VITO DI DOMENICO - ELEONORA FORNASARI - DAVIDE MOROSINOTTO -
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"JUST A SMART LITTLE MOUSE"
THE TELEVISION REBOOT OF *TOPO GIGIO*
FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE
A Writers' Round Table

Abstract

Topo Gigio – The Series is the outcome of a creative overhaul that has updated and adapted the beloved puppet character created by Maria Perego in 1959 for a new generation of viewers in animated form, by placing the little mouse in a new, modern context that provides him with a (human) family and a faithful team of (animal) 'partners in crime'. The TV series is a paradigmatic case study of a flexible, novel approach to developing and writing content for children and young audiences; one that looks at established creative practices from the US (e.g. writers' room, comedic register, short format) without sacrificing the essence of its iconic protagonist while, at the same time, retaining its international appeal. This round table gathers the experiences of three members of the show's writing team (Fornasari, Morosinotto, and Russo) as well as of the Project Manager (Di Domenico). After framing the key stages of the genesis of the project and exploring the challenges in the process of adaptation, they focus on key notions, approaches, pedagogic values and decisions that have informed the creation of the series content and unpack the creative process(es) with specific examples from the development documents and select scripts from individual episodes. The discussion draws from defining elements of the series world, multi-ethnic characters and thematic range to illustrate the various stages of development (e.g. pitching story ideas, outlining, treatments, teleplays), also in connection with less explored (but not least vital) territory such as team coordination and story editing.

1. GENESIS OF THE PROJECT

Paolo Russo (PR): Davide, Vito, given your association with Book on a Tree – i.e. the company that provided and coordinated the writing services on the project – you are best placed to tell us about how it all started.

Davide Morosinotto (DM): Giorgio Scorza of Movimenti Production knew Maria Perego – i.e. Gigio's creator – personally. Together with his partner Davide Rosio, they

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had the vision that Topo Gigio's IP would make an excellent animated series. Having known us (i.e. Book on a Tree) for some time, they approached us to probe our interest in developing it together. At that time Movimenti Production was still a relatively small company, still a far cry from the big player with their own in-house writers that they have become when they joined Banijay in the Kids & Family Division. Therefore, they needed a team of writers from the outside.

Book on a Tree's very first pitching document dates back to 3 August 2016. At first, we were asked to simply churn out as many ideas as we could come up with, to try and test the real potential of the IP. One idea – titled *Topo Gigio "PlayGround"* – was partly inspired by *Toy Story* (1995)[1]: Gigio as a toy in a world inhabited by human characters and other toys (Figure 1). One strong reason behind this approach was the need to develop a range of merchandising to go with the series. Then we pitched Gigio as a *Video Star*, somewhat similar to *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (2007)[2]. Another, slightly crazier idea was to create a whole fantasy world – which we called *Dream World* – some sort of kingdom where Gigio played the wizard's assistant.

Figure 1 - *Excerpt from working document pitching the "PlayGround" scenario: sections include the general concept (Idea), the world of the series (Il mondo), springboard of possible stories (Esempi di storie), references (Riferimenti narrativi), and notes on merchandising. Courtesy of Book on a Tree Ltd*

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[1] *Toy Story* (1995). Directed by John Lasseter. Written by Joss Whedon, Andrew Stanton, Joel Cohen, Alec Sokolow. USA: Walt Disney Pictures, Pixar Animation Studios. 81 mins.
[2] *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (2007). Directed by Tim Hill. Written by John Vitti, Will McRobb, Chris Viscardi. USA: 20th Century Fox Animation, Fox 2000 Pictures, Regency Enterprises, Bagdasarian Productions. 92 mins.

PR: This last scenario reminds me of some adventures featuring the original Gigio, the puppet, from a few decades ago. As ambitious as the idea might have sounded, it was still in line with the IP tradition.

DM: That was a key condition. Giorgio (Scorza) knew that Maria Perego was willing to take risks, as long as we would not betray Gigio's true essence as a character.
    More ideas followed suit within the next few months. One drew inspiration from *PAW Patrol* (2013–, *La squadra dei cuccioli*)[3]. In yet another "Doraemon-style" version, Gigio helped the kids to solve problems thanks to a kit of magic tools. Finally, there was also a Pimpa-like setting, with Gigio playing the vet's helper because he can speak and interact with both humans and animals. If one thinks about it, many of these elements have been preserved in the final version, with the funny animals of the G-Team (G standing for Gigio, of course) or the various gadgets used by Gigio.

Eleonora Fornasari (EF): The very first series bible was developed around the idea of Gigio who helps save the animals, right?

DM: Yes. At that stage it was considered the most promising scenario.

Vito Di Domenico (VDD): Movimenti produced a first trailer featuring Gigio on some sort of animal rescue mission, a bit like a special agent.

PR: Had that idea gone to production, it seems safe to assume that the expected target had to be younger. Was the format of the individual episodes and of the season as a whole planned from the beginning?

DM: Yes, also because Movimenti wanted it to fit with RAI's programming from the get-go, with a very young target in mind.

PR: For the benefit of any readers who are not familiar with RAI (i.e. Italy's public broadcasting network), let's briefly outline how formats are organized there.

EF: RAI's macro-division for children is RAI Kids, which comprises two channels: RAI Yoyo, mainly aimed at pre-schoolers and early schoolers, and RAI Gulp, whose main target ranges between 8 and 12. Of course, one is well aware that already around 10 years old, viewers tend to migrate to other channels that broadcast content for older viewers. *Topo Gigio* is quite transversal in that the complexity of its stories and the characters make it appealing to a much broader target audience that straddles across those demographics and includes both younger and slightly older viewers. As a format, a season of fifty-two 11-minute episodes is quite common.

PR: Back to the early versions of the series developed by Book on a Tree. Was the initial brainstorming a shared process?

