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Manny Dilone and Virgilio Santos,
Principals and Creative Directors

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c| Interview

Welcome to New York



WHY WE OPENED OUR DOORS IN THE MOST CROWDED CREATIVE MARKET IN THE WORLD

We sat down with Manny and Virgilio who lead Character's office in NY. Both R/GA design alums with a long legacy of award-winning work, we talked to them about why they opened Character in New York last year, and what they've been most proud of since. The interview below has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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Where did your creative journey start?

V I didn't know I'd be doing branding and graphic design when I started this thing. My visual culture started in the suburbs of Paris where I was born and raised. In the late 80's and 90's, French youth culture was (and still is) influenced by the US via hip-hop, basketball, sportswear fashion, skateboarding, graffiti and street art. If you watch "La Haine," one of my favorite movies directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, you'd understand where I came from. That period had a major influence on me.

In my early 20's in the north of Portugal, I was interested in architecture and the arts. I ended up applying to one of the first graphic design schools in my region. From there, I opened my own design studio with two designers and one architect. It was a wide range of work in branding and publishing for national brands, music labels, cultural institutions, the Portuguese ministry of education and science — and analog projects like a book store, a jazz bar, and a nightclub.

Manny and I came into the design world through arts and culture. We were doing things for museums, record labels, doing the [album] sleeves and being part of these big parties. In a way, design starts with culture. That's where you start understanding the power in what you do, because at the end it's about communicating something and bringing people in. That's when it becomes exciting. The basics and fundamentals of any graphic designer in the 90s; all our stories start there.

M I attended Page University for business for half a semester. During that time, I came across an internship for a film production company called Pseudo Networks. They were doing serialized content for the web before it was a thing, even before broadband. Through Pseudo, I was a production assistant to a lot of the content we were

Interview with:
→ Manuel Dilone
→ Virgilio Santos

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developing and then was thrown into the deep end to create a lot of marketing communication. I was like, “Ok. There’s something about design.” And then I took it more seriously.

I moved on to SVA [the School of Visual Arts]. I worked with 3 artists as a production assistant and, through these artists, got into galleries. We used to create a slew of promotional materials. Being part of the culture of New York City in the early 2000’s, you find yourself designing visuals and materials for the shows of your musician friends. To me, that was the most useful way of practicing design because you’re trying to solve a problem in a scrappy way as opposed to getting a creative brief. You start to realize that design is much bigger.

What’s it like to design in New York specifically?

V Back in the day, you could feel more distinct design scenes such as German design, British design or Dutch design. Today, due to the globalization moment we live in, everything is getting very flat and more unified. Being in a large city can really inspire us because we are visual people and highly sensitive to what we see and feel in urban culture. But I’ve also met designers that live away from large metro areas but work with major brands and push design.

I would say, you don’t need to be exclusively living in a big city to be a progressive designer or thinker. It’s not the ultimate thing that makes you different or better. At the end of the day, it is all your interactions, connections, and distinct dialogues with the world that will shape your work, sensibilities, and intelligence as a designer.

M It does influence you, though. Being in a city adds accountability for you to project something that can have a bigger impact. We’re



in close proximity to a lot of culture, so whether you like it or not, the work you publish needs to have to have some resonance in the world.

Let's fast forward to opening up Character. Where were you before, and how did Character come into the picture?

M I was a Creative Director at R/GA, focusing on brand development initiatives. People who are curious to solve brand problems were rare back then. That's how I met Virgilio; we had a mutual interest and passion for solving brand problems within the digital experience. Over five years, we helped launch Nokia Vine, Google Wallet, Nike+, Nook. I spent the next 6 years founding other studios and working with a diverse set of clients — including one with Virgilio.

V At that time, we designed installations and interactive experiences for the BMW Guggenheim Lab, Mentored students in Harlem for AIGA, and developed transformational design vision work for MAC, and Samsung.

