



BRANDS IN PERFECT HARMONY

How do you make every piece of your client's brand sing together? Take a few lessons in brand unity from Sesame Street, Guitar Hero and Coca-Cola Happiness Factory.

BY MICHELLE TAUTE

CAST OF THOUSANDS

With hundreds of licensees, how do you make sure Big Bird always looks like Big Bird? By using style guides and an approval process for every Sesame Street product.

Life would be a lot easier if all the brands you worked on only lived in one place. But even small brands often resemble groups of wandering nomads—with websites, social media accounts, print materials and more. All of these different elements can easily take on their own personalities, but as a designer, it's your job to make sure there's a unified effort across the entire brand. Easier said than done, right? We tapped three top brands and the creative teams behind them to find out their strategies for keeping all those nomads speaking the same language and wearing the same clothes.

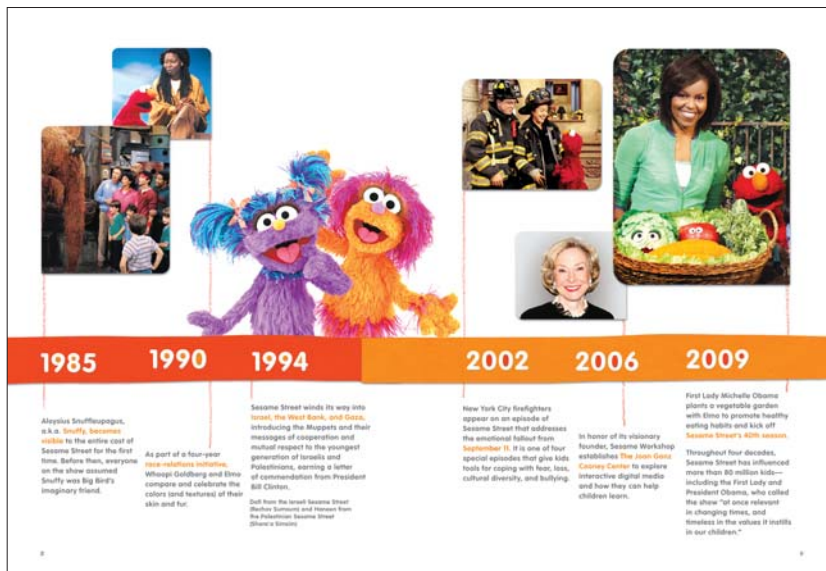
SESAME STREET: S IS FOR STYLE GUIDES

Think quick: What's your favorite Sesame Street memory from childhood? Maybe you loved reciting numbers with the bright purple Count Von Count or

watching Cookie Monster devour a sweet treat. Or, heck, you might have just wondered how Big Bird grew to be more than 8 feet tall. And that's just the trouble with keeping an iconic 40-year-old brand on the same page: Every consumer brings an emotional connection to the table, and in this case, the table includes more than 700 consumer product licensees worldwide.

These are people outside Sesame Workshop—the nonprofit behind the show—who design everything from toys, clothes and books to coffee mugs and games, all featuring characters and other brand elements made familiar by the TV show. So how do they keep Sesame Street's look, feel and essence the same when it's touched by so many hands? Very carefully.

"I think a lot of designers end up designing from a childhood memory of the show rather than how



we'd like Sesame Street portrayed now," according to Theresa Fitzgerald, vice president of creative services at Sesame Workshop. "We're often sorting through dated-looking designs."

Fitzgerald's 15-person department actually heads up the approval process for roughly 18,000 consumer products a year that all those outside partners create. So when a design for a Big Bird T-shirt or a Bert and Ernie storybook hits the office, they're always trying to push those designs forward: Can we make it fresher? Can we make it cleaner? Can we make it simpler? Can we make it feel more contemporary? For a single product, her team might see two rounds of designs and a prototype before the item receives the green light for production, providing feedback at every stage.

One of the biggest tasks is making sure all the brand standards are upheld, and to that end, Sesame's creative services department creates five to 10 style guides a year to cover different aspects of the brand. These manuals are where outside partners find the CMYK and RGB colors for Elmo and Big Bird and learn that the Sesame Street logo must always appear right-side-up and horizontal. Historically, these guides were physical books with DVDs in the back full of visual assets, including perhaps 500 to 1,000 pieces of art and even custom fonts developed in-house. But now the company is working to move these guides online to save money and paper.