DM: Very much so. In fact, Movimenti came up with lots of ideas of their own, such as the

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[3] *PAW Patrol* (*La squadra dei cuccioli*) (2013–, 9 stagioni). Created by Keith Chapman. Developed by Scott Kraft. Canada: Guru Studio, Spin Master Entertainment.

PAW Patrol approach. At that early stage, our role was to throw as many ideas as possible in the hat in a relatively short time, so that we could explore various options and understand which ones were worth pursuing. For us, this is quite common. And team work with Movimenti was crucial when it came to piece it all together and develop a series bible.

2. ADAPTING THE IP: DEVELOPING AND WRITING THE SERIES

PR: What led to understanding and deciding those early ideas were not the right path to follow and that something else was needed instead?

DM: Partly for marketing reasons, I think: Movimenti probably thought that the *PAW Patrol* version worked only for a target that, at that particular time, had become less appealing. Giorgio Scorza, Davide Rosio, Maurizia Sereni (Movimenti's Head of Creative Development) and their team realised that Gigio could have a more international appeal but, in order to do that, we needed to target slightly older children as well.

In fact, Movimenti got back to us in 2018 with much clearer ideas and more experience under their belt. They had a better sense of the direction to undertake, and, as mentioned, expanded the target to a broader audience that was no longer limited to pre-schoolers.

Moreover, and crucially, it was decided to frame the stories based on the American sit-com model. In order to do that, they brought on board two writers from Baboon (one of them was Mike de Seve) with whom they organized an actual Writers' Room, a three-day development conference in Milan that we too took part in. That's when all the characters were born, their relationships, the episode structure, and so forth. None of this was actually put to paper although we did fill up board after board. Following that, the two Americans were appointed to write the bible and two pilot episodes.

At the same time, Movimenti asked us two more things. Firstly, to draft a third pilot episode to compare with the benchmark provided by the American writers, to make sure we were actually able to pull it off. Secondly, to start drafting a production plan that showed our team was large enough to meet deadlines and work within budget.

VDD: All that takes off in July 2018, with the recruiting of the team. We started contacting writers to check their availability. Eventually, we recruited as many as thirteen writers, even though some of them joined the team a few months later when we realized we needed more ideas and more flexibility. That's because one of the key aspects of this project was the speed at which it was executed. First off, Movimenti asked us to complete writing twenty episodes by Christmas 2018 – that is, within a six-month time frame. We did kick off very quickly, with a first group of writers, who then became even more numerous.

Meanwhile, the first bible had been drafted by the American writers. When the first story concept started to pour through, it became more and more clear that Movimenti's idea of steering decidedly towards a situation comedy very much revolving around character relationships was working: stories had to spring out of the characters' wishes and motivations, whereas a slapstick element was to be added through the G-Team, Gigio's small animal sidekicks (Figure 2). Therefore, the bible went through at least two or three further iterations – especially in terms of further characterization and fine-tuning the relationships between characters, which Movimenti tested through focus groups – until a master version was consolidated by February 2019.

Figure 2 - *Topo Gigio and the G-Team. Artwork courtesy of Movimenti Production*

EF: Some characters were blended and names were changed.

VDD: They went through various stages. For example, initially Bob's name was Bike Bob, he was missing a tooth, and he was quite dishevelled. Eventually, his look turned out to be more 'regular' as a result of feedback from focus groups who found him a bit 'too weird': children would not have wanted him as their friend, had he been like that. All these adjustments, so to speak, were a constant work in progress, and some of the defining features of the series characters came out of the writers' stories while they were being written. Typically, a writer would nail a given trait of a particular character that was then adopted by everyone else in all other episodes else simply because Movimenti saw it worked.

PR: The choice of the sit-com model implies adopting a workflow that is able to sustain long seriality, that is several episodes that need several writers to be developed and written. Season One consisted of 52 episodes, which were selected from a hundred or so ideas that were originally pitched. In a way, this approach to the creative process is similar to what is usually done in soap operas, even though, logistical reasons meant that we could not be physically in the actual room, because many writers did not live in Milan or not even in Italy. Which resulted in a hybrid type of writers' room that brainstormed ideas from remote with Book on a Tree, and more specifically Vito, coordinating all that. We started by pitching a rather large number of ideas, which were then whittled down based on their perceived potential. This – i.e. identifying the most promising stories out of so many ideas – might seem a straightforward process, but is in fact a very complex one. And a crucial step for everything that comes next.

VDD: It was indeed. The very first challenge was wading through a sea of ideas. To give you a more precise idea, for Season One we sent Movimenti 92 story ideas, almost double the number of episodes, as a result of ten rounds of pitches from the writers that yielded a much larger number of ideas that we whittled down to those 92. But the ac-

tual challenge was to understand, together with Movimenti, what direction was right to undertake. As mentioned, much as the bible gave us useful references, many elements were still evolving quite dynamically and substantially and, therefore, finding the right balance between what we wanted to add and the end result has been a work in progress.

As a working method, we sent a call to action to all the writers at regular intervals ahead of the next deadline by which Movimenti needed a new batch of episode ideas. Each writer would send us a number of concepts and, after a first screening stage by Book on a Tree, Movimenti would select those ideas to develop into full episodes.

On one hand, ideas had to fit the overall vision of the series and characters; on the other hand, we had to keep in mind the actual feasibility of the idea within the timescale set by the production plan. Gradually, after the first two or three pitching rounds, we started to hit the target more and more, as both Movimenti and we managed to pull to focus more clearly on what we really wanted to put on screen. As an example: initially we thought that each episode needed a twenty-page screenplay. As soon as the first storyboards were drawn, we realised that we needed to cut down to no more than fifteen pages, and possibly even fewer, in order to fit the episode format most effectively.

EF: Throughout the development process, the key instruction was to whittle everything down so as to obtain a fast-paced type of comedy. In order to stick to those eleven minutes and ensure both action and fun, we enhanced the relationships between characters and the slapstick element with the presence of the G-Team.

