

Design Notes Episode 22 - Punanimation

Google Design Podcast Transcript

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Liam Spradlin: Design Notes is a show from Google Design about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host Liam.

Each episode, we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice. In this episode, I spoke with Bee Grandinetti and Hedvig Ahlberg, two thirds of the trio that founded Punanimation, a community and platform for women, trans, and non-binary folks working in animation and motion design. In the interview, we talked about how Punanimation got started...

Bee Grandinetti: It was just the three of us, and we were like, "oh let's start trying to connect more women that we know that do animation, and have like a space that we can debate, ask questions, encourage each other." And that space is hard to just grow super organically-

Liam: ... And how animation is informed by the music and motion of the world around us.

Hedvig Ahlberg: I see a lot of similarities in the way of timings and the musicality of it. I sometimes compare it a bit to dancing. I don't know how many times when we used to live together, we used to like open doors and like, "can you record me when I'm walking," or, like, jumping, because ... just to understand the rhythm of like a body, or how objects move and shapes.

Liam: Bee, Hedvig, welcome to Design Notes.

Hedvig: Thank you.

Bee: Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Liam: So to get started, just by way of introduction, I'm interested to hear about each of your journeys coming to motion design, meeting one another, and also forming Punanimation. And Hedvig, we'll start with you.

Hedvig: Yeah. So, I think. Ever since I graduated high school, I was sure I wanted to work with moving images somehow. So I studied a bit, like loose courses, like media, interactive media, a bit of coding, a bit of everything. And then, I just found out about Hyper Island and Stockholm. And I saw that they had a motion graphics course which I had no idea what it was. So I just started Google, and look into what motion graphics was basically. And I just started off flash and animated a really crappy video, and that was my application. But, somehow I got in. (laughs)

Hedvig: Then I just fell in love with motion design, and editing, and all kinds of filmmaking, basically.

Bee: So I grew up in Brazil and, you know, in my hometown, Belo Horizonte, and that's where I studied design. I actually, originally, studied graphic design for four years. Graduated in graphic design, was working with graphic design for ... a little while, and year and a half, I moved to Sao Paulo, was working with graphic design there. And then, I always had this thing with moving images but I never gave it a proper chance. And that's when I decided to drop everything in Sao Paulo and move to Stockholm. And went to Hyper Island as well to study in motion graphics. And that's where I met Hedvig.

Hedvig: And then the magic happen.

Bee: Yes. (laughs) Yeah, and then we, you know, we had an amazing year at Hyper, became really good friends. And then at Hyper you have this moments during your education that you're supposed to find an internship. And I ended up having my first internship in Stockholm. And then, Hedvig and a couple of other friends from our class, they came to London for their internships. And my second internship was also in London. And then, I came over, I met them, we started living together. And it was, you know, super fun time.

Bee: And I remember that, I think it was like at one point, you know, very quickly when we were studying, we realized that everything was very heavily male dominated. Even though, like, our class was 50/50, or like it was a good ratio of men and women. I personally started to realize and maybe from the hundred videos that I would like from Vimeo, maybe five were made by women or had women as directors. I think I remember, like, one day when we were at home and I was like, "oh, Hedvig, wouldn't it be fun if we just grabbed, like, a bunch of gifts made by girls and put it into a tumbler or, you know, start collecting it?"

Bee: And then, I think we had something in our Hyper class that everyone just used for some reason like this [inaudible 00:04:16], Punani, which means, you know, is the word for ladies part in (laughs), in Hawaiian. And it's just like, "oh yeah," Hedvig was like, "oh we should call it Punanimation," (laughs) just taking a piss out of it. (laughs)

Bee: And then we met Lynn, who was also good Swede, came to London for a job as a junior animator. She shared the same opinions and a lot of the same frustrations we had. And I think when the three of us became really good friends in London, all going through the same things very, you know, early in our careers, and sharing the same frustrations, we just started to shape it up to what it is today. Like first we started with Facebook group. Then, you know, it was just the three of and we were like, "oh let's start, you know, trying to connect more women that we know that do animation, and have, like, a space that we can debate, that we can ask questions, that we can encourage each other."