Managing such a large brand and approval process, however, means constantly changing and adapting. About five years ago, there were actually two different creative divisions within the company. "They weren't aligned and so they would almost be creating competitive style guides," says Noah Broadwater, vice president of information services. "One would be sending it out for vendors to use on our websites, to use in our marketing materials. The other group was creating it for packaging for licensees. So our packaging and our marketing and our website materials didn't look the

same." Today all those style guides come from one unified creative department.

They also put a lot of thought into how Sesame Street's core assets can be deployed across a variety of media. A shoot for the television show may include extra takes that could end up in an interactive game with the same theme as the episode. Even pictures of the show's set might end up as assets for marketing materials or products. And since everything flows from the TV show, Sesame Street creates one integrated message across the entire brand. "When they start writing scripts for Sesame Street, they're thinking about how those scripts can be used in interactive media," Broadwater says. "They're thinking about how those scripts are going to translate into potential books, how that's going to translate into home video."

Right now the company is making an effort to keep the big picture on track. They're partnering with San-Francisco-based Office to re-evaluate the brand's place in the market and create an overall brand book. It's an exercise the company hasn't done for 10 years, and there's no shortage of material to draw from. "The contents of the show are rich and deep and wide," Fitzgerald says. "It's a show that works on humor. It has celebrities. It has parodies. It uses all kinds of cultural influences and pop culture. And so as we try to unify our branding at Sesame Street, it should be a creative filter that helps anchor us in the world, but actually frees up the designers to do new things."

GUITAR HERO: PLAYING A SOLD-OUT SHOW

Before revamping Guitar Hero's online presence, parent company Activision followed a model similar to that of a lot of game publishers: They launched another micro site every time a new title came out. You could visit sites for Guitar Hero World Tour, Guitar Hero Smash Hits and, for the headbangers, Guitar Hero Metallica. Even ad campaigns for the game merited separate micro sites, and the user community lived on a different site, too. A simple landing page served as Guitar Hero's main online home and sent you off to all these individual destinations. "You ended up with a very fragmented brand presence," says Ken Martin, chief creative officer at BLITZ, an agency in Santa Monica hired by Activision. "When we entered in, it was just a lot of stuff all over the place."

So in late 2009, the digital agency worked with Activision to create one powerful online hub for Guitar Hero, a single place for fans to rock out and interact with the brand. Previously, the game's online community site primarily appealed to hardcore gamers, so a big goal for the new site was mass appeal. It needed to keep traditional gamers interested without intimidating what Martin calls the "Wii moms," shorthand for casual gamers. "In order to do that, we really needed to make it very simple and effortless for you to kind of connect the community activities with the actual game play," he says. "Our mantra through the build was that there's no community section of this new site. The site is the community."

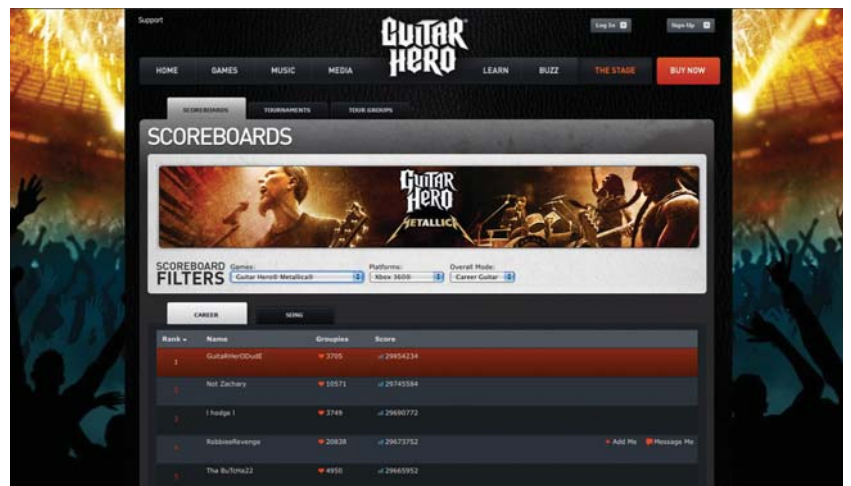
The new site focuses on a shared love for music and an online social interaction that's reminiscent of