PR: This approach also impacts directly, and substantially, on the editorial coordination of the project. In this regard, two aspects seem to emerge from Vito's account. One is a rather heuristic approach that, much as it might rely on tried and tested models, still needs verifying and constant tweaks to attain optimal end result. This affects the writers' team directly insomuch as they receive the bible along with all necessary references, information and instructions so they can plan their work, but then they must be ready to recalibrate, especially during the initial stages. The second aspect concerns format and the choice of the right ideas for individual episodes. More specifically, getting the format of the various documents that are generated during development right – i.e. story concepts, treatments, breakdowns, screenplays – is crucial if one is to nail duration, tone, and narrative pace. Saying 'let's add a slapstick element' is one thing: but to understand how this translates in practice into what a writer includes in those documents so they are as effective as they can be is a whole other matter. I guess, Movimenti managed to understand what was needed to get that result: what was the best 'prototype' to use (for lack of a better word) and how to adapt it in development.

VDD: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, and as an example, we did have a model outline but, after a few months, together we realised that episodes tended to work better if the actual plot took off within the first couple of minutes and when the G-Team was called into action as soon as possible.

EF: The coordination work was useful precisely because us writers could not meet up altogether in one place. Therefore, being able to share all the story concepts with the editors' notes, including those that did not make the cut, allowed us to figure out what Movimenti actually liked to see. Even just reading those scripts written by someone else that had been finalized and approved gave us clear references to navigate the process

more effectively. Vito's coordination made it possible to keep the team together as a whole and work more efficiently in the right direction.

PR: A writers' room would normally meet at regular intervals, first to establish season arcs, then to break out individual episodes. As we've been not able to do any of that, Vito's ability in holding everything together and obtain the same results has been phenomenal. Officially, Vito might be a project manager, but he took on his shoulder a good deal of what would normally be an executive producer's tasks.

EF: Agreed. This is not something to be taken for granted. On the contrary, on most shows this work of coordination and sharing is often overlooked, resulting in widespread confusion across the workflow for the writers. On *Topo Gigio* this was a key benchmark.

DM: Beyond the purely managerial aspect of Vito's role, which was obviously needed anyway, he has been crucial in evaluating all the ideas that were pouring in and in shortlisting those with the most potential to send over to Movimenti Production. When creating stories and characters, you can become so immersed in the process that it can be difficult to remain objective about it. Having someone who retains an overall perspective of the whole series gave us real added value.

VDD: My role was to coordinate and interface between production and writing teams. I must say, we could rely on Movimenti's full, constant collaboration on all daily operations. Maurizia Sereni and I would be in touch constantly, even several times a day, and I would then forward as much information and feedback as possible to the writers. Essentially, I built this very large pool of information and kept it up to date at all times. It was a rather time-consuming approach but it paid off. I have to say, especially in the first few months of pre-production, I could rely on Davide's and Lucia Vaccarino's expertise who helped me read through everything. Once the whole process had picked up pace, I kept on going on my own as they moved on to other tasks.

PR: To put it simply, all that work translated into huge spreadsheets containing all sorts of relevant information for the writers. Especially in the early stages, we (the writers) were not necessarily up to speed with what was being done in other episodes that were developed simultaneously by other writers and that could end preceding yours. Therefore, sometimes it was hard to know whether introducing a new element, or using given characters and elements in a given episode would work as we didn't know whether they had already appeared in other episodes. Having that knowledge has practical consequences because if they did, it means you don't have to introduce them again in your episode, which, in turns, allows you to avoid redundancies and to utilise more screen time to develop the plotlines. That's because, while it's true that each episode can be seen as a stand-alone story, there was always a serial component to take into account as the season began to shape up a certain way, which could not be discussed and shared in person with everyone.

VDD: True. That's where the shared database came into play. Consider that there really was a vast amount of content, references, information and so forth that had to be shared with and taken on board effectively by everyone.

PR: Let's talk about the development process in more detail.

VDD: Once we received a new batch of story ideas from the writers in response to one of our calls, we would send them to Movimenti who would make their selection and send us feedback to share with everyone, so they could understand what worked and what did not work, and why. Each shortlisted concept was then further developed into a story out-line, and Movimenti would send notes again. We would then move on to treatment stage, followed by a pre-script scene breakdown and, finally, the screenplay. Each of this stage would normally require two or three drafts on average. Of course, at the end of all this, each episode also had to obtain green light from RAI. There might be some variations based on given circumstances, but that was essentially the process we went through.

3. CASE STUDIES: SCRIPTING EPISODES

PR: As Vito mentioned, the creative team of Season One comprised thirteen writers who developed and/or wrote an average of four to six episodes each. I penned five. The first one, titled *Il tagliaerba robot* (1x09, *Mr Garden*)[4] – about a robot lawnmower – was actually developed from Davide's idea, initially by Alessandro Gatti and eventually by me when it got to screenplay stage, even though this also involved revising the treatment I inherited from them. Thinking in terms of types of episodes, it is similar to the last one I did (1x40, *L'incontro ravvicinato*, *The Close Encounter*)[5] – which also revolves on a robot character, a supposed martian devised by Bob in his garage, who comes to life and ends up at Gigio's house. Technological analogy aside, the two robots eventually go haywire, Gigio obviously having a hand (or, better, a paw) in it. For the most part both episodes rely on physical action: in other words, more plot lining and less reliance on character relationships. I find this type of episodes much easier to develop and write.

Other episodes such as *Romeo Bob e Giulietta* (1x28, *Romeo Bob and Juliet*)[6] – which is essentially a parody of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with the kids busy staging the school recital – or *Topo Gigio a colori!* (1x36, *Topo Gigio in Technicolor*)[7] feature stories that revolve much more around character relationships, their friendship, with Gigio usually acting as the go-between even though he always ends up getting into some kind of trouble. Whereas an episode like *Il Mago Oz* (1x17, *Oz the Magician*)[8] blends the two aspects together. When Gigio sees the magician, he decides he wants to become a magician too: this triggers the action line which, in turn, fuels the relationship line. That is just to point out the 'ingredients' at our disposal: once the core idea had been defined, each individual episode could then take one or the other direction.