Bee: And that space, it started to just grow super organically. Like, our friends started inviting their friends. And, yeah, and then it grew to be like ... today we have over 3000 members on the Facebook group from all over the world. And, yeah, things just escalated from there, really. But it was like, it started with the three of us on the Facebook group, and then it just build up, like super organically.

Hedvig: Yeah, and why we became friends was, I think, from the beginning we shared a lot of core values. I remember watching your grad film from graphic design. (laughs)

Bee: So shitty. (laughs)

Hedvig: But what ... I remember, was it about the female orgasm?

Bee: It was like ... Yeah, so back then when I graduated in graphic design, I made this insane six minute video, which is, you know, absolutely poorly animated.

Hedvig: But it was so good.

Bee: (laughs) Yeah, but so bad. (laughs)

Hedvig: But it was like a six minute video about sexual taboos for girls. Just debating, you know, like, think it was about masturbation and orgasm and faking organism. So it was about those things, basically, and using

motion to talk about those issues. And I think I showed that to you and that's when we started our— That's how we became friends!

Bee: ... our little feminist bond. (laughs)

Hedvig: Yeah, definitely. I remember, I have such a vivid memory of that moment I was like, "this woman is perfect."

Bee: (laughs) Oh my god. Fangirling.

Hedvig: Fan girly. Definitely. I think that's sort of what sparked a lot of this core values for Punanimation as well, because we shared the same sort of worldview, and we had such a strong will to change as well. And that's what we channeled, then, in action with Punanimation.

Liam: So it sounds like there's this aspect of Punanimation which is forming a collective for animators, but also actually affecting change in the industry, beyond just highlighting individuals. What are some of the more tactical things that Punanimation is doing, or has been working on to address the lack of women and non-binary folks in the industry?

Hedvig: You can split up Punanimation into different parts. It's the support part, the community, the Facebook group, et cetera. Where we want people to feel a lot more confident about their work, we want them to share, and to feedback on each other, to collaborate, to basically give a lot more confidence to women, trans, and non-binary folks. And then we have the promotion part, which is the Instagram account, and our Vimeo, where we tried to feature content from more diverse talent that you wouldn't see in your normal feed, for example. So I think this is our two main parts of affecting the industry and creating a change.

Bee: We see, like, there's not a single simple answer to why there is this gap of having loads of girls in universities and schools but then, when it comes to the actual industry, there's barely any girl in animation and motion, or having higher roles as creative directors or directors.

I think, like, first the group came up as this space that you could feel more confident and comfortable with, you know, sharing your struggles, sharing your work, and just building up the confidence, basically. And then, as the group grew bigger ... Last year, like we had such a good momentum in the group and it was like self-perpetuating. You know, like, people were posting every day and encouraging each other, and being so committed to the group. They were like, "well, we need to take advantage that this is

such a good momentum, and we need to start doing more stuff." So it was this year at Women's Day that we released first directory.

So we finally released Punanimation.com, which is a directory that you can easily, easily research women trends and non binary people working with animation and motion graphics. And you can filter them by the city that they live in, you can filter them by the skills sets, you know, like, stop motion, 2D animation, and, you know, all the disciplines within TV. Maybe it's character animation, maybe it's more UX, UI, 3D.

And you can also filter them by the software. Because we know that, a lot of the times, when producers are looking for people that do animation, they need people that do, specifically, like flash or after-effects, and all of that. Because, a lot of the times people, they have the will to change they know, "oh yeah there's not that many women, but you know I don't have the time to look for them," or, "I don't have the resources." Like, "where can I find these women?".

Hedvig: Basically wanted to just create an answer to the question that we all heard, "but where's all the women?" Here you go. Here are the women.

Liam: I want to go back to the directory for a second. Because if you go to an Punanimation.com, you'll see a page of animation samples from all of the folks that are part of Punanimation. And there's like a very clear motif and palette and everything that aligns with the Punanimation identity. I'm really curious what the brief is like, or what you asked for from motion designers to get those.

Bee: So this ... it's literally like we give them a color palette, which is the colors that we've been using since the beginning and the brief is just like, "have allusion to a triangle in the middle." It's important to say as well, because I think it's a part of our story and how we grew. It was three years ago when we started, so 2015. In the beginning, like, the group was very focused on, you know, bringing women together.