Facebook. When you pull up the site, there's a Guitar Hero music chart down the right-hand side that shows you the most popular songs and newest downloadable tracks. Registering on the site adds even more functionality for serious gamers. It allows you to connect directly with your game console to track your Guitar Hero statistics. Plus, you can chat with other players in the forum about strategies or game gear and even compete in Guitar Hero tournaments.

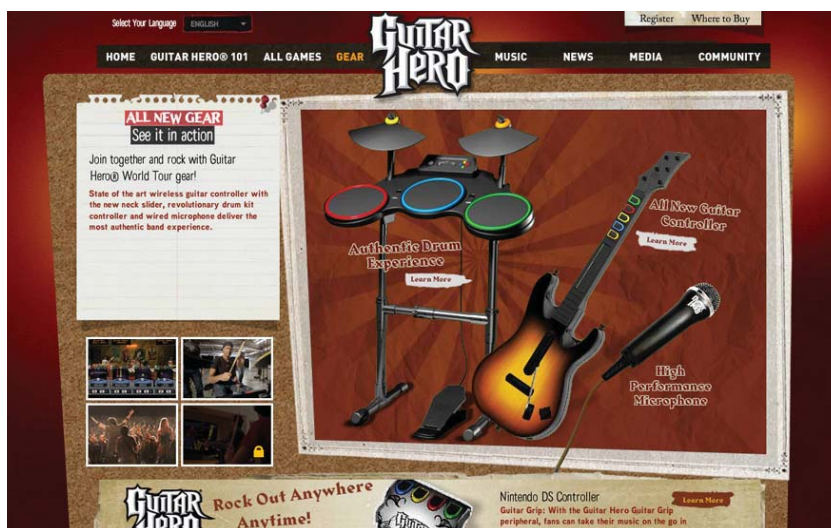
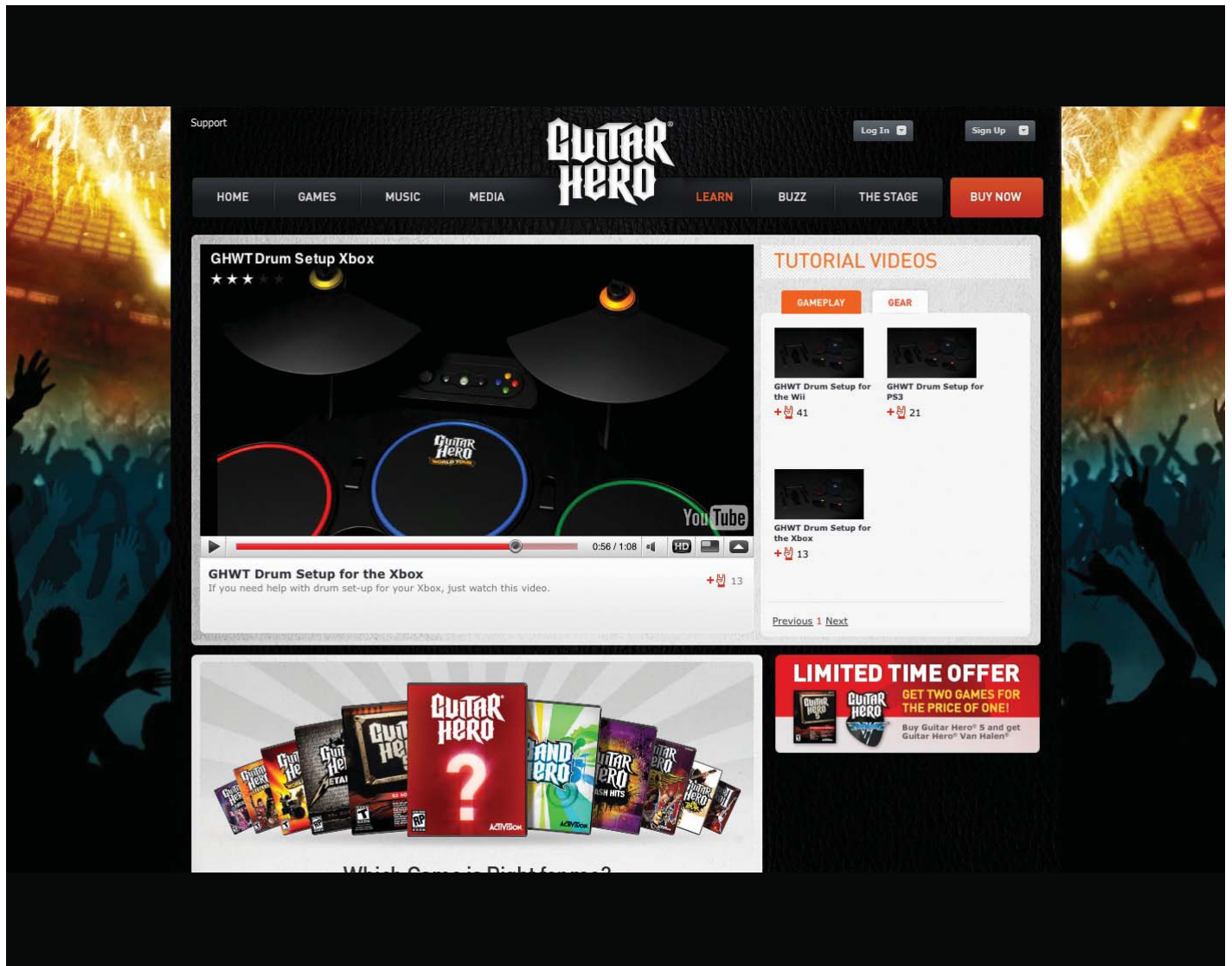
Graphically speaking, GuitarHero.com rocks a simple, pared-down look. "As the hub, it really needs to be somewhat agnostic to a game title," Martin says. So instead of leveraging artwork from individual games, which cover a range of music genres, the site reverses the Guitar Hero logo from black and creates a simple backdrop that still feels like the brand. This approach creates a framework for introducing new games within the hub instead of on individual micro sites, a move that consolidates the game's online community and reduces marketing costs. And without in-your-face game art, it's more welcoming to the casual video-game player. Hardcore fans log in for all the added functionality.

