



MAESTROS OF ANIMATION

INTERVIEW WITH João Seabra of Jump Willy

By Sharon Maloney

On the day I meet João Seabra, co-founder of Jump Willy, the Umbrella Revolution has snarled traffic in town and I'm running late, first in mile long jams and then amidst the rabbit's warren that is Cyberport. João arrives at the door with a slightly ruffled air of a man who sits at computers all day. He greets my apologies with a warm grin, a laid back "No problem!" and I'm ushered into a small office with a fantastic view. I can see immediately why they have chosen it. A floor-to-ceiling window looks out on lush, bamboo trees and a beautiful view of the sea and outlying islands. It's a calm, quiet view, no doubt providing inspiration to the creative minds here.

I am excited. It's not every day that you get to meet someone who makes cartoons digital art. When I tell my 6 year old son I'm meeting someone who does animation, he begs to be allowed to come along. My kid and I are big animation nerds and have watched every Pixar and Disney film and short going. We both know that I'll be watching some cool stuff today and he wants in. This award-winning creative studio has been pioneering a 'start-to-finish' digital animation service including advertising, corporate videos, branded entertainment and animated TV series for illustrious clients like as BMW, Lexus, Proctor & Gamble, TED, Stella Artois, H&M, Sony Ericsson, Vodafone, and Universal Music.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

Jump Willy was founded in Porto, in 2007 by João, a university professor of 3D animation, and Pedro Marques, a music composer. They met through working as free-lancers on various projects and sharing a mutual appreciation of each other's art. A

chance encounter at Berlin airport a while later led to Pedro's idea that they should start up a company offering a unique service to clients, since their respective areas usually fell within the same production timeline. Together, he reasoned, they would be able to offer competitive rates and "better, more integrated products to clients".

However, leaving the safety and stability of a secure, well-paid job is never easy. Both had full-time, lucrative careers and João initially expressed uncertainty at the change of direction his life was taking. "It was a very hard step to say that we are going to quit our very stable jobs, especially at our age. I think it's a very common dilemma among start-ups." João laughs when he recounts how he thought "it was a good dream. I thought, 'One day!'" But he

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reckoned without the single-minded determination of Pedro who sent him one email every day for a year, saying the same thing, "Have you quit your job yet?" After more than 300 emails and a whole year of badgering, João caved in and agreed to go for a coffee and talk about the next step.



WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

Coming from an artistic background, neither of them had any financial experience. There wasn't even a business plan initially. Nothing was written down and setting up the business was an organic process. They focused their energies on producing and delivering beautiful projects to clients, relying on word of mouth to help them grow. "We didn't have a business plan, but now, eight years later I see that our business plan was very clear in our heads. We just didn't call it a business plan. But we had goals. We had a real vision of where we wanted to be. We had a strategy. We had everything. Just not written on paper" he laughs.

Their strategy was to move in together with another friend to save on rent, keep their jobs for a year, and work on their business every night and weekend. Being with someone almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week would have been the kiss of death for many partnerships. I ask if it was hard to live and work with his business partner. João smiles and says it was never an issue. Their synced vision as artists, combined with very different personalities, pushed them through the long hours of work. Pedro's organised, methodical approach allowed him to focus on work from 9-6 and then switch off entirely, not thinking about work after hours. João says proximity to his work project was more difficult. "I found it harder to work where I lived. I had more problems dealing with that than work. I cannot switch off."

Despite the lack of a formal business plan, they were both financially-savvy and disciplined. Having been raised in an environment of being only able to buy things that they could afford, they carried this lesson forward into their business. "The good thing is that we were both very educated about never having loans. We didn't ask our parents for money.

Our mentality was that we have some money, but we needed much more if we want to start something serious. Luckily that first year went really well. It was very tiring because we had full-time jobs, working nights and weekend. All the money we had coming in from the company, we would save it. After a year, we had our own investment.” This principle of financial independence is a matter of pride and one they hold to today, as they remain free from the ties of investors. From that point on, they were able to rent their first office and hire staff.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION,

Initially the pair faced greater problems than mere exhaustion and saving money. Their first office was opened in their home city at the height of the European economic crisis. In a small, centralized country, launching a start-up from Porto, the second biggest city in Portugal, traditionally sounded a death knell to most fledgling companies. “It’s very rare you hear of successful businesses outside of the capital, especially our area which mainly targets advertising. All the main international agencies are based in Lisbon.” However, their determination in the quality of their work pushed them to achieve something remarkable and enduring. “We were also lucky that we had a good network when we started, in Europe. Most of our work was not in Portugal and that’s the way we were able to stay in the second biggest city, and not the capital, even though we were pressured a lot to move. As an internal country statement, we wanted to show the media, to everyone, that you can actually have a company there and still be successful.” They still have the original office in Porto and refuse to open in Lisbon. “Now we actually make our clients come the whole way, 300 kilometers to us,” he smiles.

