

BLANKSPACE: LEARNING FROM AN ANIMATION STUDIO THAT THRIVES THROUGH COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

Background: Amy Ratelle (2014) poignantly wrote, ‘Studio animation is excluded from discussions of modern and contemporary fine art (and design) for a variety of reasons, including the large, complex collaborative process. This paradox is perhaps best explained by the impossibility of crediting an individual artist with the final film of an animation studio’. Indeed, it takes a team of hard-working individuals to make a great piece of motion graphics. This paper takes on an educational approach to understand the merits of animation enabled by collaboration. I spotlight Blankspace Animation Studios, a key proponent of animation collaboration and an industry leader in East Africa. *Problem:* Great motion design looks right when we experience it, but it takes a well-oiled team working in tandem behind the scenes to pull it off. This paper will interrogate what it takes to successfully collaborate and create compelling animated works. Through the lens of Kenya’s most visionary animation studio, we unpack the ingredients that make this animation studio stay ahead of the curve. *Objective:* Most animators go solo, but this agency has cut a niche for themselves through partnerships. The main objective of the study is to define the collaborative animation process. The paper then takes on a deep dive exploring strategies, tools, and techniques that Blankspace Animation Studio employs that make them have synergy across their teams and continuously create inspiring and entertaining content. The paper also investigates mechanisms in place that have aided them to thrive through collaborations. Merits and demerits of going it solo in animation or working as a collaborative entity shall be reflected upon. *Design:* Using qualitative methods, the study uses an exploratory, single case study design. Still, illustrations, video formats of Blankspace’s work were solicited to inform on principles and techniques that animation studios required today. Data was primarily collected from an interview with the founder. A questionnaire was administered for the interview. Other sources were; Blankspace website, essays, journals, and original shorts from celebrated animation studios. *Setting:* The study was carried out in Kiambu, Kenya. *Subjects:* The subject of this study was Blankspace Animation Studio. *Results:* The research results revealed that there is a myriad

of characteristics that animation houses must have. But what stood out was a simple design thinking approach to working on projects which rests in what has been coined, 'Michael Njau's Animation Creation Hierarchy'. **Conclusion:** Many solo-animators are multiskilled and can tackle most areas of production (Draper, 2021). However, to truly thrive in this tough economy, one has to work collaboratively, tap into the multi-diverse expertise siloed in creative teams, interdisciplinary artistic, scientific, and business associations, wider job opportunities, and networks, as a guarantee for long-term success.

Keywords: Blankspace Animation Studio, animation, collaboration, fun

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Most animators in this market 'go solo', but this agency has cut a niche for themselves through partnerships. Blank space stands out as an emerging animation studio that has seen tremendous growth through collaborations. The paper will interrogate, how Blankspace has been able to succeed in the animation industry. What strategies and techniques do they apply in their craft to keep them ahead of the curve? Why opt to run a business collaboratively rather than remain a single, individual animator? What makes them stand out from the rest as Kenya's well sought-after animation agency?

2.0 THEORY

2.1 History of Animation

Animation's history had its origins in the 1880s. Throughout, it has been a 'continuous line of technological inventions that have allowed animators to achieve higher quality effects with greater ease'. At the heart of this development has been the resulting synthesis of creative collaboration (Ebert, Bailey, 2002. P.83).

In the 1930s through the 1950's the Warner Brothers produced some of the most successful cartoons of the twentieth century resulting from effective collaborations between directors, animators, writers, technicians, artists, and musicians (Ebert, Bailey, 2002. P.83).

We could say that this was perhaps the beginning of the successful creative collaboration in the history of commercial animation.

2.2 Animation in Africa

In Africa, the pioneers of animation are considered to be David and Shlomo Frenkel, two Egyptian brothers, who were reportedly inspired by the first Disney studios Mickey Mouse animation (FilmContact. 2012). Unfortunately, this first animated film was destroyed in a fire in Cairo. Some of their later works are still preserved in various museums in Egypt. Besides the Frenkel brother's animated films, early animation found in South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo proves that Africa has a long and rich animation history (FilmContact, 2012).

Just recently, Disney announced a collaboration with the African entertainment company, Kugali Media (Fig. 1). Salaudeen, A. (2021) wrote in the article that, 'through the entertainment company, the friends - Tolu Olowofoyeku, Hamid Ibrahim, and Fikayo Adeola - created a comic book collection called Iwaju, set in a futuristic Lagos, Nigeria's largest city'.