Bee: The three of us were like, all cis women. And we just wanted to bring together people that were like us and as the group started to grow bigger and bigger, we're like, well, maybe, you know, let's open the party a bit more. Because we're very aware that the industry is very non diverse, not only when it comes to women. There is barely any people of color, and, you know, more queer people and gay people. It's like it's basically straight, white, cis men. And as we grow older, we also, hopefully, become better people. (laughs) Or at least we work hard on trying to become

better people.

And we're like, "well, why-why might we not just open to, as well, like, trans and non-binary people?". And we've been trying to make, you know, arrangements to make them feel welcomed as well. But we are aware of, for example, that, you know, there's barely enough trans and non-binary people as well. But, it's just trying to make room and hopefully they will come, as well, as they feel more comfortable.

Hedvig: And we're aware that our logo implies a vagina. (laughs)

Bee: Yeah. (laughs) Yeah. So that's the thing, you know, in the beginning the whole thing was all Girl Power Movement and that's why the triangle is an illusion to the punani. (laughs)

But things has been slowly adjusting to try to be a bit more welcoming to other people as well, other minorities in the industry as well.

Liam: I kind of want to dig into the motif of the animation samples, a little bit further as well because there's something I'm curious about. In just the discipline of motion design, which is kind of, I guess, portraying a certain style as motion designer. When you're dealing with one animation sample, obviously, you have to choose a style to kind of represent your work but I think it's often the case the motion designers have many different styles that they're able to embody in their work. And I'm curious what your thoughts are on that generally, and how you've managed to that in your own experiences.

Hedvig: First of all, I struggle with the world having a style, because I think that puts so much pressure on people, especially when, when you study, et cetera, to find like your own style. Like that's something I think just comes with time. That's just something you develop after like working and working and just doing stuff, basically. And I think sometimes it's just random, really. It's just something that happens, and you can't really control it. But yeah, I think Bee's more fit to answer this since you do a lot of different ... (laughs)

Bee: Yeah, I see a lot of directors for example, that they have this recipe of ... define the style that they are comfortable with and also people seem to like them. Seems to be, you know, successful not only with ... You know, with the crowds and also you know, get them money. And I see a lot of people attaching themselves to one single file and bringing it to exhaustion. Like, even, you know, the same color palette. And it works.

I personally get insanely bored. If I work on always, you know, things are always looking the same or, you know, if I'm doing too much like vector stuff. I'm personally, like, I'm sick of vectors for a couple of years now. That's like, you know, it's very down on my portfolio because I've been digging more, I don't know, organic shapes and textures, more likely. But I try to do a couple of different things and explore, like, the things that I'm, at the time, more interested in. Maybe I have a couple of references in mine, like, "oh yeah, I saw that yesterday it looks cool." And then I combine them and I'm like, "oh I should experiment with bigger hands now." And just trying to navigate within those, those things.

But I think it's personal, like, you know, some people, they really nail one thing that is very unique. No one else has done it, and maybe they want to stick to their guns and just do that extensively until they can get jobs in that style. But, I think it's personal, like what you feel comfortable with. I definitely don't feel comfortable doing the same thing to exhaustion. I need change, and I need change to get excited about whatever it is that I'm doing.

Hedvig: I guess it also comes down to if you illustrate and animate, or if you just animate. If you're just like jumping crew as an animator or motion designer, because then, I guess, you tend to do a lot of different styles because you work for an art director or a director that has a specific way of thinking. So I guess that also depends on what you're used to. Like, what kind of setting you're used to work in.

Liam: I guess I would ask if there are other changes that you've seen in the industry over time, not just in perhaps what people are doing, but maybe even the work that's being produced or the trends that are emerging, like, as these changes take place?

Bee: One thing that I noticed, myself, in my own behavior, was that three years ago, he would ask me like, "oh, do you know any girls doing motion," or, you know, "who are your role models?", and stuff. I would be like, "I-I-I don't know." Maybe I could list you like three girls that I knew that were doing kick ass stuff. Maybe they existed, but I just didn't know of them.

And, you know, these days, I'm always recommending people that I met through Punimation. Whenever I can get a freelance job, I'm like, "oh but you should reach out to this, this, this and that." And there's like a full list if people ask me like, "oh, can you recommend me someone to speak at this conference?", like, "we need more girls and many talented people,"

and I'll be like, "well, here's a bunch." You know, I know who to send these people to and is not only for the sake of like, "oh they need to have a more diverse kind of lineup." I fully trust that these people are insanely talented and more than capable of doing it. It's not only that I know the names, but I also know that they are more than capable of being where they are.

