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GUS THE ITSY BITSY KNIGHT

—
FROM THE STORYBOOK
TO THE SCREEN



THE TEAM AT MIKROS ANIMATION AND FISHER-PRICE REVEAL THE MAGICAL JOURNEY OF TURNING A LITTLE STORYBOOK LEGEND INTO AN INTERNATIONAL KIDS' HERO



An original production of Mikros Animation based on a storybook created by Dankerleroux and Françoise de Guibert, *Gus the Itsy Bitsy Knight* tells the story of a little boy who wanted to become the greatest knight in the whole Karamel kingdom. Gus never misses an opportunity to go on heroic action-packed quests. The problem is, Gus is itsy bitsy! He stands at three apples high but has a heart the size of a house.

Upbeat, funny, modern, vibrant and heartwarming, *Gus the Itsy Bitsy Knight* dusts the cobwebs off the fairytale genre with freshness and humour. Now broadcasted in more than 70 territories, the show has reached top ranking in France, Italy, Germany and the UK. Beyond the production of the animation, Mikros Animation secured a multi-year global licensing deal with Mattel for the creation of a full Fisher-Price toy line.

In this interview, Mikros Animation's SVP (Episodic & IP) **Sandrine Nguyen**, Creative Producer **Isabelle Dinh Van Chi**, Director **Matthieu Cordier**, Art Director **David Fauré**, Animation Director **Riash Shahnawaz**, Head of Episodic Production **Joanna Ruer** and Digital Development Manager (Episodic & IP) **Aymen Salhi**, join **Giorgio Cavalli** from Fisher-Price to discuss how they brought this tiny storybook hero to life.

CREATING GUS: 2D ILLUSTRATIONS TO 3D ANIMATIONS



Gus is based on a story by Dankerleroux and Françoise de Guibert. What was it about the story that drew you to it for an animation project?

Isabelle Dinh Van Chi – The story is adapted from a book that I discovered when I went to the book fair in Montreuil in 2016. The story was very fresh and modern, and we just knew kids were going to fall in love with it.

Sandrine Nguyen – We're always chasing new IPs and ideas, and so when Isabelle brought this book back with her it was love at first sight! It was so different from anything we had seen before, like mixing the traditional knight figure with the very modern electrical pony.

When we look for new projects, we look at the market and what's doing well. We saw that *Paw Patrol* and *PJ Masks* were popular, but in terms of the knight theme, there wasn't that much happening. We saw a need for a new brand with that theme. It was a good opportunity for the local and global markets.

What were the very first stages in bringing this animation to life? What was your vision for the show?

Sandrine Nguyen – When we studied the book we realised it was for a much younger audience than what we would need to create for TV. The book was for young kids who couldn't yet read. With TV shows, it's difficult to find slots for the two – five and the three – six age groups – they almost don't exist any more. There are a lot of rules in France regarding this, as people are concerned about screen time. The majority of the market is currently targeting pre-school kids, so ages four – seven.



So the first thing we had to do was make a case for making the characters older and expanding the world because it wasn't in the book. We also needed to add new characters, creating an ensemble cast, so that we could write lots of different stories for the show.

Then came the graphic adaptation. Even though the drawings had volume, they were still 2D illustrations, so we had to adapt all design into CG At the same time, we wanted to stay true to the origins of the project with our CG so the whole adaptation has been done with the involvement of the book's creator. We walked him through the process and we listened to all his concerns. All the enhancements we added he really loved. We also had to rework the colour palette to make it more vibrant for TV.

What elements did you need to consider when designing the character, Gus? What were his key characteristics that you needed to get across?

Matthieu Cordier – Gus wants the best for everyone. He's very close to his sister Iris and they both support each other. We wanted to make the parents gentle and caring. They're a great family with a big heart.

Isabelle Dinh Van Chi – Gus is a very aspirational little hero. He wants to become the most famous knight in the kingdom and live by the three knight's values: bravery, justice, and kindness.

David Fauré – We had to adapt it from the book to the TV show, so we had to make some modifications and improvements to suit international audiences. In the book, Gus looks a little bit childish so we had to make him just a little bit older and heroic looking.

We also created some extra characters such as the Shadow Knight who does not exist in the book.

Riash Shahnowaz – There's a real blend of personalities that contrast and complement each other to make the story really interesting. When you're working on a series you want people to invest in the characters and different people will relate to different personalities.



