

HOW TO CREATE A SITE OF THE DAY

THE MAKING OF MERRY CHRISTMALLAX

by Petr Tichy

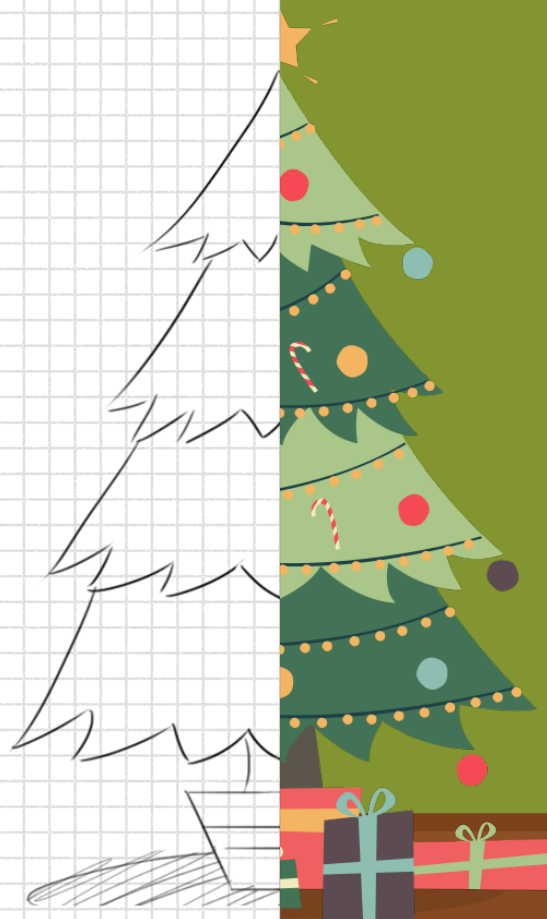


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KEEP READING



INTRODUCTION

You are reading this because you are curious and interested in how we created the [Merry Christmallax](#) campaign page.

This eBook is aimed at creative thinkers, talented designers, and curious developers. Those who want to learn from our mistakes and what we've gained along the way.

I will try my best to describe all the steps we took while brainstorming, designing, and developing this little project.

I've crammed a bunch of small **TIPS!** into here, which I believe are the most important things which contributed to the success of this campaign. Just read those if you're in a hurry.

SPECIAL MENTIONS

Thanks [Jason Mitsios](#) for the beautifully simple design, you have nailed it again. Read more from Jason in the Design chapter.

Thanks [Petr Kolarik](#) for throwing in your ideas for improvement and for your singing in the office. "Che site!"

Thanks to my wife Martina for putting up with scrolling down the page every time I asked her to. Oh boy, she scrolled more in the week we worked on this than in the entirety of 2013 together.

CHAPTER 1 - THE IDEA

As you would expect the idea behind Merry Christmallax is pretty simple.

We wanted to create something that was creative and fun. Something which uses the latest design and development trends and will be very easy to share. Something which will entertain all designers and developers during the holiday season, and something where I will learn a few new things about scrolling and parallax – and I certainly did.

THE NAME

I also knew that the name has to be catchy. I thought to myself, “What kind of tweet would I click on?” “What would make me think “Oh, what’s this about? Let me check it out!”

There are plenty of buzzwords flying around these days, but ‘scrolling’ and ‘parallax’ were a clear winners – and that’s how the name was born.

The initial idea was Merry Scrollmas, but Merry Christmallax somehow sounded better, so we stuck with it.

TIP!



Nobody will see a great campaign hidden behind a boring name, but many will see a SHIT campaign with a catchy and creative name.

THE IDEA EVOLUTION

The initial idea was to create a page where a Christmas tree transformed from a sketch into a coloured version, and then to a fully decorated tree with presents – all while you’re scrolling down a long page.

The ultimate goal of this campaign was simply to wish as many designers and developers a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

This *rough* idea was in my head from the start, but all the details of how the scenes transition between each other, how the decoration appears, and how the final scene would animate were all ‘figured out’ in a browser while trying a few things.

I believe that this flexibility and freedom were the most important reasons why it turned out the way it did.

