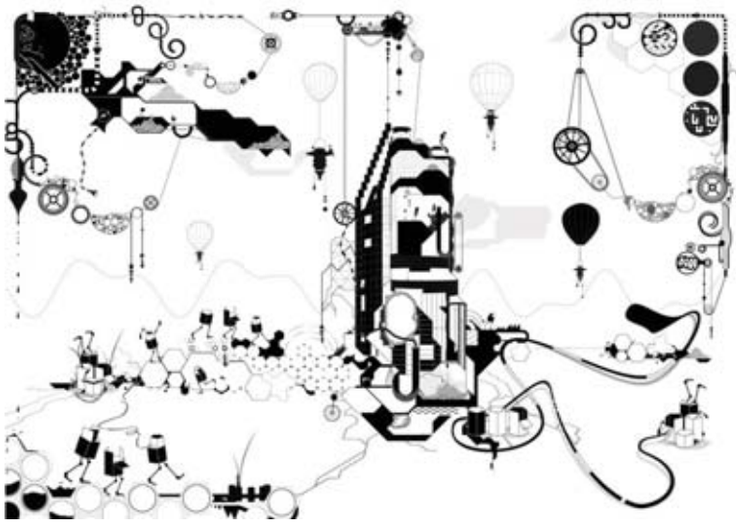
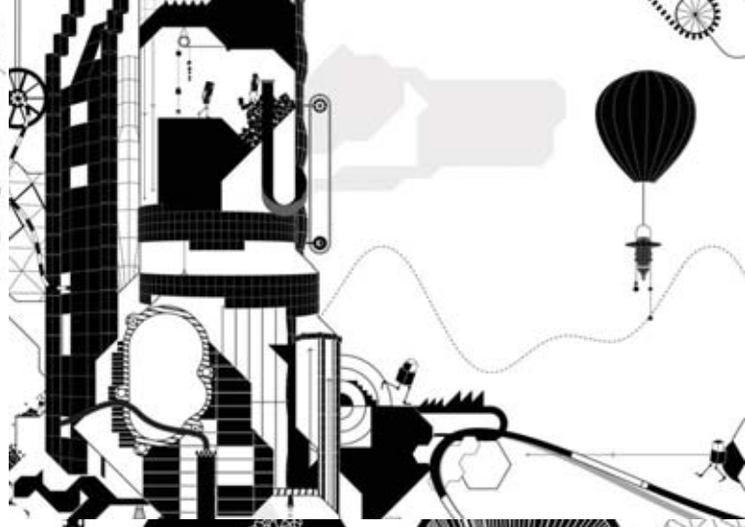
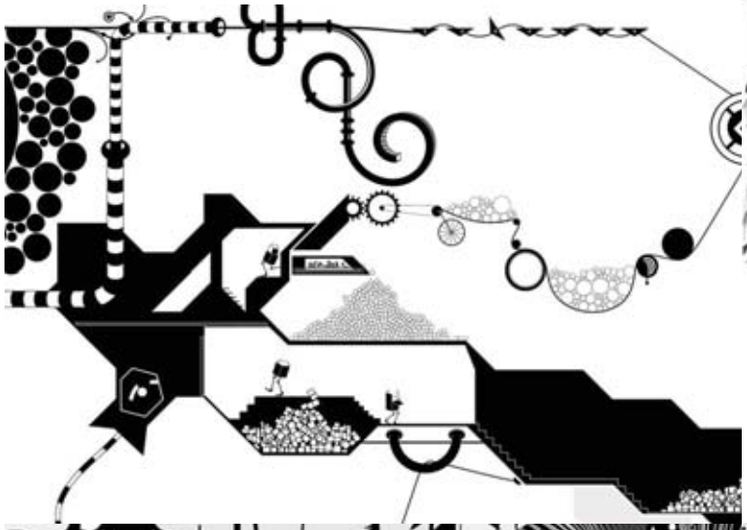
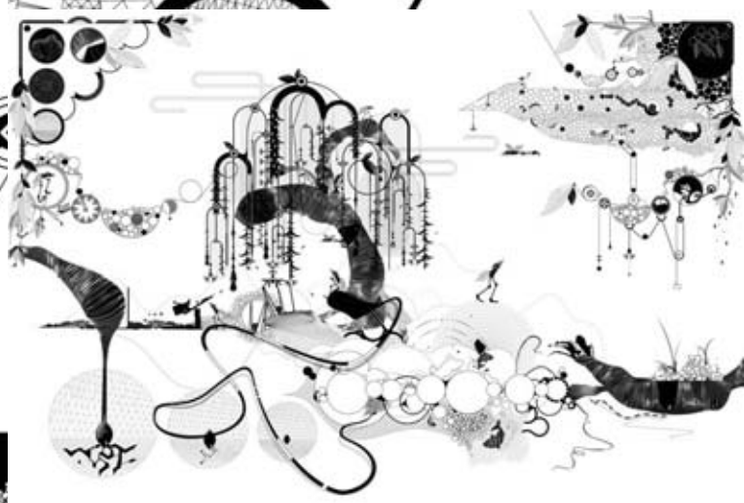




