



Monkeying Around

Maltese short film director Martin Bonnici meets up with **Sarah Micallef** to discuss his latest project – Tele-Monkey, the first completely locally produced short film animated in 3D CGI, set to show at Empire Cinemas this month.

Tele-Monkey, much like any film or animation project, Martin maintains “started from a question, an idea that I wanted to explore and share with others.” The short film tells the story of Joe and his obsession to understand the meaning behind the advertising and teleshopping dominating the world around him, hence exploring the idea of “a consumerist society that is constantly bombarded by advertising, sometimes of a questionable quality.”

Once the idea has been established, Martin tells me, the lengthy development process begins, starting by “creating a structure of a story, outlining it, changing it into a treatment and finally a script.” But that’s only the beginning, as he goes on to explain. “It typically takes a few drafts before the script is ready, then its time to start planning production, which is in turn followed by a period of funding applications.” Indeed, the project must have certainly showed promise, as it was the only short film selected for production support in 2010 by the Malta Film Fund. Additionally, the team received sponsorship from Studio 7 Productions and Beagleworks as well as a few donations by the public.

What is perhaps most impressive however, is that Tele-Monkey is not just another run-of-the-mill short film, it is 3D animated – another first locally. Unsurprisingly, the choice to produce Tele-Monkey in Stereoscopic 3D provided further challenges for the team, Martin explains. “In an animated film, production entails building the characters and preparing them for animation. One must then explore how a character moves and looks depending on the emotions he’s going through. The same has to happen with the sets – every location has to be designed



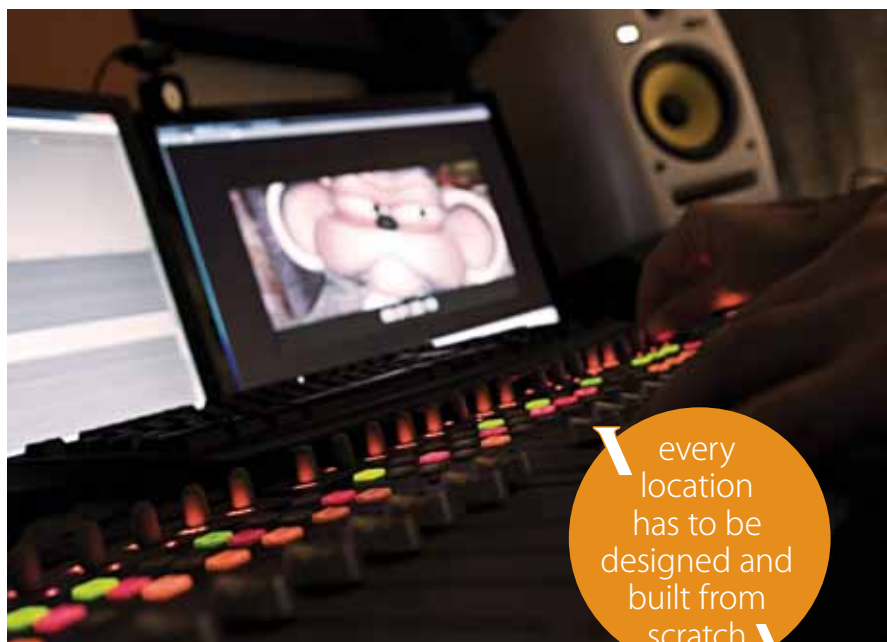
and built from scratch, lit and prepared for animation. Each scene is animated according to a storyboard, starting off a process that can take up to 15 minutes per frame to render. Since we're producing the film in Stereoscopic 3D, instead of the normal 24 frames per second we had to work at 48 frames per second (one frame for each eye) which doubled the rendering process. In the meantime, a parallel process takes place in which the sound designer and composers start putting together sound elements and exploring the score so that at the end everything may come together."

Martin admits that it's a very long, time consuming process, goodnatureably maintaining "we've lost count of all the man hours that have been put into this production". So, I can't help but wonder, why choose 3D in the first place? "Animation in Malta is still in its infancy," he replies, "whereas most European countries have a history of animation going back to the early days of cinema, Maltese animation really started off in the past couple of decades. This reality means that the industry isn't as well developed as in Europe and the choice is limited. Having said that, 3D animation is by far the most developed of all the different styles and was the obvious choice for our production."

With the long and arduous process of production finally in its end stages, the next step was getting Tele-Monkey out there, which is where marketing comes in. Martin explains how the team went about it. "Our first step was releasing a number of small snippets on Facebook and announcing the project there. As a result, we received a number of encouraging messages from people from all over Europe, asking for more information and when they can expect to see more of the project. Through that we were also invited to say something about our project on a local TV programme."

Tele Monkey will be showing at Empire Cinemas a little later this month, a venue chosen specifically by Martin and Tele-Monkey's production team because they were the first to invest in a 3D projection system, which is one of the best available locally. Moreover, Martin explains that they approached Empire not only to screen the project but also to run the preliminary tests necessary to ensure sure that their work works well on the big screen.

Throughout the project's production, Martin concludes, the main aim has been "an attempt at achieving an animation project that breaks the barriers we've experienced before" as well as using Tele-Monkey as "a tool to help us network with the wider, European production community and show what we can achieve with the necessary support and funds." Indeed, it is Martin's view that the Maltese film industry is held back by a lack of support and investment. "Whereas it is true that the funding structures put into place in the past years by the government have helped the situation," he asserts, "they still do not address the lack of courses focused on film-making that exists on the island. We have to start looking further into opportunities for training and co-productions with our European counterparts and share knowledge and resources to achieve work of a truly international standard." To this end, Tele-Monkey certainly seems like a step in the right direction. ▀



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