A bold experiment in digital theatre with Google+
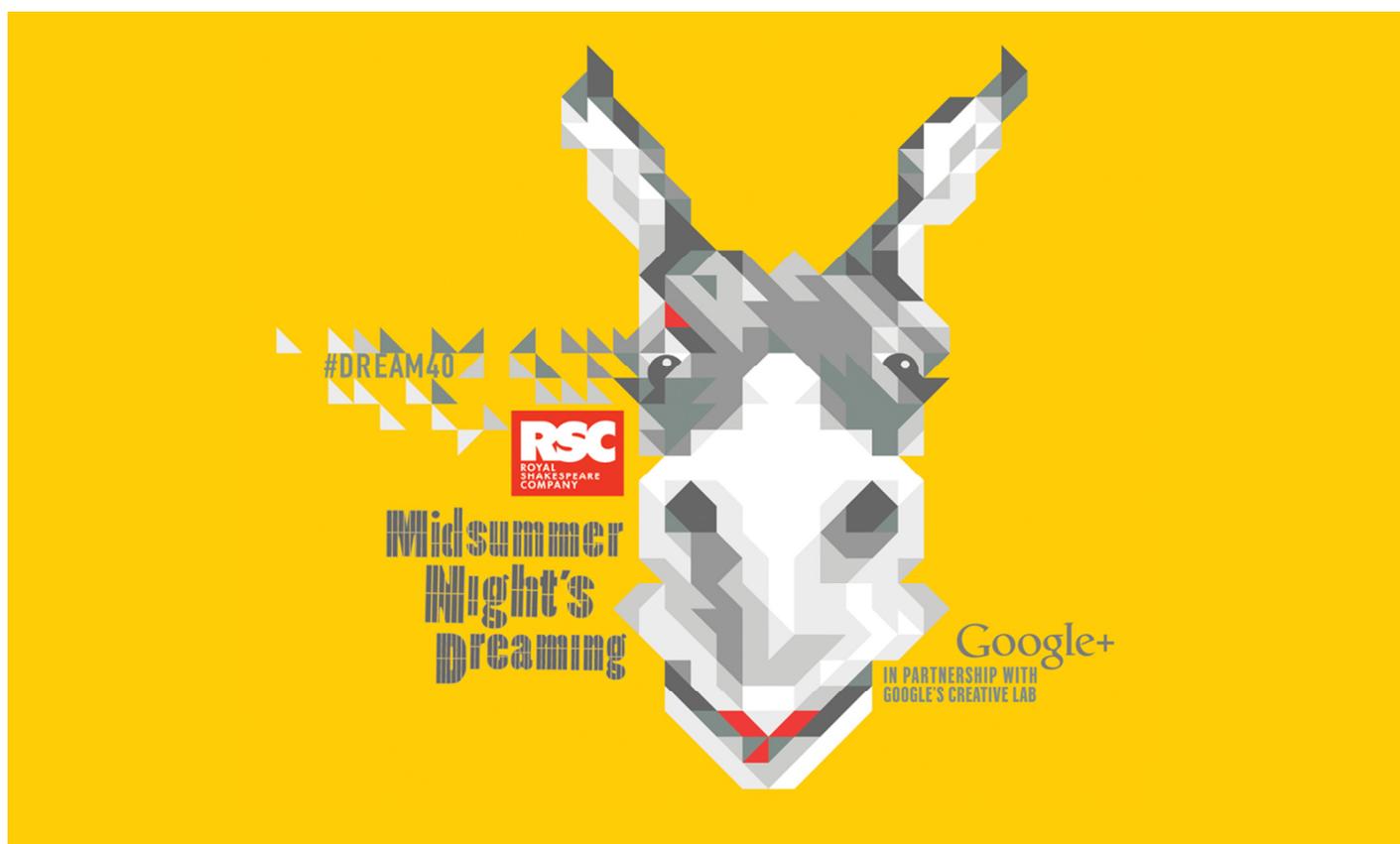
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Background & Objective

During a discussion between the RSC and the team at Google Creative Lab, the question was raised, "What would a play look like on the internet?" This led to a in depth conversation about how the attributes of the digital world and the attributes of theatre could work together to make an engaging and value experience for the audience.