Emily Gobeille

Emily Gobeille is an art director and designer currently working in the motion graphics industry. Her recent project, 'Funky Forest' is an immediately engaging, interactive and brightly-coloured experience.
Kate McCurdy spoke with Emily to learn about the artist's drive and passion for designing for children.





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Autumnal beginnings

Emily grew up in a small town in Connecticut, among lots of cows, cornfields and apple orchards. She recalls that 'growing up in New England where the seasons change in a very definite and visual way fostered my love for every bit of design in nature - and also my love of cranberry juice.'

In 1996 Emily moved to Boston where she received a BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design with a concentration in graphic and interaction design. At MassArt, an institution known for their solid design program, she learned the fundamentals such as design principles, colour theory, and typography. After graduating she worked for three years as a print and interactive designer with companies including Razorfish and Big Blue Dot, a studio specialising in design for children. Keen to work on her own projects again, Emily moved to New York to attend the Design and Technology MFA program at Parson's School of Design. At Parsons she was able to focus on designing interactive systems within a narrative context and also found a love for motion graphics.

Thesis project

As part of her MFA, Emily completed a thesis project using the DVD as a medium for interactivity in order to make education for children fun.

The goal of her thesis project was to create a narrative experience for children aged 3-5 that was entertaining, provided an opportunity for autonomous choice-making and was a platform for learning.

'I developed an interactive DVD fable called *The Best Fort Ever*. The overarching story is about the character's quest to find the Great Inventor. The project's main story is broken down into smaller sub-story sequences, each containing its own lesson, connected by the branching narrative thread. These smaller chunks were more manageable for young children's attention span and also allow for changes in tempo, interaction and style.'

For this project Emily wrote a branching narrative, built the puppet characters, shot them on greenscreen and then composited them into her animated designs.

The illustrations in children's literature were a major inspiration for this project.

'I wanted to create visual worlds that were memorable and captivating. The variety of visual treatments also function as cues for the user in the story and for pacing purposes.'

In this sense, the DVD seemed the perfect medium for Emily's thesis project. She felt that its potential for interactivity had not yet been exploited. The greatest advantages of the DVD were that as a medium it is familiar and accessible to children without requiring adult supervision, as well as being able to support rich audio and graphics without any load time.

(above, top to bottom)
Thesis project – Big Rot and Little Ian walking sequence, Kes the gatekeeper and Izzie underground sequence, Big Rot and the apricot sequence, Red Roger's flying machine.

(previous page, clockwise from top left)
Here to There – City, poster series for children, **City** – poster detail, **Jungle** – poster detail, **Jungle** – poster series for children, **Jungle** – poster detail, **Jungle** – poster detail, **City** – poster detail.

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Funky Forest

The 'Funky Forest' was produced as a collaborative project with Theodore Watson. Emily and Theodore created an immersive, interactive ecosystem where children manage a virtual forest by creating trees with their bodies, and then divert and dam water flowing from the digital waterfall to feed the forest. The types of sounds and creatures that inhabit the forest depend on the amount of water the forest receives. Their goal was to create an open system that would allow children to play and see how their actions affect the ecosystem.
'Funky Forest' made its debut at the 2007 Cinekid Festival in Amsterdam. After working on the project for two weeks straight, they were astonished at the positive reaction from the kids when they first entered the space.
'[The children] loved it. They even realised that the creatures would fly away when they got too close and spent hours trying to trap them.'