It's been really nice to sit down and realize that I've changed my behaviors and my perception and that I know way more than I knew, three years back, you know. I could at least on, like, a handful of people that I knew.

Liam: I guess I would ask then, also, what are the changes that you would still like to see? Besides just more forward progress.

Bee: You know what? I think, like, what I would love to see because I was working in a big studio here in London and has a couple of floors. And then the first floor, which is production. It was literally just girls, maybe two guys, but you know just girls.

And then I was working on the upper floors, which was animators and creatives and stuff. And it's me and a bunch of dudes. And also, yet, they had one black guy amongst the creatives, so everyone was white as well. So, I think, like, ideal scenario, I would go in a big studio like that and you know production. You see this big diverse range of people and all floors, you know, you wouldn't know which floor is what. This floor could easily be production, that floor could be, you know, the creative part of it. And I think that, that would be really happy scenario.

Hedvig: So there was a study done a couple of years ago. It was called The Great British Diversity Experiment, where they got together bunch of different people. They tried to create as diverse teams as possible in terms of gender, in terms of bringing a lot more people disabilities, people of color into the teams to just try to make as mixed teams as possible. And then they just created all this data based on their creative solutions they come up with. And it turned out so good, apparently. I think they said that the more different people you have in a room, the more different ideas you will have. And by that, I guess the more creative ideas you will have.

Bee: 'Cause, like, yeah, innovation-

Hedvig: Yeah.

Bee: ... I think that the quote was like, "innovation comes from unconnected ideas", and in the room full of, you know, people who are diverse and

come from completely different backgrounds, is way more likely for you to have different ideas that haven't been connected before than in a room where, you know, everyone is kind of the same and has the same background. So that's why it's so important to have, you know, a diverse team, especially when working with creative stuff. Or, when working with communication, I guess that's the biggest one. Because how can you communicate with a diverse audience of your team is not diverse? Definitely.

Liam: Right. Obviously the people who are in leadership positions now would have the power to make this change. But what about just practicing motion designers in the world? What are some steps that maybe they could take?

Bee: I think like the very first thing because, especially when we are in a position of privilege, it's hard to be aware of your own privilege. 'Till it bugs us, until we feeling misplaced, we're not really, maybe, aware of our environment. And I think the first thing is just to turn your radar on and start being a little bit aware. Just to know, like, start in a healthy way to question yourself.

You step in-in your room, like, "oh, what is this room?" How many guys are there? Like, oh, how many girls? And how many people of color? Like, how many immigrants? Which roles are they in? Who is in the power positions? When we go out for lunches, do we invite everyone in the room? Or are we excluding anyone in the room? And once to turn your radar on, magical things happen. I think it starts to do one plus one, and you start to realize a couple of things. If you feel that someone is not being comfortable, can you make that person's life easier? Especially if you're in a situation of power, that maybe you feel comfortable. So maybe you can make that person's life a bit easier, and invite that person over for lunch. Or, you know ask, "oh, what do you think about this?" And just pay attention to the day-to-day dynamics that happen inside your studio. Even on the tiny things, like, who is making coffee? Is there someone that is feeling that she has to go around and make coffee and become the mama of the studio for some reason?

It's on the tiny things as well like is ... on the meetings, is there someone running over someone else? Is someone that is always silent, where someone else is taking the stage for himself? And especially like when you're in a situation that you feel you have the authority, and the power to intervene, do intervene and try to make it easier for the people who maybe

are not having things as easy as you are.

Hedvig: Definitely and become allies with the people that needs it like, create a little sub group of people that need that extra support, et cetera. I think that's so important.

If you're in that position, that you can employ people and you're writing job ads, try to write it in a way so that the bigger group of people find it fun and interesting to apply for a job, rather than, "we're a cool studio. We love to play ping pong and drink beer," because I don't think that that many women would feel like that's the place they want to be at, you know what I mean? And then you miss out so much talent. So, I just feel like take the responsibility and look into, like, how you can make your studio, your workspace, your collective, whatever, a bit more diverse about how you put out ads, like how you talk to people.