How did you come up with the different episodes and scenarios that Gus finds himself in?

Isabelle Dinh Van Chi – We had to pick the right authors – guys and girls with the right kind of ‘craziness’ to keep the DNA of the original story. We organised some writing rooms and the writers did an amazing job. It was quite difficult to find the right balance at the start between action and comedy, but we achieved it through collaboration.

Sandrine Nguyen – We had to balance a lot of ingredients : action, comedy, emotion. Comedy was definitely a huge part of the stories, but the action and emotional journey were key to create great stories that Kids would enjoy. It wasn’t an easy thing to achieve but I think we succeeded in the end, with the help of our partners, TF1 and Disney Germany, who brought their expertise in storytelling to the table.

How do you get into the mind of a child to create compelling and imaginative stories that will appeal to the young audience?

Isabelle Dinh Van Chi –In a nutshell, we never lost our inner child!

Having said that ,Gus is a projected fantasy hero but he is also a “hero-self” character, so all the themes related to the 4 to 7 public with a “Gus tweak” (ie medieval meets modern) and the adequate emotional journey were developed in a creative and secure way, while still conveying right values and message.

Sandrine Nguyen – We’re a company of big kids – you should see the office. Even though the world in the book is a specific one, it still deals with what kids are dealing with today - like being shy, or Gus finding out that he’s too short, but with big dreams. Kids find themselves in those characters, not only in Gus, but in his friends too.

And what about the rest of Karamel Kingdom and the characters – what was the look and feel you were tasked with creating and how did you achieve this?

David Fauré – In the book, the kingdom is not very precise and leaves itself to the imagination. For the purpose of the TV show, we needed to create a consistent universe and that involved developing more locations and the whole geography of the kingdom which does not exist in the book.

Matthieu Cordier – The kingdom was created in a very painterly style in the book which needed transforming into 3D for the series. We had to ensure that the entire universe’s aesthetic matched the characters to create a unified look.

Riash Shahnwaz – It involved creating a visual grammar so that the characters and environments sit really well together. Working out the geography of the kingdom was also really important in defining a narrative continuity for the series.

Isabelle Dinh Van Chi – We had to flesh out Gus characterization then all the other ones and the specific bonds and relationship between all of them (including his pet, Pippy the dog) ... and enlarge the universe.

We had to introduce antagonists to create interest in the story, as there were none to start with, and add strong visual comedy – especially with the Knight-Knights.



AN ADVENTUROUS JOURNEY

In less than four months, Gus reached top rankings across the UK, Germany, Italy and France – and it is now broadcast in over 70 territories. What do you think led to its huge success?

Aymen Salhi – Gus brings a great freshness in kids animation on TV. The quality of the writing, the singular graphical world and an appealing quality of the animation greatly contribute to this success. Also, the show nicely moves between Medieval, Fantasy and Modern times. By mixing up this timeline, the show offers to our audience a universe where the imagination is unlimited. No doubt that the anachronisms contribute to its success and popularity among kids.

Sandrine Nguyen – It's the mix we talked about: comedy, action, emotion. It's a fresh take on a nice theme. We've worked on a lot of shows and we've seen what works and what doesn't. We kept things simple, focusing on really speaking to the audience and for kids to find themselves in the stories and say, "I'm Gus" or "I'm Iris." King Mummy and King Daddy are really like the parents at home. We created a magic world that at the same time can be their real life in a way too.



Joanna Ruer – It's a very positive show that has come out at a time when the world was going through some challenges such as the pandemic. Gus' cuteness combined with his energetic enthusiasm are what I think really stands out for the kids.

What were the challenges in creating this series?

David Fauré – It was a pretty difficult project but it was a lot of fun. The most challenging part was in bringing to life the personalities of the characters. Finding the right voice was so important – we needed to find actors that sounded like what the audience would have imagined when reading the book.

Riash Shahnawaz – When you're defining characters, you're always faced with a lot of technical challenges such as the moving of the 3D character that you can see from multiple camera angles and in different lighting. You want to make sure that you're faithful to the original intention of the author and that you're respecting the original design, while at the same time adapting it to 3D and making sure that it appeals.