Lion King (FilmContact, 2012) however, this movie tells stories about Africa but has no Africans. Closer home we have had Kenyan animators such as Celeste Wamiru play a leading role as a head animator for the creation of the Tinga Tinga Tales, an animated television series for children. The collaboration was between Kenyan multimedia production company HomeBoyz TV and British production company Tiger Aspect.

2.3 Collaborative Animation

Great motion design looks right when we experience it, but it takes a well-oiled team working in tandem behind the scenes to pull it off. I, therefore, took on the challenge of defining what this collaborative



Fig. 1. Disney Animation tweeted this image to announce their partnership with African entertainment company Kugali. Source: CNN

animation is as collaborations are complex phenomena that can vary widely in nature.

Ratelle, A. (2014) writes, “True creative collaboration,” is a method of making that involves a group of individuals whom all interact with one another to collectively produce a single, final work, which in this case is an animated cartoon.

According to Ebert & Bailey (2002. p.83), animation has always required close collaboration between artists and scientists, poets and engineers. Current trends in computer animation have made successful and effective teamwork a necessity.

Some of the key components the two authors highlight that is critical for professional animators to succeed in the industry are, collaborative teams, mixing artist with different skills that set to enrich the dynamic of the animation output, team to possess an enhanced computer animation technique, being exposed to research issues in computer animation. Some of the technical skills requirements include technical knowledge of graphic and commercial computer software for design, writing procedures in storytelling, modeling, and animation expressions.

In Ebert and Bailey’s (2002) educational book, these 3 themes stand out as being the key ingredients of achieving success in animation; a) working in collaborative team b) cross mixing of expertise and c) group-based education; that is learning from each other.

But in retrospect, animation seems to also be a reflective artistic form of expression. In a thesis by Malory Spicer, she wrote on this saying, for her, ‘Animation is a reflective practice. There is artistry in the creation of these moving images that cannot be separated from the artist who created it - and self-reflection on the practice of creating animation, for me, has proved to be the most rewarding aspect of my process. (Spicer, 2015)’. It is perhaps why the skill of animation starts first as an individual venture. One born alone and in contemplation.

Spicer (2015) goes on to add,

Animation as a method of inquiry will help to make our world visible through representation and interpretation, and if animators consciously reflect and contextualize their work, we can gain a better understanding of some of the infinite perspectives that construct our

collective reality.

In a Quora discussion, Draper, J. (2021) reflects on the question, 'Is animation a collaborative work?'

Excerpts from his response were:

That's not to say that animators can not produce single-handedly. Many animators are multiskilled and can tackle all areas of production. Most animators start off learning this way or may have side projects they'll happily work on by themselves over the years. However, typically they'll excel at a select few skills. As a result, if they decide to do EVERYTHING themselves, the work will generally take significantly longer and may suffer in some area of production.

Collaborating with other skilled creatives can be a really positive exercise, you can learn from one another, produce bigger and better work. Plus have fun with the banter that gets thrown around as you built rapport and lifelong friendships... or lifelong enemies.

3.0 STUDY METHODOLOGY

Because of the complexity and scope of this topic, I selected a qualitative, exploratory single case study. Using a combination of critical realism and pragmatism, the problem at hand will be addressed from a local context using observable data that shall contribute practical solutions to inform future practice and make recommendations for those working in the animation industry.

Data was collected from an interview with the young Founder & CEO, Michael Njau, of Blankspace Animation Studio. An open-format questionnaire was administered at the virtual interview. To enliven the paper and demonstrate best industry practice, still illustrations and video formats of Blankspace's noteworthy works were solicited and informed the findings. Using three illustrative examples, this paper shall elaborate on the principles, characteristics, techniques, tools, and stylization that enable animation collaboration. Other data collected for this paper are from magazines, essays, journals, and film critic websites. All images, characters, video content, intellectual property are used with permission from Blankspace. An audio recording of the hour-long interview may be retrieved here.

4.0 FINDINGS

3.1 Blankspace Animation Studio

A lovely little paragraph description of who Blankspace is, is left at the bottom of their website. It says, 'We are an independent animation studio that tells your stories through animation. We thrive on pushing boundaries of creativity to deliver and delight ("About us". 2021).'