A significant part of the motivation for the project was experimental. As Tom Uglow from Google outlines in the blog post explaining the origins of the project:

> "Today's big news events, riots, bombings, royal wedding, all become subject to this anarchic, multi-dimensional, multi-authored storytelling…….we started wondering if one could apply the same treatment to a fictional narrative, like a play? Could we bring a play out of the scenic world and into the real and online worlds?" He goes on: "Where theatre conventionally seeks to bring the audience into their world, and create a reality around them – we are going the other way – taking the world of the stage and putting it into real life."

The outcome was an ambitious idea to stage A Midsummer Night's Dream in real-time over the course of three days, culminating in a wedding in Stratford-upon-Avon. Meanwhile online, via the RSC's G+ page, the main and lesser characters in the play would share other snippets about the story as it played out (photos, text updates and videos), much as would happen on social media about a real life event. In addition, the watching audience would be able to comment, contribute and respond to the play and the RSC would reflect this back. In doing so, a new extended version of the story would be created.

You can read more about the motivation for Midsummer Night's Dreaming in Tom Uglow's, Prologue to #Dream40 blog post, which also includes a video explaining the original concept of the play.

How did it work, and what happened?

Sarah Ellis, who is a digital producer at the RSC and worked closely on the project, explained more about how they went about planning this ambitious event, "It was certainly a challenge to be doing something completely new, on a relatively new platform. Initially we had no real idea what the response would be and what would or wouldn't work." The team also knew they would be talking to two different audiences about the project; the existing RSC audience many of whom may well be new to G+ and the digital audience who may be familiar with the platform but less connected to the RSC and Shakespeare's plays. For this reason the way the project was explained, had to be carefully considered and executed. Videos such as the animated short trailer for example, presented the idea in an engaging and simple way. Sarah explained that in the preparation phase, work was done to connect with relevant online communities to make them aware of and get them engaged with, the project. This included groups interested in theatre or Shakespeare, together with general creative, arts and performance communities. "It was important that we didn't just expect people to take part, we had to make sure that we actively went to find them and tell them about it", Sarah said.

During the three days of the play individuals online could contribute by posting content to any of the main social networks, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook etc and providing it was tagged with the hashtag #dream40, the team would collect it in. However, the main online action took place on G+ and via an 'online stage' that was created specifically for the event with the help of Google. This is still currently available to view at http://dreaming.dream40.org/stage but will eventually be replaced by the timeline which brings together some of the content that was created during the course of the event. The online audience was encouraged on the to post their content at the right time in the story over the weekend although providing the play hadn't finished the team endeavored to incorporate and use it.

This behind the scenes video also provides more insights into how the event played out, together with comments from key individuals involved.

Outcome and Results

Tom Uglow has shared some key learnings from the project via the Dream 40 blog. This post includes the following statistics in terms of the reach of the project:

• There were 110, 000 unique visitors on dream40.org during the weekend of the project.
• #Dream40 appeared on 25 million Twitter feeds.
• The active online creative community included 1,000 people from across the world.
• The two project films were watched by 435, 000 people.
• The Royal Shakespeare Company Google+ page increased in size by 742%.
• 3000 pieces of content were released during the weekend of the project; project participants created half of this content.
• Over the weekend a piece of content was released at least every five minutes.

From the RSC's perspective, Sarah Ellis is clear that they have learnt a huge amount from the experiment, "We are certainly much more experienced at how you effectively tell a story online and we also appreciate how much work is involved to make it happen. There has to be a real motivation to maintain the momentum and to translate the vision to others within the organisation. For the RSC it's helped to demonstrate that digital is not always about solutions but that it can also help to create work that has real intrinsic value."

For further background information visit: http://about.dream40.org/