Interacting with kids

Designing websites and exhibitions aimed at children is a whole different ball game. Emily Pacey looks at how to get young people hooked

"It is very surprising what children find interesting," says Magnetic North creative director Brendan Dawes. "They use stuff in a totally different way to adults."

Dawes describes the digital equivalent of a child preferring the box to the toy. "Very often, the thing that kids love is a trivial rollover that makes a silly sound. You thought it was just a throwaway thing — and it's not even part of the game — but they will do it again and again," he says.

Magnetic North has just completed a website that aims to teach children about artist Jimm Turner for the Tate. Making Turner appealing to children was Magnetic North's challenge and a 'perplexing problem', says Dawes, "because Turner is difficult to understand and not exactly super-exciting."

The result is a virtual catapult into which you load Turner subjects like sunlight and bottlenecks, and ping the lot at the canvas, conjuring a picture containing them.

Dawes assumes that children's attention spans are "nil" when designing with them in mind. He says, "If a game takes a while to load, you've lost them."

Airscape's recent work for the London Transport Museum on a website of archive material, called Pick & Mix, is intended to appeal to all ages, including children. "The content includes lots of beautiful posters, but a younger audience might not want to engage with them," says Airscape interaction designer Guy Moorhouse. The solution, he says, was to add movement by using Flash, "which is so much more immersive and fluid than html, and allows you to animate and create transitions and movement."

But while Turner and transport posters may not be instantly fascinating to children, in terms of accessibility, cellular biology is on a whole different level.

In 2005, Land Design Studio took on the challenge of making cellular biology comprehensible and interesting to young children, completing a £2.5m installation last month for the Centre of the Cell in Whitechapel, east London.

Aimed exclusively at ten- and 11-year-olds, the installation aims to engage children in a narrative about cells. It even hopes to hook the youngmsters into considering a career in science.
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The result is a virtual catapult into which you load Turner images like sunlit and battles, and ping the lot at the canvas, conjuring a picture containing them.

Dawes assumes that children’s attention spans are ‘nil’ when designing with them in mind. He says, ‘If a game takes a while to load, you’ve lost them; if it has instructions, you’ve lost them. Children do not read instructions.’

According to All of Us founder Simon ‘Sanks’ Sankaryya, children are viewers, not readers. He even says that the traditional storybook, ‘with all its baggage’, is anathema to interactive design.

Sankaryya recommends abandoning the conventional grid of Modernist-influenced print design, which is ‘flat and repetitive and translates very badly to screen’, in favour of creating impressions of 3D ‘space and flow and movement’.

**APPEALING TO YOUNG AUDIENCES**

- Use children’s love of repetition to make things ‘addictive’
- Abandon Modernist rules of graphic design when creating for the screen
- Use Flash instead of html
- Look to gaming as an inspiration for creating 3D space
- Take account of children’s boisterousness in the design of physical environments and interfaces
- Remember that many children have short attention spans

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