The new site also embraces all the third-party sites—from Facebook to YouTube to Digg—where people were already talking about the brand. The site's news section, for instance, is completely powered by Digg, and the BLITZ team integrated YouTube as the video-serving platform for the site. By doing the latter, all the eyes watching videos on GuitarHero.com count



MY GUITAR HERO

After linking your console to the Guitar Hero site, you can see the songs you just played, learn how you stacked up against other people and even join tour groups.



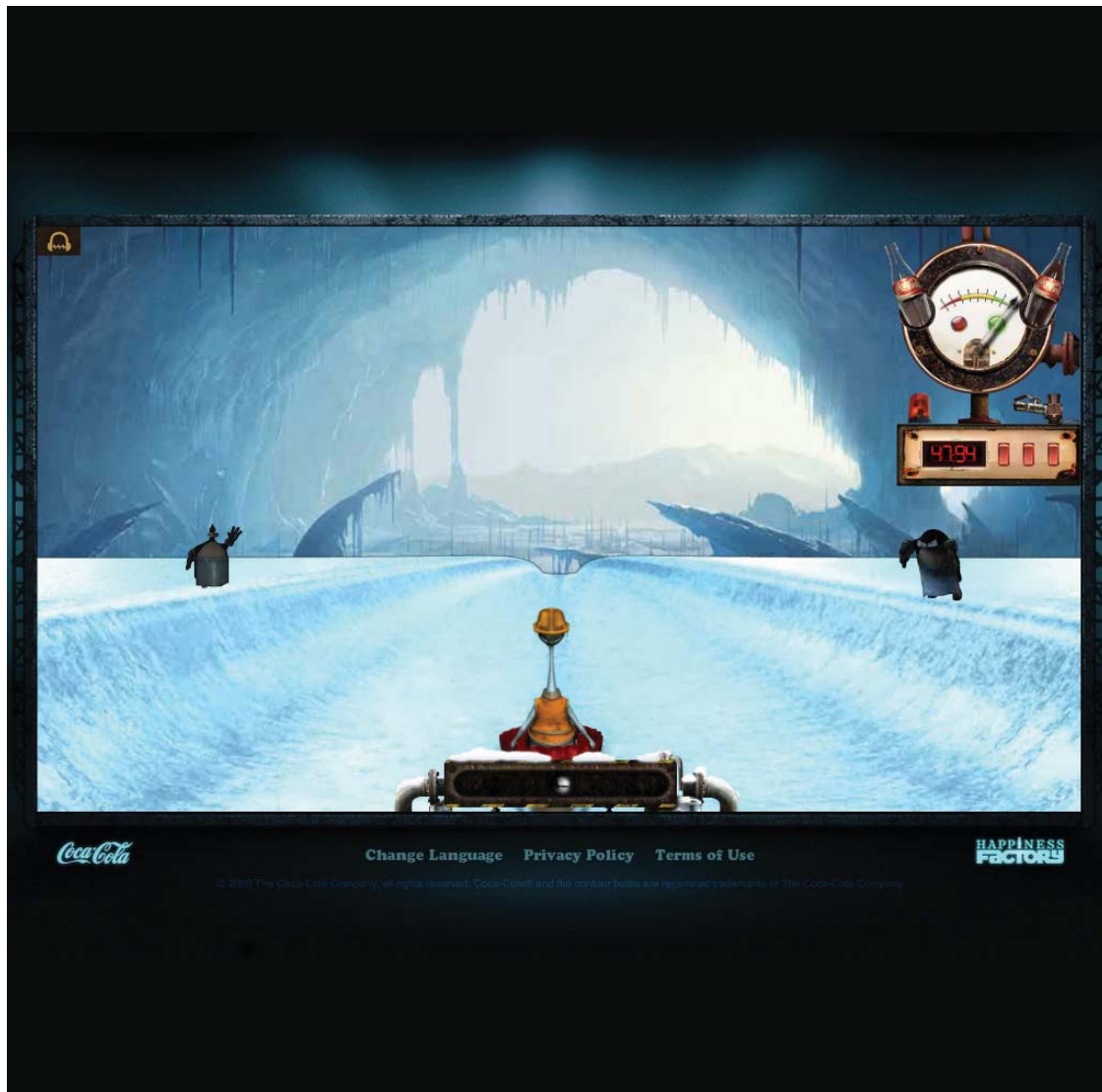
MASS APPEAL

The new Guitar Hero hub (top) is game-agnostic, pulling together fans of everything from Guitar Hero Aerosmith to Guitar Hero World Tour in one place. Older sites (bottom) tended to leverage more game-specific artwork.

as YouTube views and help increase the game's search results on this external video site. This move alone increased video engagement by 500%, and that's just one of the impressive metrics for the site.

Traffic has doubled since the new hub launched, and site registration has increased 50%. "I believe that's due to the fact that now it's worth registering," Martin says. "There's stuff for you to do. There's stuff for you to interact with." The agency's online integration efforts also helped push Guitar Hero past the one million fan mark on Facebook. But perhaps most impressively, revenue from sales in the online store, which was re-branded to Guitar Hero, rose 300%.

Martin says the site takes the best part of game micro sites—the immersion in the game content—and marries it with a strong social strategy. "Peers are really the greatest influence on the purchase decision," says Martin. "Being able to allow product information to sit comfortably next to social commentary, through and through, is a key element." So go ahead, watch the trailer for that Guitar Hero game you have your eye on, then click over to the message boards and see what everyone's saying about it.



ONLINE SWAG

Playing 3D games on the Coca-Cola Happiness Factory 3 site unlocks downloads, such as screensavers, ringtones and iron-on shirt transfers.

