HOW TO:

CREATE FILMS WITH CHILDREN AGED 7-14
Mission Possible Part 1: Getting Started

In this guide we share Missions 1-3 of our 'Mission Possibles', a set of filmmaking activities for children. Each activity consists of a task and a set of clear creative rules, and is designed to develop on the previous one, so that children can continually practice and build on their knowledge and skills as they work their way through the set. When you've completed these activities, you can move on to *Mission Possible Part 2: Next Steps.*

Each Mission includes a YouTube link where you can see some of the videos made by the children who helped us develop these activities. To find out more about us, how and why this project came about, have a look at the '*Developing the Mission Possibles*' Case Study at the end of this guide.

MISSION 1:

DOWN THE STAIRS

EQUIPMENT

- 2 x DV Cameras
- 2 x Tripods
- Back-up hard drive
- DV tape
- Slate
- Large cardboard box

AIM

To introduce the basic concept of sequencing a visual story by shooting a documentary film sequence.

LINK

https://youtu.be/5rFxsmWs_lU?t=614 (leads into the Pixilation video)

MAIN ACTIVITY

The group comes into the room to find a large cardboard box. They are tasked with filming themselves taking the box from the classroom, down the stairs and out of the door.
They must work together to find their own approach to this, deciding on their roles (camera person, box holder(s), door people) and how they could capture it.

This activity is a good starting point to get the group thinking about stories of how and why the box was in the room for their next film.

OUTCOMES

- A simple and fun exercise to get the group working together and excited about filmmaking
- Building confidence, sharing ideas and being creative and funny
- Initiating interesting and vibrant discussions
- An opportunity to use a single hand-held camera to try and capture an event as it happens

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

Immediately watch the footage back and discuss what works and what doesn't. Then:

- Re-enact and film additional material to complete the sequence
- Use the documentary sequence to make a storyboard and shot list to re-create or dramatise the activity

This allows the group to take turns on:

- Directing the action
- Operating the camera
- Setting up compositions
- Monitoring continuity
- Logging the shots

Compare the two sequences and discuss. Children can raise some interesting question from this activity, such as:

- Is there a danger of over-planning an activity and making it boring or sterile or 'less real'?
- How does hand held camera footage affect the sequence? Is it more authentic?
- Did the hand held sequence capture any unexpected and interesting activity?
- How can we build on this experience to better capture other events such as class activities?

MISSION 2:   STEP AND SHOOT

EQUIPMENT

- 8 x Digital Still Cameras (one per child)
- 8 x Laptops (one per child)
- Back up hard drive
- 8 x different missions in a hat (mission = a simple journey through the school, e.g. classroom to playground via hall)

AIM

Experimenting with the basics of making moving pictures using stills-cameras and computer programming.

This introductory session also allows the tutors to explore group dynamics and plan for future animation sessions.

ACTIVITY

Each child is given a digital stills camera and picks a 'mission' from a hat. They each set off on their journey about a minute apart so they don't get in each others' shots. Using their camera, they take a single photograph at each step; one photograph, one step forward, another photograph, another step forward... all the way along their journey.

They then load the sequence of photographs onto a computer and use stop-motion animation software to join them up into a movie of the journey.

The images can then be loaded into a simple computer programming language that the children can use to experiment with frame playback rates and creating on-screen buttons to control fast forward and rewind functions.

You can also try using sensors and other input devices commonly found on games consoles to control the film by increasing light, blowing or clapping loudly for example.

OUTCOMES

Children start to understand how single images and the illusion of moving pictures are the basis for all animation and filmmaking.

Children begin to understand how they can bring simple techniques together to create more complex projects, expanding from photography, through film and into interactive interfaces and simple games.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- Look at 'point of view' sequences in films
- Watch short 'art films' and discuss how visual language can convey ideas and emotions
- Discuss: What is film and how does it relate to video games?
- Talk about frames, sequences and time
- How did film begin? Look at early filmmaking

MISSION 3:

PIXILATION

EQUIPMENT

- 2 x Webcams
- 2 x Macbooks with stop motion animation software
- 2 x Tripods
- Back-up hard drive
- DV tape
- Large cardboard box
- Filmed outside - no lighting required

AIM

Introducing the basic principles of animation using a stop-motion animation technique called 'pixilation'. Pixilation involves creating animations of people using a series of still photographs taken as they move their bodies.

LINK

https://youtu.be/5rFxsmWs_lU?t=614 (Pixilation is the second half of this video)

ACTIVITY

The children plan their sequences, set up the camera on a tripod and animate their own bodies by breaking down their movements into a series of still photographs. Everyone takes turns using the computer, video equipment and directing the action. By experimenting with this method the children can start to perform film tricks, devise comical sequences and perform seemingly impossible feats, such as flying like a bird, gliding on invisible skateboards and walking through walls.