The reason why I find it easier to develop episodes that rely more on the action line has to do with narrational tempo. Generally speaking, more emphasis on the action line makes it easier to get to the essence of the story more quickly. We mentioned how im-portant this is when breaking a story, because it sort of gets you on track right off the bat.

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[4] *Il tagliaerba robot* (*Mr Garden*). Ep. 1x09 of *Topo Gigio – La serie* (2020). Story by Maria Perego, Davide Morosinotto. Screenplay by Paolo Russo.
[5] *L'incontro ravvicinato* (*The Close Encounter*). Ep. 1x40 of *Topo Gigio – La serie* (2020). Story by Maria Perego, Paolo Russo. Screenplay by Paolo Russo.
[6] *Romeo Bob e Giulietta* (*Romeo Bob and Juliet*). Ep. 1x28 of *Topo Gigio – La serie* (2020). Story by Maria Perego, Paolo Russo. Screenplay by Paolo Russo.
[7] *Topo Gigio a colori!* (*Topo Gigio in Technicolor*). Ep. 1x36 of *Topo Gigio – La serie* (2020). Story by Maria Perego, Paolo Russo. Screenplay by Paolo Russo.
[8] *Il Mago Oz* (*Oz the Magician*). Ep. 1x17 of *Topo Gigio – La serie* (2020). Story by Maria Perego, Paolo Russo. Screenplay by Paolo Russo.

Working on relationships requires more of a creative effort, also given the high number of characters, because developing those relations eats up (screen and diegetic) time from an already rather limited duration (i.e. eleven minutes).

The episode I'd like to focus on in more detail is *Topo Gigio in Technicolor*. Of all the episodes I developed and wrote, I think it is an interesting case study to understand the mechanics of the process expounded by Vito, from original idea to final green light. I drafted three versions of the story concept. If one checks out the feedback I got in response to my first draft from the story editor (i.e. "purtroppo così non la posso approvare": tr. "I'm afraid that, as is, I can't approve this one"), they might assume the idea was going to end up in the bin (Figure 2).

Figure 3 - *Excerpt from the first draft of the story concept for* Topo Gigio a colori! *(1x36), with the story editor's notes in red at the top of the document.*
Courtesy of Movimenti Production

TOPO GIGIO A COLORI!

Mi sembra lunghissimo, pieno di model nuovi e complicato. I personaggi e la storia sono fuori fuoco.

Ci sono vari episodi dove i nostri fanno quadri con le tele.
Ho riletto lo spunto, e per non fare "il compito" ci siamo andati a complicare. È bello pensare a Gigio con i colori, ma dobbiamo ripensare completamente la storia, che qui è lunghissima e un po' pretestuosa.
Non possiamo avere il MAMA, ma possiamo andare al parco o stare in giardino o a scuola, eviterei un museo intero con tutti i quadri da disegnare.

Gigio sa cosa sono i colori, quello che vuole è di certo essere integrato e dipingere con i suoi amici.
Se scegliamo la linea del compito, allora vuole aiutare Zoe, se è un gioco in giardino con gli amici, allora gioca anche lui.
Può essere una cosa che fanno per il set di papà? Dobbiamo prevedere anche la presenza del Gteam.
Purtroppo così non lo posso approvare.

I ragazzi della scuola (Emy, Jo, Twyla, Bike Bob e altri) si ritrovano all'entrata del Museo di Arte Moderna e Alternativa (il MAMA): buon ultimo arriva anche Tatum. Mrs Glides è in fibrillazione affinché tutti arrivino puntuali per questa "giornata speciale". Tutti pronti a entrare quando Bike Bob fa notare che qualcuno manca all'appello…

Zoe è ancora a casa sua, tutta presa a studiare su libri, tablet e quant'altro: disseminati intorno a lei, numerosi pennelli di tutte le dimensioni, tubi di colore, matite a carboncino, tavolozze… che (ovviamente) attirano l'attenzione di Gigio il quale si chiede cosa stia studiando la sua amica. Risposta: tutto il possibile su come si fa il "dipinto perfetto" che secondo lei (ovviamente) si può ottenere solo con un approccio scientifico super-preciso, ovvero le tecniche per il ritratto perfetto, la sezione aurea, i segreti dei più grandi pittori di sempre. Tra i vari pennelli, Gigio ne nota uno in particolare: rosa e tutto glitterato. "Non toccarlo" gli intima Zoe, quello è il suo pennello preferito. Ma Gigio ci mette comunque lo zampino… letteralmente, dato che indietreggia su un tubetto facendo fuoriuscire un "vermicello" di colore blu; inavvertitamente, ci mette sopra la zampetta e inizia a seminare impronte sul pavimento proprio mentre entra Gregory. "Mi auguro che dopo tu pulisca, Gigio", dice Gregory allungando un kleenex a Gigio che lo usa per pulirsi la zampetta.

Gregory era venuto ad annunciare visite: è Bob, che arriva tutto trafelato. "Zia, ma che fine hai fatto? Sono tutti al museo che ti aspettano; faremo tardi per la gara." "Gara? Che gara?", le orecchie di Gigio cominciano subito a roteare. Zoe spiega che il MAMA ha indetto un concorso per le scuole di tutto il

One of the issues highlighted by the story editor was the introduction of a new model, that is, of a new setting that had to be designed and made from scratch. More specifically, I came up with the idea of a Museum of Alternative Modern Art (the MAMA): clearly my mistake. I guess I did not take into account that, as funny or smart as the museum idea could sound, it would have meant additional work that was impossible to carry out within time and budget. Moreover, it did not comply with instructions: as any writer of animation knows all too well, one has to use those models that are already available. As writers, it is important that this is not seen as a limitation, but as a spur for creativity. Furthermore, Maurizia pointed out how the plot was way too complicated, with too many twists and turns: the characters go to the museum, then back home, then back to the museum with two chase sequences involving Gigio, an art competition with the school kids, new characters (e.g. the museum director) and so forth. All in all, too many characters, too many sets, and too many complications plot-wise.