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INVESTMENTS

What did the company then spend their hard-earned money on? They invested in people. “Good people”, as João emphasizes. As a university professor, João looked to his former students for artistic talent. “I wanted to hire my best, past students. I wanted to catch them before the competition.” The company’s strength undoubtedly comes from understanding and appreciating the individual assets and talents of each team member, which helped the company to grow rapidly in its first few years. This proved particularly important during the turbulent economic crisis when other companies fell by the wayside. By embracing a multitude of artistic disciplines, Jump Willy’s creative

team is able to conceptualize, develop and produce custom-made content in all forms of digital media to produce a high-end product and service for their clients. João’s pride in the company is clear to see. He shows me some projects they have produced for different clients and I’m very impressed with the unique quality of their animation which rivals anything I have seen on the big screen with my kid. There is a delightful whimsy to each video he shows me, in the characters that come to life in each story and in the music. João tells me each video is still created with a unique hand-made approach, with every little detail given attention, before being translated to digital form.



WHAT’S IN A NAME?

I am curious about how João and Pedro came to choose the company’s name and João tells me that an episode of The Simpsons is the inspiration.

The pair had a long list of “not very serious” names to choose from, because “we knew our work was being taken seriously.” They instead wanted to make a statement to show their company’s informal and playful nature. The decision for picking their company name came because by that time, it was the name that came up less often on Google searches and João and Pedro wanted to have SEO leverage. “We needed clients around the world to find us very easily on the web” he explains.

This particular name comes from an old Simpsons’ episode, where Homer is watching the classic kids movie “Free Willy”. In the Simpsons version of the movie, Willy the Whale is trying to jump over the main character and kills it in the process. During all this Homer is shouting “Jump Willy, Jump Willy!” at the TV. And there it is. Willy the Whale kills a person while Homer cheers it on. I can’t stop laughing. There is nothing esoteric or Feng Shui about their approach. It is refreshing and lighthearted.

LOOKING EAST

Jump Willy now have offices in LA and Hong Kong with 12 people overall. Hong Kong is both personal and professional choice for João. With other Asian powerhouses like Shanghai (where João’s father lives) and Singapore on the table, they were initially indecisive. João tells me that part of his childhood in the 80s was spent in Macau, where his sister now resides. The city’s familiarity is only one of the many reasons why he chose Hong Kong for Jump Willy’s Asian base.

With Europe in state of ‘stagnation’ as João neatly puts it, their team being young and ambitious and China being the fastest growing market, the company felt that Asia was where they needed to be. When I ask João what advantages HK offers over other Asian cities, his reply is succinct. “The internet is pretty damn fast!” From his company’s point of view, this is a necessity in their field. It is also chiefly why they chose Cyberport as their hub. 3D animation depends on a secure, stable and ultimately fast connection



to move massive amounts of data and means João can liaise with his team back in Porto “and it almost looks as if I am in the next room.”

The city’s proximity to other Asian countries and its bureaucratic efficiency and organization rank high too. “I come from a country which is the opposite!” João speaks of Asia with great love. Every holiday in the last few years has been spent backpacking around different countries in the region. “I did everything from Mongolia to Cambodia! I knew I would fit in Asia. It’s a culture I admire. It’s the people I really admire, especially in Hong Kong. I love it that I can book meetings really close together and make them all. It’s like a clock.” When I ask if he’s had any difficult or bad experiences here, João says he’s still learning to decipher the nuances in faces and meaning here. He explains that in client meetings, people often seem really eager and say that they want to work together and that in Europe this means business has concluded and an agreement has been reached. Here, “sometimes you never hear from them again. They don’t like to say no to your face. Everything is ‘great’. In Europe, if they don’t like your work, your style, they tell you.” It is

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perplexing for the outsider but he’s learning to adjust his expectations. He’s much more cautious about “jumping all in.”

KEEPING CREATIVE JUICES FLOWING

“Some things distinguish our work. We are seen not just as a very good technical company, but everyone I have hired since the beginning is a creative person. The creative side is what distinguishes our work. Our reputation comes from our

unique style. We came here to bring something new.”

To keep their creativity going, João says he spoils his team a lot. I ask if working with a creative team is like working with small children for the amount of ego involved and João laughs self-deprecatingly and agrees. They have a relaxed working style, allowing each person the respect and freedom to set their own routine, even if that means needing to play Playstation for an hour! Each summer, staff are given the freedom to work on a personal project to add to the company portfolio. This summer has been no different and João has been working on a labour of love, a paean to Hong Kong, which is soon to be released.

Before I leave, I ask João if he could go back, would he change anything. His reply is philosophical. “I wouldn’t change anything. Even the things we failed at, we learned from, and did them again and did them much better the second time around.” Great advice for any company, big or small.

Jump Willy