COCA-COLA HAPPINESS FACTORY 3: DRINKING IN THE DETAILS

You may remember the Coca-Cola Happiness Factory campaign from those fabulous TV commercials harkening back to the early 2000s. They took you inside a Coke vending machine, where a world of magical, animated creatures prepares your beverage after you drop a few coins in the slot. These happy-while-they-work characters also live online, and by the time Sapient Interactive dove in on the digital campaign in 2009, the Happiness Factory website (www.hf3.coca-cola.com) was entering its third phase. “I think what they wanted was a more immersive experience, and that’s what we were really gunning for as well,” says Jimmy Allen, creative director at Sapient. “We really wanted to make it look and feel like a video game.”

Rather than unifying a disjointed brand, this project gave the digital agency the chance to play within the space of an existing, highly creative campaign. They studied the Happiness Factory bible, a detailed guide to all the characters created by Wieden+Kennedy, and acquired visual assets from other agencies. One shop sent over a huge hard drive, and the Sapient team

pored over those materials and more. “We studied the commercials and how the characters interacted with each other,” Allen says. “We studied the environment before we even came up with one concept. That’s a really important aspect of all the stuff that we do. We try to explore as much of whatever’s already been created before we come up with any concept.”

The team knew the ins and outs of Happiness Factory before digging in, but they still had to make sure all the details stayed just right across the micro site, banner ads, iPhone app and MSN Messenger games. One way the agency achieves consistency for any brand is by working in small teams. For this project, there were two senior art directors, one art director, a copywriter and Allen. He might put one of his senior art directors in charge of the micro site, one in charge of the iPhone app and check in with both of them periodically. “It’s an intense working process over three or four months,” Allen says. “But, we realized that by keeping this small team, you’re less likely to make mistakes, because everybody kind of owns something.”

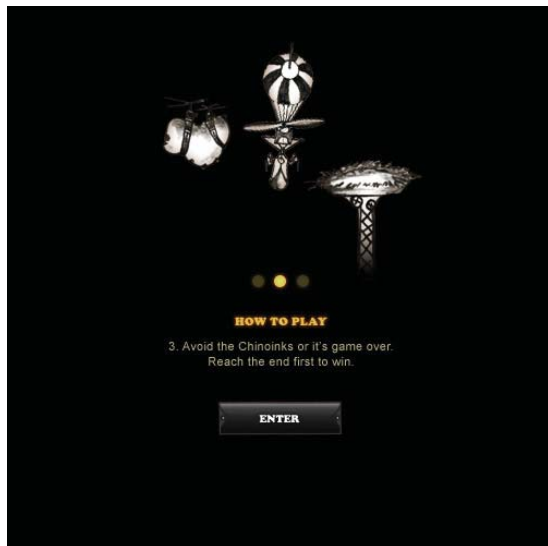
This small group created or oversaw just about everything for Happiness Factory 3. The micro site



PICK A PLATFORM

If you're not into playing games on MSN Messenger (above), you could challenge a friend to an iPhone game via Facebook Connect (right).





HAPPY HERE, HAPPY THERE
MSN Messenger games let users experience Happiness Factory in real time as they compete against friends, while banner ads (above) added another touch point to the campaign.

itself takes you inside the life of the humble factory worker. You can watch HD video of the factory, or play games that let you slide down an ice luge or fly high above the factory in a pedal-powered contraption. The MSN Messenger games let you compete against your friends in such simple tasks as outrunning kissy puppies, whimsical little creatures within the Happiness Factory. Banner ads promote the site, and the iPhone app offers up yet another gaming experience.

But all these different digital applications came with a range of file-size requirements. On the micro site, for instance, there's plenty of room to introduce players to the animated characters, who might walk up and start waving at you from the screen. A Messenger game, on the other hand, needs to fit within smaller file-size limits. "We might have to save that sequence in fewer frames," Allen says. "So you might actually see a sketchier version of [a character] waving."

There's also an art to making sure all the little details stay the same across the entire campaign. On this project, for instance, the team worked with a group of animators and developers hand-in-hand,

day-and-night. But at one point, a new person came into the fold and started doing his own shading and adding it into the comps and animation. A couple of days went by and the team started to ask, "What's wrong with this character? He doesn't look the same." On closer examination, they realized the little guy had different shading on the arm, a different lighting pattern or maybe the source of light was coming from a different spot. "You notice those subtle differences," Allen says. "They really do give a different feeling." [HOW](#)

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