So I took Movimenti's and Vito's feedback on board and used it to redraft a new version. I whittled down the idea to its core, which was having the children work with colours as a school task. On Maurizia's suggestion, I moved the action to the park where they make a mural, no longer to win a competition but inspired by environmental themes. They argue, split up, then, thanks to Gigio who rustles up a *guasch* of mud and leaves, not only are they praised for it, but they overcome misunderstandings and make amends with each other. Overall, I worked at streamlining what otherwise could have ended up being a 25-minute-long episode requiring the creation of new models and characters. I then further refined this new version through three treatment drafts until, on reading the last one, Maurizia noted that: "This episode is really nice, especially because of the messages it conveys". I then broke that treatment into a scene breakdown, which I then used to draft the screenplay which, thanks to all that development work, was a rather quick and effective process (Figure 4).

The take-home point here is that if an idea does not get immediate approval, it does not mean it is not a good idea. It just means that it needs further work in a different direction, one that takes into due account all that Vito explained earlier. From a writer's point of view, this demands times so that one can understand what actually work in each episode. What needs streamlining is never the meaning of a story or the dramatic impact of an episode. In fact, one needs to do exactly the opposite: find what elements are really essential to the story and make sure they pack as much impact as possible within the available format.

VDD: I will piggyback on that to add a couple of things. This streamlining work that Paolo just mentioned concerned several episodes throughout the whole first season, especially in the first half when everything was still very much in progress. Constantly polishing every detail of every episode was key to make sure that all the themes tackled across the 52 episodes hit it home within those 11 minutes. Many concepts that were passed on initially have been rescued, revamped or merged into other episodes that ended up working perfectly well, thanks to the experience gained in those first six months. Because of that, everything worked in a much smoother way in Season Two. It must also be said that, with thirteen writers working simultaneously, many topics – such as the school play or birthday parties – tended to recur at least three or four times and therefore some blending was needed at some point.

Figure 4 - *Excerpt from the second draft of the teleplay for* Topo Gigio a colori!
(1x36). Courtesy of Movimenti Production

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                    Pink Rev. (17/05/19)              5.
                        TWYLA (CONT'D)
             tranquillo.                                      *
                  (a Zoe)                                     *
             Vinceremo noi.                                   *

                        EMY                                  *
             Ma... veramente non è una gara.                 *

     Twyla si allontana, impettita; seguita da Emy e Jo, piuttosto
     riluttanti. Tatum scrolla le spalle e si unisce pure lui.   *

     Zoe li osserva con una smorfia. Gigio si rimette a          *
     zompettarle intorno.                                        *

                        GIGIO                                *
             Allora possiamo dipingere adesso?               *

                        ZOE                                  *
             Non ancora, Gigio.                              *

                        GIGIO                                *
                  (preso in contropiede)                     *
             Ma cosa mi dici mai?                            *

     Zoe aduna Gigio e Bob come a confidare un gran segreto.     *

                        ZOE                                  *
             Dobbiamo scoprire che cosa dipinge              *
             la squadra di Twyla e farlo meglio.             *

                        BOB
             Una missione di spionaggio. Cool!

                        GIGIO
             Allora questa è una missione per il             *
             G-Team!

     SEQUENZA G-TEAM...


     EST. PARCO, AREA GIOCHI - CONT.

     Il G-Team accorre al gran completo.

                        GIGIO
             La migliore squadra di agenti                   *
             segreti al mondo!

                        ZOE
             Non c'è tempo da perdere. Gigio,
             Coniglietti e Piccione andrete a
             spiare il gruppo di Twyla. Noi
             altri resteremo qui a dipingere.
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EF: Talking about birthday parties, I will follow up with another case study: one of the episodes I pitched and wrote was *Un compleanno movimentato* (1x52, *An Eventful Birthday*)[9]. As one might expect, this type of narrative situation usually relies on rather eventful character dynamics. In this case, it was not one of the protagonists' birthday (i.e. Gigio's or Zoe's); it was Zoe's best friend's, Emilia. That said, the initial idea revolved around Gigio and Zoe who plan the most 'super-surpriseful' birthday ever; of course, everything goes belly up. That core idea remained pretty much unaltered throughout, but the hard part while developing it was, once again, having to streamline it and making sure it had the right pace.

This episode makes for an interesting exemplar also because it was one of the episodes we discussed in person at the Writers' Room that was organized in Milan. Having devised and written the concept, the Room gave me a chance to pitch it to my fellow writers, take their comments on board and developed it further. For those of us who were able to attend, it was without a doubt very good practice because we were able to explore ideas together and then follow up at a later time.

In my case, it helped me revisit and improve my concept. In the first version, Zoe and Gigio hire a magician to perform at the party: however, the magician never shows up. They order a cake but the wrong one is delivered. And so forth and so forth. As a result of all these situations, Gigio ended up being rather side-lined: never a good thing for a character who is supposed to be the protagonist of the story. Similar problems affected the children too because they relied on someone from outside their entourage (e.g. the magician) for the party to take place. In episodes such as this that revolve around a third character (Emilia) there is always a risk of moving focus away from Gigio, the heart and soul of the series. The workaround was of course to make all the children more active and make sure Gigio remains the driving force of the story. To that end, rewrite after rewrite, I heightened the contrast between Gigio's and Zoe's personalities. Zoe is a born planner but often gets lost in the detail. Gigio is the opposite: always positive, enthusiastic, but prone to overdoing things and messing up. Relying on these opposites I reworked the story along their relational dynamics, with Gigio doing his best to help his friend – which is the foundation of this type of comedy that hinges on characters' wishes and motivations.