3.2 Founder and CEO

Led by Michael Njau, Blankspace Animation Studio began 6 years ago and has now grown to be an 'independent African animation studio that tells kids stories through 2D and 3D content ("About us". 2021).'

Listening to Mr. Njau (Fig. 2) speak, one cannot imagine a more fun-loving person, optimistic



Fig. 2. Michael Njau, Founder and CEO, BlankSpace Animation Studio. Source: blankspace.co.ke

and very expressive. It is obvious to see that ‘making fun work’ and ‘making work fun’ is how the young animator, founder, and director has managed to rise and run a visionary animation studio that is thriving within Kenya.

To deduce the meaning of the topic we must understand the man. The second-born of two brothers, Njau was born 39 years ago to an architect dad and an artist mother. He was raised amongst creatives, inspired by his parent’s freedom, influenced by their belief in their career choices, and calls them ‘rebels of their time’.

Michael is a passionate creative at heart. He had an award-winning career spanning 11 years in advertising, during which he headed different creative portfolios in various countries across Africa. He then founded BlankSpace Animation Studio, taking his creative passion on a different path of telling stories. For the past 9 years, he has focused on producing quality commercial productions as well as original kids’ animated content.

3.3 Njau’s Interest in Animation

It all started with a fascination for the arts from when he was a child, Njau was completely taken by the early 1998 Pixar movie, *A Bug’s Life* (1998), (Fig 3. and 4), the original movie can be viewed here (IMDb.com n.d.). Njau said that what fascinated him about the movie ‘was the way it was done, the story was done in a different form’. Ranked as one of ‘90 Best Computer-Animated Movies by TomatoMeter’ this movie was a hit that it garnered a score of 92% and was described by RottenTomato as follows, ‘*A Bug’s Life* is a rousing adventure that blends animated thrills with witty dialogue and memorable characters – and another smashing early success for Pixar (RottenTomato. n.d.)’. Njau mentioned that he first started the studio solo, with no partners. It was his first client that took a chance on his vision and gave him his first job and as they say the rest is history.

Believing in a vision greater than himself, Michael pursued his passion with passion. What becomes



Fig. 3. Filk, the misfit ant. Source: Pixar



Fig. 4. The characters of, “A Bug’s Life”. Source: IMDb/Pixar

evident is that his beliefs in life and the Brands are intertwined. Infusing his ideologies, philosophies, principles, ethics, time, and talent into Blankspace created the special DNA that the company is known for – a stellar collaborative animation studio capable of delivering ‘relatable, timeless and fun’ cartoon stories.

Some of the clients Blankspace has worked with, and are cited on their website are; Bank of Africa, Britam, Coca-Cola, Cooperative Bank, Visa to name but a few.

He admits that success did not come easy and he attributes it to ‘putting in the time’ and working with the ‘industries best’ (his head of 3D animation studied in Malaysia). He claims that people ‘take art as a joke’ Whereas his is a philosophy of ‘art is about creating work that sells’ and treats his work with the seriousness it deserves. Njau’s dream is to get on the big screen with one of their original series. He believes that as Africans, we should invest in ourselves and that it’s a pity that we don’t invest in African content. Therefore, his strategy for Blankspace is to look beyond producing for an African audience but rather tailored itself to embrace a global audience.

3.4 Characteristics of an Animation Studio

There is a myriad of characteristics that collaborative animation houses need to have in place. From complimentary creative skills such as marketing, character/environment design, modeling, colour grading, lighting, rigging, animation, videography, rendering, compositing, editing, visual FX, sound design (Draper, 2021); the list is endless. These skills could vary depending on the scope and style of animation.

According to Blankspace Animation Studio, the young visionary animation studio admits that these characteristics and skills are vital for the survival of the business. And when seeking out team members, he has a checklist in mind to guide him.

Some of the characteristics that were highlighted for the study are presented in Table. 1. In principle, it establishes a general ‘rule of thumb’ guide for what to look out for in an ‘ideal’ animator that would make for a ‘perfect fit’ as one builds a creative collaboration. What is interesting to note is

that there is a blend between looking for artistic, scientific, and business ideals. Some of these skills are acquired, innate, or both. The practice of design thinking is likely at play.

