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Videos with animated characters: where to start

The process of immersion is one of the most powerful techniques at your disposal for creating effective eLearning courses.

For this reason, making short videos or episodes with animated characters allows you to engage your course users, putting them in front of a series of situations that will enhance their learning and help them fine-tune best practices within their work.

Making a digital "set"

In this article, I do not want to dwell on writing characters, settings and scripts. We have already discussed this in another dedicated article, where we introduced **eLearning script writing with animated characters**.

I will show you, however, what are the basic steps for creating a development project with animated characters, using motion graphics software or a content creation tool such as the DynDevice platform.

Once you have defined the script, my advice is to start creating all the assets that will be useful for you to create the animated products.

There are, basically, two winning products in eLearning that use animated characters: explainers and animated episodes.

Explainers are short situational videos in which a narrative voice introduces us to a character in front of a problem, telling us what his actions are to reach a solution.
Usually these products last a few minutes, if not a few seconds, and are self-contained.

Making such a project is quite simple: it involves following a script or storyboard with all the steps for making the story and proceeding in a linear fashion along the development.

Nevertheless, there are a number of tips and rules to follow for developing effective explainers.

The second type of product concerns animated episodes: these are videos that tell a story, making the characters talk and, most importantly, making them interact with each other. When I make an episode, the most important aspect is precisely the ability to write effective dialogues and to develop a verisimilar "skit" that will allow me to make my audience identify with the issue.

But what are the first aspects to start with?

For both cases, whether you want to make an explainer or an animated episode, I recommend starting with a digital set, a virtual environment in which to make your characters live and move.

Where is your story set? In an office of a large organization or in the middle of the desert in Nevada? At what time of day do your characters' actions take place?

This is important information that you can extrapolate from your scripts or that will be indicated in the briefing phase of the eLearning project.

For the creation of a digital set you have two options in front of you: use an already created environment or...start from scratch. This may seem like trivial advice, but in optimizing a project for an eLearning course, you will have to think about balancing your effort with your budget.

For this reason, for small projects or personal testing, you may need a ready-made set. If you are looking for graphic resources, a quick web search will allow you to find dozens of sites with thousands of vector resources that you can use for that purpose.

Making an original set, however, is much more work and needs special attention and, above all, vector-drawing oriented skills.

If you do not have these resources available, you can go in search of freelancers who will know how to help you. Very often, I get support from Graphic Artists who have created wonderful assets for my productions!

If your client's requirements are unique and you can't find ready-made assets online, you can work with an artist in the field to create novel designs that, I guarantee, will allow you to make a difference.

The character design

Once we have defined the character set, we need to make the characters of our course and, therefore, of our stories.

But how to make these characters?

First, we need to thoroughly study the scripts, our client's brief, and, if available, a background of each character.

The character's background tells us something about the character's life, preceding the actions narrated within the course. Mind you, there is no need to write a detailed biography of the character but a few character traits, the type of studies, physical characteristics.

A description of the character's background will enable us to present an accurate character design:

- will the character have long or short hair?
- how will he or she be dressed?
- will he or she have slow, controlled movement or frenetic?
- what will be the set of expressions we will use?
- will it be a human character, a robot or anthropomorphic?

and so on.

These are a series of questions that are extremely useful in producing a specification document that we can hand over to our client or that we can use as a master for our development.

Character design essentially allows us to proceed in two directions: you can start from available libraries or you can create graphic assets from scratch.

When we start from ready-made vector or motion graphics libraries, we will definitely have little room for maneuver but, with a little practice, we can definitely achieve satisfactory results.

First identify your purpose: if your characters remain static (will you add vignettes or a voice-over?) to achieve a certain degree of originality you will want to compose them with a series of body parts (arms, clothes, facial elements, etc.) and modify them to create a novel character.

Creating a character will be like creating a jigsaw puzzle, made up of different parts that will, in turn, fit together harmoniously.

If, on the other hand, you plan to create animated characters from libraries, you will need to identify a good starting template.

For motion graphics, there are numerous products on the market (just do a search online) that allow you to take advantage of character rigging techniques in an agile and fast way.

Many of these templates feature a set of pre-configured animations that will help you save a lot of time indeed!

But what is **character rigging**?

Character rigging is the construction of a structure, a real character framework that allows you to turn a static image into an animation.

Artists working on character rigging prepare a series of separate pieces (or rigs) for each part of the character, such as facial expressions and limb movements.

Each body part will then be a part of the total animation, and with a series of automations in the motion graphics software, you will have the opportunity to create truly original actions!

Rigging allows you to create, even from existing libraries, entirely new animations.

This is why character animations are, often and often, a sum of elements and a clever reduction of unnecessary movements.

Animation work is by no means an easy job, and, for this reason, if you are a novice content creator, it may be useful for you to go in search of already made animations to include within your courses.

Using templates for motion graphics will allow you, above all, to very easily modify costumes and animations for your characters that you can insert into a digital set and export for authoring on eLearning content platforms such as DynDevice.

Conclusions

If you need to enhance your eLearning course by including safety or soft skills topics, you will need to create a verisimilar situation to draw your audience into the issue you plan to tell them about.

My advice is to produce original content or, when that is not possible, to create well-structured characters that will allow you to reach an unprecedented level in your productions.

Dubbing also plays its part: the viewer's attention will be especially active if we use a good speaker, with the ability to record the text of the script with a bend...a little more theatrical than the usual commentary on slides in a course!

It's all about using a good dose of creativity and starting to learn new techniques for content creation. Relying on a content creator skilled in motion graphics will also enable you to achieve your desired goals.

Whether you are an instructional designer or a content creator, don't underestimate the power of a project with animated characters in your next eLearning course.

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