The screenplay's first draft was quite long (18 pages), with way too many situations. For instance: Bob shows up with a balloon-making machine that is supposed to blow out cuddly animal-shaped balloons but never really works. Then, Emilia comes back earlier than expected, thus risking spoiling the surprise. Therefore, Zoe decides to keep her busy and entrusts Gigio with preparations. Gigio is of course thrilled to be promoted to the party's MC but, needless to say, bundle of mischief that he is, goes through the mill. The cake he ordered has the wrong lettering and is supersmelly because he asked for one with countless types of cheese only he likes. And so forth and so forth. And, of course, for each situation one also needs to show the characters' reactions. Eventually, this was done through a musical montage sequence, which highlights another essential element of this animated series: music (Figures 5 and 6).

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[9] *Un compleanno movimentato* (*An Eventful Birthday*). Ep. 1x52 of *Topo Gigio – La serie* (2020). Story by Maria Perego, Eleonora Fornasari. Screenplay by Eleonora Fornasari.

Figure 5 - *Excerpts from the revised, final draft of the teleplay for* Un compleanno movimentato! *(1x52) green-lit for production, featuring the cited montage sequence. Courtesy of Movimenti Production*

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   22TG - UnCompleannoMovimentato - DEFINITIVA - 22mar19        13.

99                         ZOE                              99
                    (al walkie talkie, fiatone)
                 Festeggiata in arrivo, ripeto
                 festeggiata in arrivo! (poi, ad
                 Emy) Emy! Aspettami!

    EMILIA si gira e rallenta. ZOE la raggiunge.

100                      ZOE (CONT'D)                       100
                 Dove stai andando?

101                      EMILIA                             101
                    (delusa)
                 A casa... non mi sembri molto
                 interessata ai miei racconti e
                 poi... nessuno si è ricordato che
                 oggi è il mio...

    Le ragazze passano in quel momento davanti a casa di ZOE e dal
    giardino, spuntano tutti fuori con...

102                      AMICI                              102
                 Buon compleanno! Sorpresa!

    GIGIO, il G-TEAM, TWYLA, BOB e JO -SUONANO DELLE TROMBETTE DA
    FESTA-. A seguire quella di TATUM, che fa un -SUONO STONATO e
    MOSCIO. STACCO su EMY, emozionata.

103                      EMIIA                              103
                 Ragazzi... grazie! Io... pensavo
                 che...

104                      ZOE                                104
                 ...che ci fossimo dimenticati?
                 (l'abbraccia) Siamo i tuoi amici!

105                      GIGIO                              105
                    (microfono alla zampa)
                 E ora... che la festa abbia
                 inizio!

    GIGIO prende per mano EMILIA e la trascina da BOB.

    INIZIO DEL MONTAGE MUSICALE.

    GIGIO e BOB le mostrano lo sparapalloncini... che si inceppa
    subito e sputa palloncini orribili con Coniglietti che fuggono
    impauriti e Piccione che prova ad affrontarli con sfida.

    Stacchiamo a tendina al x tavolo delle cibarie. GIGIO solleva il
    tovagliolo che ricopre il vassoio dei biostuzzichini e sotto
    appare ROSPO satollo. Il vassoio è vuoto. ROSPO digerisce. Sulle
    espressioni inorridite di EMILIA, TWYLA E ZOE. Le orecchie di
    GIGIO vibrano per l'impatto. GIGIO passa allora alle ciotoline.
    Alza i coperchi in successione, ma le ciotoline sono tutte
    vuote. Si gira a guardare PICCIONE che, in un angolino, si
    freeza, apre il becco e lascia cadere una valanga di chicci.

                                                            13
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22TG - UnCompleannoMovimentato - DEFINITIVA - 22mar19        14.

GIGIO allora indirizza tutti verso la scultura di spiedini di
frutta di JO. In quel momento però TATUM prende uno spiedino e
fa crollare la piramide di frutta, sotto lo sguardo disperato di
JO. Poi ingurgita lo spiedino in un sol boccone e usa il
bastoncino per pulirsi i denti soddisfatto. Tutti lo sguardano,
basiti.

STACCO SU: TWYLA che porta il pacchetto regalo, con il fiocco
sfatto e dietro i coniglietti mezzi avvolti e incastrati nel
nastro. EMILIA, emozionata, lo scarta e tira fuori il vestito
verde... a cui manca un pezzo. Stacco su TARTARUGA che sta
masticando il lembo di vestito strappato con faccia goduriosa.

Crescendo di espressioni allibite e sempre più deluse di ZOE,
mentre EMILIA appare più frastornata. Creare un vero crescendo
in diting e close up storyboard. Gigio apre il braccio stile
presentatore con sorriso forzato per provare a recuperare col
photobooth.

STACCO al photobooth. TALPA è immersa nelle mascherine,
indossate come fossero tanti occhiali tra cui quelli con gli
occhi a molla che cadono a terra davanti, Talpa inciampa e si
trascina con sè la cornice del photobooth che gli crolla in
testa e si spacca.

FINE BRUSCA DEL MOTIVETTO MUSICALE che coincide con una -FRENATA
DI CAMIONCINO-.

REVEAL: il camioncino del corriere ha inchiodato nel vialetto.

106                         GIGIO (CONT'D)                    106
                          (eccitato)
                        È' arrivata la tortaaaa!

107                            ZOE                            107
                        (a bassa voce, denti stretti, a
                         GIGIO)
                        Non doveva già essere qui?

  Espressione colpevole di GIGIO che corre verso l'entrata. ZOE
  segue, prendendo una frastornata EMY per mano.

108                         ZOE (CONT'D)                      108
                          (finta entusiasta)
                        Evviva!

  STACCO SU il ragazzo del corriere (comparsa del ragazzo riccio),
  che si avvicina, con una mano a tappare il naso e reggendo
  quella che sembra una forma di formaggio con sopra un razzo
  spaziale e delle candeline accese. ZOE non ci può credere.