Individual	Inherent Characteristic	Representation
Love for the arts, talent, creative	Artistic	Innate
Acting, humour	Artistic	Innate/ Acquired
Training /skills from industry experts, practice	Artistic, scientific	Acquired
Art and design principles and their application	Artistic	Innate, acquired
Marketing, sales, traffic control, finding clients	Artistic, scientific, business acumen	Innate, acquired
Love for storytelling	Artistic	Innate, acquired
Knack for computer technology, adaptability to new software and features, agility	Artistic, scientific	Innate, acquired
Exposure to multicultural experience, global mindset, multilingual	Artistic, scientific	Innate, acquired
Business-owner mindset	Artistic, scientific, business acumen	Acquired
Ambitious	Scientific	Innate
Timing, practice, experience	Scientific	Acquired
Unique stylization, character design, modelling	Artistic, scientific	Innate
Character, nice to work with, sensible		Innate, acquired
Empathy	Artistic, scientific	Innate, acquired
Confidence, boldness	Artistic	Innate, acquired
Speed, 'work smart'	Artistic, scientific	Innate, acquired
Youthfulness (at heart)	Artistic	Innate

Table 1: Ideal characteristics for animation collaboration. Lubano. T.N. 2022.

3.5 Systems and Production Processes

Protecting copyrights is critical for Blankspace. They have made an investment in understanding the Intellectual Property laws of the land in order to protect their original content both for commercial and educational use. Beyond IP, they have also made an investment in the production processes that rely on specialized ICT as a resource. Below, Table 2. shows some of the recommended software that the animation studio have invested in.

3.6 Have Fun

Blankspace are in the business of entertaining and therefore 'having fun' is a key stylization seen across their work. Njau emphasized that the studio emphasizes 'entertain, entertain and educate'. Highlighted

Specialization	Software Used
Modeling and sculpting	Auto Desk Maya Auto Desk 3D Mask ZBrush
Texturing/Fluid	Adobe Photoshop Substance Painter ZBrush
Compositing	Adobe Photoshop Adobe After Effects
3D Animation/ Motion Graphics	Auto Desk Maya Cinema 4D Adobe After Effects
2D Animation	Toon Boom Sketch Book Pro Adobe Photoshop

Table 2: Animation Software List. Source: Njau, M.
Source: (“Notes from Blankspace Animation Studio”. 2022)

here are some of the notable works that have been produced. To note is that the movie, *A Bug's Life*, has heavily influenced works produced by Blankspace and lives in these works.

3.6.1 Safaricom/ PayPal

Fig. 4 shows a still illustration of a frame from the Safaricom PayPal (2019) advertisement. Directly approached by the late Mr. Bob Collymore, the previous CEO of Safaricom, this animation clip was designed to communicate the benefits of the partnership between Safaricom, Kenya's most popular telecommunication network provider and Paypal, a global leader in online payments worldwide.



Fig. 4. Safaricom Paypal AD. Source: Blankspace Animation Studio. 2022.

3.6.2 *Munchiez Show: Season 1 Animation*

Nominated at the 2020 Kalasha Awards, for Best Animation Series, the *Munchiez* (n.d.) is about 3 cookies (Fig. 5) having fun. It has garnered a huge following and viewership on YouTube.



Fig. 5: *Munchiez* cookie characters. Source: Blankspace Animation Studio. 2022.

3.6.3 *Coca-Cola: Ghana. Chivita*

Commissioned by Coca-Cola Ghana, this commercial animated advertisement, *Chivita* (Fig 6) put Blankspace on the global map. They also managed to work with international film producers on this piece. Targeting a youthful audience, the *Chivita* ad (2019) is about a new range of delicious fruit juices. The funny dance and energy, typical of West African's are seen in the '*Chivita* bottle animated characters', a stylization that mirrors the 'fun side' of consuming Coca-Cola's refreshment.

Some collaborators that Blankspace has worked with are from Turkey, India and Canada. They comprise individual partners for specialty clients.