M Founding those studios let me explore what I envisioned as a studio of tomorrow: being versed in new mediums, reimagining how to develop brand systems, etc. I realized that every time we do something like [opening up creative studios], every version gets sharper and sharper. I met Ben [Pham, one of Character's Co-Founders] when we started to follow each other's work, and we stayed in touch from that moment on.

V I spent around 12 years at R/GA, working with a wide range of major brands — Nike, Converse, Givenchy, L'Oreal Paris, Samsung, and startup founders under the R/GA venture program — always



from a branding and experience design perspective. I got the chance to co-build and establish the Brand Development Group at R/GA, merging the UX design and creative tech practice with our brand design practice. Brand as interface was our mantra at that time.

At some point, it was time for me to leave. Manny and I were talking together then, and he was already talking to Ben. Because I also wanted to do something new, Manny brought me in. We said, let's do this together. So we jumped in.

New York is a crowded creative market. Why start another one here?

- V The truth is, it's not every day that you get to create something from scratch in New York City. The opportunity was super compelling — to bring a company with great equity in design, here from the west coast. It was an interesting challenge.
- M 100% agree. We had many rich conversations and wanted to do things here that were different. There was a general consensus that to have an imprint outside of San Francisco, it would need to be different — in our space, in our skill sets, in the kinds of projects we take on — while still acknowledging some common values across both coasts. There was mutual appetite to evolve with intention and move into the unknown.

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Thinking back to a year ago, what were some of the biggest challenges at the start?

- V For me, there were two things. Building a great place to work that people want to work at. You depend on the team you build. You can't lead with your name and reputation alone. Finding and bringing



on the right people was challenge number one. It sounds easy, but it's not. The chemistry, finding the right people, to build a great environment to work: that was our main priority. And it's still a work in progress. Our biggest responsibility was creating a good place.

And then building a design practice, not just doing what everybody's doing. Just like any business, you rely on a pipeline of work to be successful. Projects define who you are, and it's not easy. We wanted to find a way where we can do our work on our own terms, the way we think is right. Our DNA plays a big role.

- M When you're building a studio, you become more conscious of how you want to be seen. How do you articulate the way we're different for clients as well as for the team who wants to be part of it? There's a lot of incremental things happening, but all of them will add up to something unique—how we activate the space, how we invite clients to be more engaged in the work, what type of work we take on, etc. We are on a journey.

Now that Character NY has been open for more than a year, what are you most proud of from the last 12 months?

M There's a long list, for sure.

V For me it's always the people first, and then the work we do together. New clients and their vision, the extraordinary talent we've met through the process, the team we're building, and the ideas we're still developing—those are what I'm proud of.

M Definitely the people for me. On Friday, just gathering our team for wine and cheese late in the day reminds us why we're doing this. We have people who moved here from different cities and countries.



It's rewarding to see how they feel — that they've made a great career move and are energized to thrive in New York. In many ways, we already define that as one of our early successes.

V It's nice to see our mentorship having an impact. We see our team owning meetings and conversations. Leadership for us is about helping others be empowered and have room to grow. To us, the best leadership is silent, because being quiet for us means everyone else is doing their jobs really well. To build this environment and bring in people who are very ambitious and talented, that's a fucking reward.

It's not about us, you know. It's about you guys [speaking to the team] and how you're able to do your thing. Mentorship for designers means giving back what we learned. It's super rewarding.

M We're proud in year one of working with big name companies as well as ones that are willing to take big risks with us. Ones that want to be brave with us. Seeing some of that work realized beyond just the vision...

V That's the ultimate vision, for a designer.

M It feels like in previous lives, you really have to earn that. But we've done that by hitting the ground running.

So what's next for Character and Character NY?

V Next is now. We're starting to think about expansion. From New York, we could go to another place. The format here is to stay small and keep this number of people. There's so much still to do here,



so we plan to continue with great clients and impactful work.

- M We want more experimentation, more diversifying our skill sets, and growing...
- V Yes, continuing to grow by thinking beyond what we know now, and get better. There's always more listening and learning to do.