Another challenge is that you always want to show lots of interesting, cool action while at the same time not making it too dangerous for children to see! We had to make sure the characters don't feel like they're in too much danger. Gus also has a lot of cool gadgets, so we had figure out how they would all work, how he would interact with them in a believable way.

Matthieu Cordier – And for me, it was the storyboard because it's all in the details: thinking about all the camera angles and script and how they work together.



What was your favourite episode to work on and why?

Matthieu Cordier – There's an episode where Gus spends time with his grandparent, Merlin. The relationship between these two characters is so cute and funny because Merlin is a bit silly. He lets Gus explore and adventure and often helps him out.

David Fauré – For me it has to be the first one because that's the only one I needed to be heavily involved in.

Riash Shahnawaz – Each episode has its own moral and story, but I personally love those that are more villain-centric. And the Knight-Knights are just brilliant, they're very serious but whenever they get involved things get messed up! There's a lot of slapstick humour around them.

There's another episode where Gus' friend Tyler has a Karate Kid moment, coming through trouble with all these frogs on his shoulder. It's a beautiful scene. I really like those episodes where the characters are reversing their personalities and you take them through a journey.



THE TOY LINE AND BEYOND

You and Fisher-Price team collaborated closely on toys for this series. How did you find that process?

Sandrine Nguyen — Fisher-Price came on board when the show was already into the writing process. It was still very early so there was time for them to get involved in the brainstorming. They have been collaborating with us right from the start and helped us include things in the story that could later be built into the toy line. Despite this, we ensured that the most important thing was always the storytelling.

But what our collaboration with Fisher-Price inspired was bringing in lots of cool gadgets and accessories that kids would be excited by — like the electric pony.

Giorgio Cavalli — The Fisher-Price team worked side by side with both Technicolor Animation Production (now part of Mikros Animation) and PGS Entertainment (the distributor of the show) to bring the world of Gus to life through toys. Gus was the perfect fit for a preschool toy. Not only in terms of the values that the show portrays, but also from the different components that translate really well into a Fisher-Price toy. Castles, knights and dragons, mixed with vehicles, creatures and tech accessories are a perfect theme to bring into preschool playsets, figures, vehicles and role play.

The diverse cast of characters also plays into the appeal of the show, carrying an important message to young pre-schoolers. Last but not least, the Knight-Knights' key component of humour tops this licence off to make it a go-to choice for kids.

All of your favourite characters and places from the world of Karamel Kingdom will come to life! From Gus and Iris riding their electric ponies, to Shadow Knight creating a bit of chaos, to the Knight-Knights flying all around, the Fisher-Price Gus toy line will allow kids to jump into this world and play.

Joanna Ruer — We provided a lot of designs to Fisher-Price to help them make choices on what would work best for the toy line. David Fauré also worked closely with Mattel on things like the proportions and colours for the characters and their props - because we had to be mindful of the requirements and restraints of toy production. Things like what colours would be available to create the toys.





David Fauré – There was a lot of back and forth between us. Fisher-Price provided us redesigns and then we would check it against the characters and ensure there was a real consistency – even down to the toys’ facial expressions, they had to match the personalities of the characters.



What did you learn from this whole project that you applied to the rest of your work?

Joanna Ruer – That we can do incredible work, even during a pandemic! We also learned the benefits of having a toy producer involved early on in the process.

Aymen Salhi – We also learned the importance of having everyone on the same page and having the same respect for the original material.

Sandrine Nguyen – Definitely, we all respected the DNA and origin of the project. We all had the same vision and that really helped create something impactful and consistent. It’s something that brings all the partners on a project together with common values and the same goal in mind.

If you were a character from Gus, which would you be?

Riash Shahnawaz – Warticious or one of the Knight-Knights.

David Fauré – Maybe a dragon. They try to be scary but they’re not really.

Sandrine Nguyen – I would be Iris – I liked her relationship with her little brother. She’s very protective of him and that’s how I am with my team at the office!

Isabelle Dinh Van Chi – Warticious as well!

What’s next for Gus?

Sandrine Nguyen – We have many different ideas for Gus. Right now, we’re focusing on the toy line and we’re already on season two. We’re also working on apparel, puzzles and other merchandise.

Aymen Salhi – We want to expand the Gus universe. Not only do we want him on TV, but we want kids to be able to interact with him digitally too. We need to support this success and that’s why we recently launched a YouTube channel with original content that explores the lore of the show with great humor.



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