OUTCOMES

- With a little planning you can create a longer film by adding the short sequences from this activity to the sequences from Mission 1: Down the Stairs.
- Children are quickly immersed in the process of making animation by just using their own bodies and props in the school playground.
- By taking turns in different roles, children are able experiment and adjust their ideas in order to achieve a rewarding result in a short space of time.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

View the films to inspire new ideas and activities, which can feed in to future workshops Discuss how they can achieve pixilation using their own camera-phones.

Talk broadly about how special effects are used in films and how they are made convincing for the viewer, include:

- Models
- Mock-ups
- Chroma-key
- Less visible, more cost effective 'work arounds'

View each other's work and discuss:

- How the tricks are created, link this to the illusion of moving pictures as the basis for all animation and filmmaking.
- How mistakes, unexpected events and plot changes can add to the humour and energy of a film.
- The importance of keeping the camera still, planning the frame composition and working with the available light.
- Breaking down the process to create convincing movement , using pauses in the action.

WHY USE THE 'MISSION POSSIBLES' FORMAT?

There are many children's filmmaking activity resources which are influenced by an industry model, e.g. write a script, storyboard, shoot the film and edit. While it might seem logical, there are some common pitfalls with this approach:

- If you're working with a large group it's difficult make films which include everyone's ideas.
- If the group is inexperienced the learning curve can be too steep.
- If a professional filmmaker is involved there can be too much focus on the product, rather than process, because the children understandably want the final product to be well received.
- An apprenticeship style approach can be highly valuable, but children may not be fully immersed in the act of filmmaking or making meaningful decisions in the process.

The 'Mission Possibles' set out to avoid these pitfalls, teaching filmmaking skills by providing children with a practical task and a set of clear creative rules.

WHAT WE SET OUT TO DO

To find out what filmmaking activities children already did at home.

At first, children indicated that they take quite a lot of footage on mobile devices, but nothing beyond that. As we worked through the project it emerged that they actually did have some knowledge of film editing software, particularly special effects apps.

To find out what aspects of film production children were curious about.

We found that they were keen to understand what we came to think of as the magical elements of film, e.g. how to make people vanish?

To design a set of activities that would teach children filmmaking through a rich and enjoyable learning process

Using the data we collected we designed the activities so that they would involve learning and practicing filmmaking skills through an artistic and creative process. This means the children:

- Learn through first-hand discovery and exploration, unpicking filmmaking techniques and developing their own ideas for narrative structures and sequences.
- Can work without fear of 'getting it wrong' or becoming fixated on the finished product.
- Benefit from hands-on experience, making original and sometimes chaotic films that capture the creative energy of the process.
- Develop a strong sense of ownership, personal achievement and the confidence take risks and experiment as they progress.

HOW WE WORKED

We worked with six groups of eight children for three half-day workshops each. During this time we introduced them to filmmaking techniques that would allow them to experiment with different approaches to visual story telling.

The children worked individually and in groups exploring:

- Animation
- Pixilation
- Live action drama
- Documentary
- Still photography and computer programming (to learn about camera angles, sequencing and editing)

The workshops were developed and adapted in response to the children's interests; building on their skills, knowledge and aspirations and challenging them to try different approaches. We made sure that there were some rules and constraints on each task to guide and focus the process. For example, in one workshop we presented the children with an innocuous looking cardboard packaging box as inspiration. Each group approached it in a different way; the box was destroyed and re-animated using visual trickery by one group, and in another it 'crash landed' into a classroom and became a portal for an alien invasion.

The children were encouraged to discuss and share their ideas freely with the group throughout. They viewed and appraised each other's work, discussing how their films could be developed or improved at every stage of the project.

WHO?

The 'Mission Possibles' were developed in Sheffield by Dr Becky Parry, Janet Jennings and Jon Harrison as part of a research project funded by First Light (now Into Film).

Dr Becky Parry is a research fellow at the University of Nottingham, and author of 'Children, Film and Literacy' published by Palgrave Macmillan. Becky was the inaugural director of Showcomotion, a children's film festival in Sheffield, England, and has worked on numerous creative projects with young people.

Jon Harrison is a creative producer, filmmaker and educational consultant, working primarily with universities and arts organisations. **Janet Jennings** is an arts project manager and fundraiser with experience of producing arts and media events. Jon and Janet are also Co-Directors of Lovebytes, an innovative and groundbreaking organisation that promotes digital creativity as a means to connect and cross-fertilise educational subject areas and learning environments. Over the last 20 years they have been running digital arts projects, including large-scale public events, festivals, exhibitions, film programmes and educational activities for adults, children and young people.