109                          FATTORINO                       109
                        Ecco la torta "Formaggio
                        Spaziale". Dieci formaggi diversi!
                        Coraggiosi! In cinque anni non
                        l'aveva mai scelta nessuno.
                            (MORE)

                                                             14
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In this particular episode, like in many others, when everything seems to have gone south, Gigio grabs his guitar thus giving a chance to Emilia to sing a song. Emilia is timid, the typical friend who tends to remain in everyone else's shadow: however, she has an incredible voice, loves singing and turns into a completely different person when she does. At the end of the day, she is happy even though the party was a disaster. When she holds her nose from the smell and blows out the candles, she wishes she could have

many more birthdays like this one, in the company of all her friends, whom she shows gratitude to through the song lyrics. This musical number between Gigio and Emilia, along with quite a few other situations at the party build into a sequence of montages that allowed to cut down excessive or redundant dialogue.

Among the tweaks I made to the screenplay, I ensured that the G-Team was called into action as soon as possible, and certainly much sooner than in the first draft. We were briefed to aim for an 80/20 balance between comedy and slapstick. The slapstick parts rely on the natural characteristics of the animals: for instance, Pigeon (Piccione) goes ballistic the second he spots some seeds or grains; therefore when he sees some rice bowls during the party, he nosedives fearlessly towards them. Or Toad (Rospo), whose prehensile tongue grabs all sorts of nibbles, so when Emilia goes to see what is there to eat, Pigeon and Toad have already cleared everything out.

PR: Davide, you often claim your contribution as writer was not so relevant. To be fair though, you've been involved pretty much on every stage and aspect of the development process.

DM: For the most part I took care of ideas development and story concepts. I approached the whole thing rather pragmatically and told myself: we have fifty-two boxes to fill (i.e. the episode); what do we fill those boxes with? With so many, the most common risk to avoid is repetition: birthday parties, that Eleonora just talked about, is a classic. Or particular settings, such as the Christmas-themed story, the last day of school and so forth. Production tends to frown upon ideas such as these because, if the Christmas episode is then broadcast in August, nobody likes it.

Another big issue is limitations. Don't get me wrong: this was a 'lavish' production by many standards and Movimenti Production deployed as many resources as they could. And yet, like any other production, the number of sets is finite. When developing the bible we had come up with all sorts of settings – e.g. Gigio to the seaside, Gigio on the mountains, Gigio in space and many more – that we then had to give up because the related sets were not there. As a consequence, particularly at that stage of the development process, the number of constraints and limitations increased substantially and it was not easy to come up with more and more original ideas using the same sets. Sometimes we tried to force these barriers: for instance, I wrote the concept of an episode titled *Missione Bioparco* (1x33, *BioPark Mission*)[10] for which we convinced Movimenti to introduce a new set on the back of the prospect it could be re-used in other episodes too.

EF: I actually wrote treatment and screenplay from this concept of yours, which, I believe, had already gone through a couple of revisions round before it landed on my desk.

DM: Maybe even three. Similarly to the case studies described by Paolo and Eleonora, in its first draft the concept was quite long and convoluted. As we kept developing stories, we realized that those eleven minutes needed to be 'filled' with less situations. I must say, credit to Maurizia Sereni from Movimenti who figured out a key to hold everything together and make the story work by drastically streamlining it. I simply executed her

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[10] *Missione Bioparco* (*BioPark Mission*). Ep. 1x33 of *Topo Gigio – La serie* (2020). Story by Maria Perego, Davide Morosinotto. Screenplay by Eleonora Fornasari.

instructions. More often than not, a good story editor like Maurizia makes your life so much easier and saves the day story after story. She is exceptional.

PR: The introduction of new sets, like the one described by Davide, is something that is rarely talked about, probably due the rather common misconception that when working on animated stories one can draw whatever they like with every new story. The reality is quite different, though: the number of sets available is limited and writers have to come up with stories that fit those settings. Davide's zoo was an exception to the rule, but in my opinion, it also shows that those limits should not be seen as constraints but the confines within which to develop creative ideas.

DM: We all managed to work around the issue by taking advantage of Gigio being the protagonist, the lead force propelling the stories. Surely this applies to all series, but Gigio is an unusual case because he is the odd element out in the world he inhabits: he is a mouse but he can speak and therefore he has a unique vantage point on this world that makes him the engine of each episode. Creators and writers need to remember that Gigio is the real protagonist, not a particular setting, narrative situation or calendar event; they need to step into his shoes and see the world from his point of view, one that is different, unfamiliar, and therefore clashes with daily routines. That's what triggers each story in every episode.

EF: This was also possible because we retained some fundamental traits of the original character created by Maria Perego: his candour, his innocence on one hand, and his guile, enthusiasm and positivity. The puppet enjoyed much popularity in many countries, thanks to his appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971)[11] among many others. In the series, he was introduced into a whole new world. He is given a human sister (Zoe) and human friends, all of whom are children; he has a family, with a mum and a dad; and the G-Team, comprising of animals who are not anthropomorphised like Gigio and therefore cannot talk, although he can still understand them. All has changed around him, but Gigio's essence remains the same.

We also rescued his catchphrases that made him so iconic and are still so familiar to those generations of viewers who grew up with Gigio decades ago, such as "What a frighty fright!" or "My whiskers are quivering!". Many episodes end with his familiar "Hug me till I pop" marking an endearing moment between him and Zoe, because even in their lowest moments, when it seems that things could not be any worse, like at Emilia's birthday party, what matters is that by the end they all laugh together.

PR: The idea of turning Gigio into an animated series dates back to 2016. Since then, the landscape of the distribution of content has changed dramatically with the advent of streaming platforms. In the early stages already there were talks of having an English version too. And distributing the series to an international audience soon became reality.

VDD: Absolutely. The series was created and developed to be available both in Italian and in English. Since the very first day, we were tasked to translate all scripts in English. Maurizia Sereni and I attended a test dubbing session very early on. So much so that

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[11] *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948–1971, 24 seasons). USA: Sullivan Productions, CBS Productions.

the series soon sold abroad, especially in Latin American countries where the characters was already very popular.

