co.uk/nick)

\* one translation I obtained from the internet has this copyright information:

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People who may assist the project:

**Co-creator of the animation** - Jamie Gibbs (my son, ten years old)

**Flash** - Ben Hill, Kevin Thomas (fellow students on MAiP)

**3D** - Maja Hill (fellow student on MAiP), Russell Richards at Southampton Institute,

**Stop-Motion animation** - Suzanne Templeton (Bafta winner for 'Dog' and Oscar nominated), Gina Dearden (photography lecturer at Totton College and animator on Captain Pugwash), Nick Philips at Southampton Institute

**Sign Language** - Liz Thornhill Communication Support, Southampton City College

**Music** - Stuart Walker of Headland and Nick Harper may contribute songs

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