Liam:

I do want to move briefly into the motion design practice generally. There might be listeners out there who are wondering what motion design is like as a practice. So I guess I would just start by asking, what is the starting point for a motion design project?

Hedvig: It all starts with an idea.

Bee: I mean, motion design is a funny one, right, because it's a very weird hybrid, where design meets animation. And by the end of the day it's all animation, but it's this little thing that people are scared of calling it animation, because when you say animation people think like Pixar, and characters, and, you know, traditional frame-by-frame animation. Whereas motion is where people feel comfortable naming when it's like more abstract shapes or the smaller formats like the more commercial things, and music videos, or after effects stuff. But, as Hedvig said, it all starts with an idea and the strong concept, and it's the same with design, you know? Good design meets good storytelling, and then it meets sense of rhythm, and movement, and animation, and all of that to tell the story.

It's very easy to differentiate because, a lot of the times, you see a video that is like absolutely gorgeous, and it moves amazing, but you're gonna forget it in one week. Because you see it; it is like, it blows your mind because it's gorgeous, but you have no clue by the end of it what the video was about.

Have you had that experience like watching something on Vimeo like this

was amazing. What was it about.

Liam: Yeah, exactly.

Bee: And, like I find this all the time, you know. Like, you're gonna forget this videos unless the visuals were super innovative or something, you're going to forget about this videos so easily because being pretty and moving sexy can only get you so far.

By the end of the day it's about the substance. Like, if you see a video that has amazing, mind-blowing concepts and content, and maybe, you know, design is okay, and movement was okay, you're going to remember it because you're going to remember how it made you feel. You're going to remember the message that it gave you. That's the strongest point. All good design starts with good ideas and good concept and the strong message, and something that actually touches people on the specific little knob and turns that little knob.

Hedvig: Stop saying little knob! (laughs)

Bee: I don't know. Was that sexual? I'm- (laughs)

Hedvig: No (laughs).

Liam: (laughs)

Hedvig: Sorry It's my weird humor. I think, also, when designing for animation or starting out with animation motion graphics project, you also have movement in your head. Which is different from when you're designing something still, I think.

Bee: Yeah, I mean, it's funny to compare both because it feels like the animation is the magical side of things, you know, like you're making it move. And I always find, like, interesting to compare both because I think like graphic design is more quickly rewarding. You start putting something together. And you're like, oh, this is shit. But then, like, after a couple of minutes you're like, "oh, that's getting better," and better, and then you start to feel happy about yourself and like, "oh I've done something pretty. It's nice.", And then you print it, and it's like, "ah, nice."

Whereas, with animation, it looks horrible for such a long time until it starts looking good. The reward is so slow. You really have to be, like, a patient person to work with animation because otherwise, it just doesn't

work. But once you get there, the reward is way bigger as well, I feel. It's like, "I made it move!" It's like, you feel like you have a superpower, almost, you know, like it's, it's the most rewarding thing when you feel like, "yeah, you know, it's moving." It-it's ... because it's almost like you're giving life to something, so it's fun.

Liam: And that underscores the importance of having a really strong, substantive concept, I guess. Because, if you don't have that underlying vision you might get impatient and give up before you get to the point where it gets good.

Bee: Yes, absolutely.

Hedvig: Definitely. Yeah.

Liam: I also want to ask about the components of motion design. I'm always interested to hear about what tools are at our disposal and different design practices. So, what are some of the things unique to motion design that help you express that idea, as you're working on it?

Hedvig: I think definitely timing, because I do a lot of live action editing as well. And I'm in the ... at the moment, I'm actually directing my first short film, so. I should ... But yeah, so I do a lot of live action editing and I see a lot of similarities in the way of timings and the musicality of it, if that makes sense. I sometimes compare it a bit to dancing, because I have a background in dancing. I used to dance a lot when I was younger. And I think I benefit a lot from it, especially in editing. Because again, a flow and a rhythm to everything. And I think it's the same with motion design. I mean, I don't know how many times when we used to live together, we used to like open doors and like, "can you record me when I'm walking?", or like jumping, because, just to understand the rhythm of like a body, or how objects move and shapes so you get that understanding. I'm sounding like such a hippie. But to just, like, understand timings and rhythm of things and objects but also an edit or a cut, if that makes sense?

