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# Aardman Digital

The digital division of Aardman Animations brings the likes of Wallace and Gromit to the virtual world. Dan Efergan, Rich Davey and Gavin Strange explain how they go about it

[www.aardman.com/digital](http://www.aardman.com/digital)

Agency location Bristol, UK

Team 12

Expertise Website design, online brand integration, microsites, community building and management, game development and seeding

Established 2006

Clients BBC, CBeebies, Channel 4, Cartoon Network, Disney, Leonard Cheshire, Tate, Intellectual Property Office, npower

## Q&A

**.net:** What does Aardman Digital do?

**DE:** We take all the warm, fuzzy love that Aardman Animations is famous for and find a home for it in digital products. So the characters, worlds and stories that are falling out of people's brains get turned into Flash games and virtual worlds, or built up into online communities. More recently, we've been working closely with other departments in Aardman to put together entertainment that lives across a number of different platforms.

**.net:** Why was the division set up three years ago?

**RD:** Up until that point, 'online' for Aardman had meant outsourcing site design to third parties or the IT department, usually as part of the marketing campaign surrounding a specific production. Aardman Digital was set up to bring this in-house, and at the same time help form and shape digital strategies for the diverse IP and brands that Aardman owns. As a result we also started working with broadcast partners such as Disney, the BBC, Channel 4 and Cartoon Network. They liked what we did so much that we evolved and became a digital agency within Aardman in our own right.

**.net:** How much is your work influenced by the stuff Aardman Animations does? Is it both a blessing and a curse?

**GS:** It's influenced an awful lot. The swell of creativity in this building alone is enough to get you excited about creating pretties. You have an immense feeling of pride behind you to create under the name of Aardman, so that really pushes you, as well as enabling you to wander around and spot beautiful pieces of work, whether that's on-screen or on-set! I'd say it's definitely a blessing. Online design is no longer static: with more and more movement happening across the web, being part of an animation company is a good thing. You learn a lot and figure out ways to apply those techniques to the job you're doing. It's exciting.

**.net:** How do you create a truly viral campaign?

**DE:** There are a couple of approaches to making something spread. The best is to build the process of distribution into the product itself, so the whole premise revolves around passing it on. Social gaming is a great example, where playing against your friends is part and parcel of the experience. These can be pretty obvious, such as the Vampire vs Werewolf Facebook game (which we've all likely received thousands of notifications about), but recently the process has become a lot more subtle and crafted, such as with Farmville or Pet Society.

**.net:** What are Aardman Digital's favourite tools and techniques?

**RD:** Sites developed for our own properties, such as *Wallace and Gromit*, make use of a highly extensible PHP5/MySQL framework, built in-house. But we're happy to use other platforms, including MovableType, WordPress and Drupal, when appropriate or requested by the client. Our Flash work revolves almost entirely around ActionScript 3, and we couldn't work without the incredible FlashDevelop. Source code is version-controlled off-site with unfuddled.com. Of course, the best tools we've got are each other – we're a highly creative team in the middle of an extremely creative company. A few hours spent around a table with pens and paper pays dividends in the long run. All the best ideas are born and die there, before anyone even touches a keyboard.

**.net:** What kind of research and development is going on at Aardman Digital?

**DE:** We've done a bit of geeky R&D, working with the Pervasive Media Studio, a Bristol-based research centre, to try to create augmented reality characters. But more recently, our concentration has been around unravelling the potential of good quality multi-platform content.



Back row (left to right): Tom Milner, Sam Witters, Robin Davey, Jemma Kamara, Kirsten Williams, Sarah Matthews  
Front row (left to right): Katie McQuin-Roberts, Rohini Denton, Dan Efergan, Rich Davey, Gavin Strange, Gromit



“We take the fuzzy love that Aardman is famous for and find a digital home for it”

Dan Efergan



As our viewing habits, and particularly those of children, adjust around a plethora of new platforms, then companies such as ourselves need to understand how to weave their magic around them all. The first immediate issue has been creating a common understanding that all the scriptwriters, directors, gaming geeks and community managers can plug into. This means our department has been reading a lot of books on narrative, and the guys upstairs have been sent off to play games such as Grand Theft Auto.



**.net:** Why is Bristol such a hotbed for design?

**GS:** There are an awful lot of talented and driven people here, from the music scene to the graffiti world, web developers to motion designers, DOPs to animators. It feels good to be a part of that.

**.net:** What are you currently working on?

**RD:** Our community manager has been interviewing Nick Park, asking him questions gathered from the online forum. Hot in development is a racing game for WebbliWorld, as well as lots of Christmas items for kids to decorate their virtual houses with. We're also ramping up for the build of the *Show Me Show Me* site for the BBC, and *Shaun the Sheep* series 2.

**.net:** What's the most bizarre request you've ever got from a client?

**GS:** I don't have a bizarre request, but I do have the best bit of client feedback. They just said, "That's sick". Sick in a bad way, not in the street way.

**RD:** While building the *Shaun the Sheep* microsite for Disney US, they specifically requested we edit out the plasticine sheep poo from the farmyard. ●

(1-2) We were asked to create a game based on *Chop Socky Chooks*, an animated kids' series about kung-fu chickens ([chopsockychooks.com](http://chopsockychooks.com)). The game engine was developed and tested endlessly (read: constantly played) in-house.

(3-4) The Intellectual Property Office approached Aardman to inspire the UK's next generation of young innovators. Alongside a huge exhibition in London's Science Museum, we created a website ([crackingideas.com](http://crackingideas.com)) to enable this community of clever kids to take part in monthly challenges.

(5) To get people to the Cracking Ideas site and

exhibition, we worked with an external developer on the Invention Suspension game ([crackingideas.com/exhibition/game](http://crackingideas.com/exhibition/game)). Players fly through puzzles, collecting parts for a giant contraption. Its real-life counterpart stands in the main exhibition.

(6) Taking on the crown jewel of Aardman, we created a simple one-page microsite to give clay hero Morph an online home ([morphfiles.com](http://morphfiles.com)).

(7) The highly successful pre-school show *Timmy Time* needed a new site ([timmytime.tv](http://timmytime.tv)). The challenge was to capture the feeling of the show while entertaining the younger audience. The site blends together instances

of Flash with HTML and PHP elements.

(8) After being approached by two ladies with grand ideas of an environmentally-aware virtual world, we created WebbliWorld ([webbliworld.com](http://webbliworld.com)). We worked with one of Aardman's directors, the surreal genius Tim Ruffle, who painstakingly created the world and its characters in Illustrator and Flash. It's built from scratch in ActionScript 3 and uses the Electro server to connect it all together.

(9) This racing game lives both inside and outside of WebbliWorld. Users can race two of the tracks on other sites, but must visit Webbliworld in order to play all four circuits.