PR: Even the main precinct of the series, this leafy suburbia setting that feels and looks very American…

EF: It feeds into the internationalisation of the series that Paolo mentioned earlier and that involves the multi-ethnic cast of characters too: Twyla is African-American, Jo is Japanese, Emilia is Colombian. The choice of names reflects that too. All in all, these were all planned decisions made with the intention to appeal to an international audience (Figure 6).

Figure 6 - *The multi-ethnic cast of characters of* Topo Gigio.
Courtesy of Movimenti Production

4. CONCLUSIONS

PR: Let's draw some conclusions by following up on what we discussed earlier in regards to some key decisions made at creative development stage aimed at redefining Gigio for a contemporary audience, perhaps focusing on the characters.

EF: The character born in 1959 had specific traits and embarked on a certain type of adventures. Movimenti Production met the need to turn Gigio into a contemporary character while, at the same time, retaining his true essence. One crucial move was to reframe Gigio's world and populate it with children characters that young viewers can relate to: both in terms of their personalities and their daily adventures. For example, whenever stories are set at school, they never focus on classes but on relations. At home, Gigio has a human family: Zoe, dad and mum. The dynamics between the kids at school or within the family at home provide that relatability factor coupled with a fast narrative pace that

today's audiences are used to. If we compare *Topo Gigio* with animated series of even a couple of decades ago, the difference is striking: regardless of how cool we think they are, their narrative pace is often very, very slow.

PR: Gigio the puppet generally interacted with adult humans: Ed Sullivan, Raffaella Carrà and many more. Exceptions to this rule – such as, Rosie, the female mouse Gigio has a crush on – were rare. The origins of this type of interaction can be traced all the way back to the vaudeville, or variety theatre, in numbers featuring a comic duo usually consisting of a serious, more dependable character playing sidekick to a blunderer. It is based and structured around gags as opposed to storytelling per se. When shifting to a TV format strongly indebted to situation comedy, one imports a model with a core narrative engine that requires a high number of characters. On one hand, we have the children's world; on the other hand, we have the adult characters, both within the domestic settings with the various families and in the outside world. This increases the dynamic range systematically. Gigio is still Gigio: the keystone is the new format. Original Gigio was the heir of variety theatre: today's animated, televisual Gigio relies on a model imported from American television and takes on a whole new freshness.

DM: Another, very modern character is Bob, who was invented by Maurizia and Giorgio in the Writers' Room, drawing inspiration from The Dude made famous by *The Big Lebowski* (1998)[12]. A kind of eccentric, wacky character that has become common in recent years but was hard to find in animated series of the past.

PR: With his cool and laid-back attitude and his slang, Bob is a mix between The Dude and a skateboarder. His inventions, somewhat bizarre and brilliant at the same time, are also reminiscent of Doc from *Back to the Future* (1985)[13].

EF: Bob also plays Gigio's 'buddy' in those situations where Zoe cannot be, which originates very funny dynamics between the three characters. With an added element of mystery: nobody ever seems to see him at school, only for him to pop up when we least expect it. He always has his head in the clouds only to surprise us with brilliant ideas and his knowledge of the most unlikely things: for example, in the episode I wrote where Gigio and the children must look after a plant that mum is growing in her lab, by the end of the story we find out that Bob is an expert botanist who even knows the endless Latin name of the plant. These are the ingredients of a winning character.

VDD: It is true that Bob's character in particular stands out. At the beginning he was supposed to be the wacky tinkerer of the group: while this feature is still there, story after story all the writers refined his character more and more, coming up with those catchphrases that have made him such a modern character.

Another character I'd like to mention is Tatum. At first sight, he is a bit of a bully but soon his multiple facets begin to emerge. While all the other children live with their parents in a more "regular" situation, Tatum lives with his grandmother: together, they add great value to the stories, and I find their relationship really sweet.

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[12] *The Big Lebowski* (*Il grande Lebowksi*) (1998). Directed by Joel Coen. Written by Ethan and Joel Coen. USA-UK: Working Title Films. 117 mins.
[13] *Back to the Future* (*Ritorno al futuro*) (1985). Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Written by Robert Zemeckis, Bob Gale. USA: Amblin Entertainment. 116 mins.

EF: We played with and reversed the stereotype of the classroom bully by revealing his sensibility and care for his grandmother. Generally speaking, while all the characters have well-defined, recognisable traits, we worked to give a certain depth to each and every one of them.

PR: From a practical point of view, developing character depth is absolutely necessary otherwise those two or three recognizable traits would make for a rather repetitive pattern.

VDD: Those traits give each character a distinctive verve but you need depth to make them believable. Maurizia Sereni's sensibility as a person and story editor was key in identifying the right traits to be developed for each character.

EF: In conclusion, the elements that make *Topo Gigio* an example that stands out in the landscape of today's animated series in Italy and beyond can be summed up as: i) the type and high standards of the workflow and organization. Coordinating the writing team and supervising all the individual episodes/stories throughout development and production has been a complex but highly efficient process. And ii) the international out-look of a co-production focusing on a character that, although originally Italian, is very popular abroad too. The iconic character went through a process of significant transfor-mation with full support from his creator (Maria Perego) that ended up in a complex product that today's audiences find appealing while it still retains the core values of the character: it is never banal or shallow. That is because in *Topo Gigio* the winning card has been the development of a solid relational matrix that has made all the stories thor-oughly enjoyable and, at the same time, often leaves you with something to think about.

PR: The challenge now will be the sustainability of the series beyond its second season (Figure 7). After 150-200 story concepts, of which 76 made it to the final cut, finding ever new, fresh ideas while, at the same time, retaining a high standard, is no mean feat.

Figure 7 - *Artwork from Season Two of of* Topo Gigio.
Courtesy of Movimenti Production