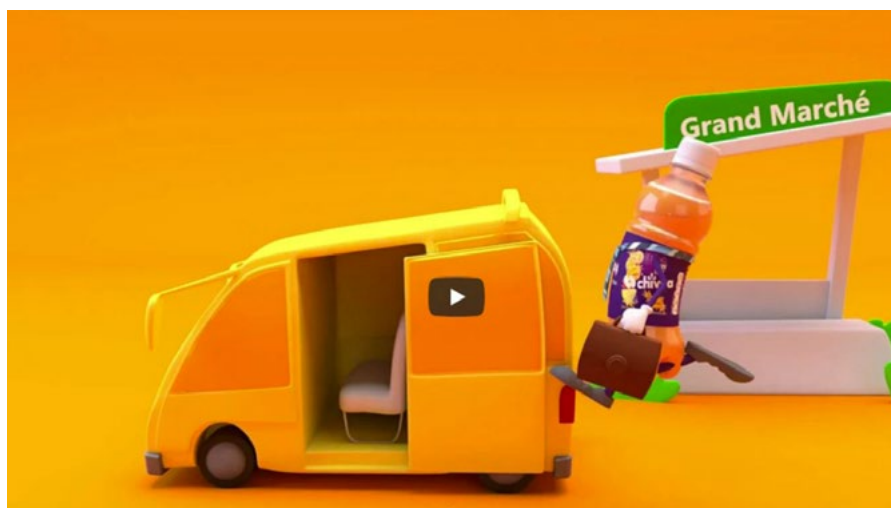


Fig. 6: *Chivita* bottle character. Source: Blankspace Animation Studio. 2022.

3.7 Skills

3.7.1 Personnel and Roles

To sufficiently run a collaborative animation studio; one should be equipped to manage various tasks like managing client requests, design, production, direct, write, accounting, marketing and sales, output of the content for various media. In summary, some of the personnel required are: Traffic managers, producers, designers, copywriters, client management, 2D/ 3D animation lead, motion graphics lead, content lead, accountant and support teams.

3.8 Challenges of Running Animation Collaborations

Like in any business, there are obvious challenges in running them. Some challenges that exist within an animation collaboration include but are not limited to;

- i) Convincing clients to work with the studio
- ii) Animation is still deeply a 'childish' endeavoring and its intrinsic value undermined
- iii) Cost for production - Clients who don't understand how animation works don't want to pay the true value for the production of animation and have unrealistic expectations of the same.
- iv) Synergy within teams, complex and intertwined roles

3.9 The Laws of Animation Collaborations

To run a successful animation studio, Njau distills 2 empirical laws for creative collaboration.

- i) Artists need to partner with people who are not like them.
- ii) Create work that people love and not what you love

Below is a Fig.7. that explains what has been coined, 'Michael Njau's Animation Creation Hierarchy'. Unconsciously built around the tenets of design thinking, Blankspace uses this philosophy as a model in coming up with the various types of animation content for their clientele. I believe that this hierarchy of thinking informs on how one can successfully launch an animation collaboration.



Fig 7. Michael Njau's Animation Creation Hierarchy. 2022

In the audio recording, Njau's example was clear, '(Lubano, 2022) the business person/accountant looks at the ad in terms of 'how can we make money from this' whereas the artist, 'looks at the emotions, the acting, the content – however this doesn't make money'. Therefore, if artists doesn't partner up with others, then, one will not make money.

Njau's parting shot was, 'Animators should not create work they love, but create what other people love. Otherwise, it's fine art (Lubano, 2022)'. The consideration of whether the animation idea is loved and works for the end-user/ target audience should always come first, second, is the person who doesn't like your stuff (they are your 'haters' as they ignite the fire), the third is the one who doesn't know what you do. The last person should be you – the creator.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, it is evident from our findings that the merits of animation collaborations supersede going it alone as a solo animator. Working collaboratively, the teams achieve more, taking each individual with the team closer to their goals, exposing them to bigger projects and better opportunities. Blankspace Animation Studio had this insight from the onset. However, it is also obvious that running a successful animation studio can be daunting but not impossible.

With the right people, systems, and processes in place, the benefits of animation collaborations are huge. For example, the studio gets to grow in various areas of their field, a diverse set of skills embedded within its creatives means everyone gets to learn from the other, consequently, enabling the creation of richer animations, faster. Underpinning all this is a human-centered approach. Cited in 'Michael Njau's Animation Creation Hierarchy', is an analogy on the importance of always designing for the end-user; the viewer. This approach distinguishes 'art for art's sake', from 'art that sells'. Therefore, the 'magic' that happens within animation collaboration cannot be downplayed.

As I complete this study, I cannot but help iterate the African proverb that states, 'If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together.'

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