Bee: I think like it is very, very musical, and it was funny though. Like, I don't know if you remember, Hedvig, but in our class, a huge chunk of our class had some sort of connection to rhythm like some people, maybe they were really good musicians. Some people were dancers, and I feel that all of that, you know, feedbacks in my work so much. Because I play a couple of instruments, very poorly; all of them very bad, but you know I do have a little bit of fun playing stuff. And all of that feeds into my sense of rhythm

and anticipation and building tension and, you know, I also done my share of dancing classes when I was a kid. I think that all of this is super connected. I think my design knowledge feeds into the way that I move my objects on a scene because, you know, the layout of how you design something ... also, like, all of this, like, sense of rhythm, and building anticipation, and where to have the focus of the animation. Where you're going to lead the eye of whoever is watching your video.

That's why motion design is such a fun thing because such a combination of things, of different disciplines. For example, like, personally have been getting more and more into character animation lately. And I've been really, really wanting to take some acting classes, just because I think ... whenever I'm animating a character I already do, you know, the acting myself because I think it's so important to feel on your body first. So I can understand the movement, like what's moving first on your body, and you can do it afterwards. And I think, you know, if I really study a little bit of acting and body language, all of that knowledge just feedbacks into the work that you do so much.

Liam: Speaking of character animation, I'm curious about the ways in which things like characters are designed for motion. Is there something about the process of designing something for motion where you're building in that capability? Are there characteristics of the character where you've planned to allow it to move and if so what are those?

Hedvig: There's some stuff on, like, posing. And, you know, how you design it is like you want to find good, readable silhouettes. Like strong poses.

Bee: You see a character, you understand the intent, or you communicate something with it. And, you know, depending on the project, if you have a very short deadline. And you're going to negotiate with the client, like, "hey, this is the design that we have to go because this is going to be more doable, animation-wise, according to the schedule that we have."

But a lot of this amazing projects that we see, super innovative animation-wise, is when people design them not necessarily knowing how they were going to animate it afterwards. Like the design, at first, to the maximum awesomeness that you can be. And then afterwards, they're like, "oh shit how we're going to animate this."

And then they figure out along the way, because a lot of animation is also problem-solving and figuring out like, "oh, okay maybe if I made the hand in flash, or Photoshop, but then the body can be in After Effects, and you

start to connect those things. Yeah, so I guess there's this two scenarios. You know, like one scenario that you have to be very optimal and build your character in a way that is doable, to animate within a certain deadline. Or there's this fun way that you just designed something that you're really happy with, and then afterwards you set this trap for yourself of, "okay. How do I animate this?" (laughs)

Liam: (laughs)

Hedvig: Also on character design, tying it back to Punanimation and creating more diverse industry. That's also something motion designers and designers can have in mind when designing characters to design them with, like, diverse mindset. To think about having a broad range of different characters. When it comes to skin color, or body shapes, and gender, et cetera, et cetera. Because, obviously, once again, it's about communication, right? So, the people you communicate to want to be represented in your animations and your designs. So I think that's also something that's really good to keep in mind when designing.

Bee: I think we have such a massive responsibility, like people who do character design. 'Cause, you know, we're communicating things and it's that old, "you cannot be what you cannot see". And, you know, whenever the clients challenges you, you challenge him back, "why-why can't it be this way? What's the problem about it?".

And a lot of the times you'll find that, picking the fight is, most of the time, is going to be more successful than not. You know, it's just gonna make your client think, and, "yeah, why can't it be this way". And, at the end of the day, it's sending out more diverse, encouraging messages.

Inclusive, yeah.

Bee: Inclusive and encouraging.

Liam: And- and maybe if you do have to pick that fight, then at the very least you've gotten them to the step one of just being aware.

Hedvig: Yes.

Bee: Yeah.

Hedvig: Yes, definitely.

Liam: I think we'll wrap it up there. Thank you again, Bee and Hedvig, for joining me.

Hedvig: Thank you.

Bee: Thank you.

Liam: Subscribe to Design Notes so you don't miss our next episode with New York-based type designer Ksenya Samarskaya You can subscribe on Google Podcasts, iTunes, Spotify, over wherever you listen to podcasts. Thanks for listening.