'Funky Forest' has been Emily's favourite project so far, as she was able to experience seeing the first-hand the children's reactions to their project.
'It was incredibly rewarding to see kids really playing - and in ways that we could not have imagined. For some it was quiet exploration and at other times there were 18-20 frantic kids in the space with a team managing the water, a team creating trees and a few "managers" telling the teams where trees and water were needed.'
Being able to accomplish this project from what Theodore and Emily had imagined together has been very satisfying for them both, as well as inspirational, and Version 2.0 is now in the works! A video of 'Funky Forest' in action can be viewed on Emily's website (zanyparade.com).

An ongoing creative collaboration

Emily continues to foster her drive to develop fun teaching tools for children, as is shown by her recent collaborative project - again with Theodore Watson - an experimental poster series entitled 'Here to There'. 'Jungle' and 'City' are the first two in the series for children that combine science, nature, algorithm and design to feed their imagination and curiosity.
Emily's motivation for the series stems from her own childhood memories.
'We remember in detail the pictures, paintings and patterns that were on the walls around us as we grew up. We realised that this long-term access to a child's attention is a great opportunity to introduce concepts of mathematics, design and narrative in a fun, intuitive and visual way.'
Emily and Theodore developed a suite of software tools to programmatically build elements based around concepts of algorithm, permutation, cause and effect, and topology. These elements are the building blocks for the different worlds and become a part of the stories being told. The programmatic-designed elements are mixed with hand-illustrated forms and quirky creatures to create a bizarre hybrid world that talks to both hemispheres of the brain.

'Theodore and I really enjoy working together and I think we learn a lot from one another', Emily says. 'We share a similar enthusiasm and excitement when it comes to seeing an idea through to its solution. Because our approaches to problems and strengths are different, we're able to bounce off each other and end up somewhere where we could not have gotten on our own. We have some awesome brainstorming sessions and just need to find the time to make all of our ideas.'

(above, top to bottom)
Funky Forest, Diverting the water, Trees take the shape of your body, Forest creatures.

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Inspiration

When asked whose work inspires her own projects, and whom she aspires to, Emily acknowledges two artists in particular.

'The kinetic sculptor Arthur Ganson has always been an inspiration to me. There is a quality to his work that I love. It is whimsical, mechanical, intricate, delicate, graceful and often quite funny. And of course Jim Henson has been a huge influence on me. I would love for my work to create a similar feeling of wonder and delight for people.'

As well as artists, Emily cannot ignore the influence of her growing up on her work.

'I'm definitely inspired by nature and I love warm colours and texture. I've tried not to have a distinct style, but as much as I try to avoid it, there are some recurring themes and elements that keep popping up in my work: trees, birds, bicycles, sneakers, weather - all of the things I'm obsessed with. Maybe I should embrace it and see what happens.'

The process - from paper to the screen

Emily is very much a 'paper person', and she always starts designing on paper, rather than going straight to the computer. She keeps a lot of sketchbooks and paper around her so that she can jot down ideas and working things out throughout the design process.

'I find it easier to get ideas down quickly without getting too caught up in the details,' she says. 'For me it's important to get away from the computer screen, especially during the early design stages.'

Emily explains how the story behind each project develops with the design process. 'While I'm working on a project I tend to make up stories about the design. It makes it fun for me and helps when I know I'll be sitting in front of the computer for the next ten hours. I think that's when all of the quirky details come out - because they are part of the story.'

Up ahead

Emily has three new projects in the works. The first is another collaborative project with Theodore, which explores the way that people communicate with nature, and will make its debut mid-year at the Riviera Gallery in Brooklyn. Emily also has two projects of her own which both contain themes of the body, what it's made up of and how it moves. 'Inside Out' investigates the human body, while 'Body Language' is a short film about a journey and mood and communication through body language.

Foremost in her work is Emily's passion for children and seeking to engage them in an entertaining and educational way, and this is sure to continue to inform her work into the future.

'I love the way that children approach the world,' she says. 'There is something amazing about the way their imagination flows between fantasy and their perception of reality. There is little hesitation when approaching something new or tackling a problem. What I love about designing for children is that opportunity to tell a story and provide a space for learning where they can create their own rules and logic. I also find it to be the most rewarding.'

zanyparade.com/v8

(above, top down)
Body Language – still frames.
(bottom image)
Body Language – character sheet.

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