Having this flexibility and freedom enabled us to:

- Tweak things on the fly and not get stuck
- Keep moving forward very quickly
- Try a few things and see what works the best
- and most importantly, keep having fun from start to finish

TIP!



“3 important ingredients for a killer parallax website: A creative idea, a curious developer, and a flexible designer. In that order.”
via @Ihatetomatoes #parallax

CHAPTER 2 - THE DESIGN

WRITTEN BY JASON MITSIOS

SETTING SOME BOUNDARIES

Knowing that all the visual elements on this page aren't going to scale with browser sizes, we had to set some grid lines at the beginning so we could define where the boundaries are.

To make sure that all the main action takes place in these boundaries we set the width to 1024px and height to 550px. This made sure that it had a much higher chance of being visible on the majority of desktop resolutions, with plenty of padding above and below the content.

BRINGING IT TO LIFE

The initial sketch of the tree was drawn roughly in Photoshop with a Wacom tablet using the default brush. Since this page was supposed to be showing a progression from start to finish, we made sure the sketch remained rough looking and minimal

Absolutely every coloured element was created with shapes and/or the pen tool. I always do this, to be sure that everything is a scaleable vector and can have its colour changed very easily, and resized if needed.

GIVE THEM A HOME

Each new asset that was created had a folder made for them, named appropriately, and grouped into their own master folder. This way we could turn sections on and off to see how the final coloured version overlays on top of the sketch.

It also makes it much easier to isolate individual assets for when you're cutting up the page.

Force yourself into the habit of grouping layers into folders and naming everything. You'll be glad you did once you start working with 100+ layers!

IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS

An initial colour palette was created with muted, pastelly, christmassy tones in mind. I didn't want this to be TOO vibrant, I instead wanted it to be recognizable from it's colours.

I always kept this visible in the top-left corner of my canvas, this way I could quickly colour-pick a sample to work with - just like paint pots!

THE IMAGE DIET

We wanted this page to load fast, since it's 100% image based. Everything had to be nice and trim.

Because of this, all the individual elements were saved out as 24-bit .PNG's, then ran through ImageOptim and ImageAlpha to compress the file sizes as small as possible. These free applications are a must for web designers and developers.

You can check out some more of my work at:
<http://behance.net/jasonmitsios>

TIP!



If working on a project similar to this (where it's very illustration heavy), always do your best to create all your assets using the pen and vector shape tools. This will give you the ability to scale, tweak, and re-colour them at any time - also the added bonus of a drastically smaller file size!

CHAPTER 3 - THE DEVELOPMENT

Your standard website development workflow is probably to wait for the final PSD and then start slicing up the HTML and CSS.

What we did is to design just the sketched version of the tree first, then start cutting up the HTML. What happened in Photoshop from now on was very closely influenced by what was happening in the browser.

Assets were scaled down, removed, and resized to fit the way it all worked in the browser, not the other way around.

SKETCH - THE FIRST SECTION

Ok, so you have a PSD with a sketched Christmas tree in a pot on a simple background, now what? Now the fun part starts.

This is quite hard to explain, but basically you have to play with the code in the browser. It's not coding, it's having fun while trying a few things and seeing what works best.

THE PROCESS:

We started with the pot always being visible on page load, and the tree growing as a whole. The tree was scaling up from small to its original size, but this looked somehow un-natural, boring, not good enough. We had to think differently.

THE PROCESS EVOLUTION:

So we looked at how a tree grows in the real world. It grows a few branches, becomes taller, grows a few more branches, becomes taller etc.

To make this happen in a browser I had to cut the tree up in a smaller pieces and create 5 PNGs, instead of only one. I then updated the animation settings a couple of times until I created a more natural, elastic effect.

TIP!



To make the biggest impact on the users you need to break the interactive design into the smallest possible pieces. You need to ask yourself “Would anyone be bothered to cut this thing up into XX parts?” Nobody would. But if you will, you’ll stand out.

TREE WITH PRESENTS - THE SECOND SECTION

Here I positioned all the baubles on the Christmas tree and animated them into place, then realised that I will need to overlay one image (with tree + baubles + star + presents, etc) over the top of these multiple assets.

Because I cut out only 4 baubles from the PSD, and didn't rotate them to match the "exact" position in the design, I couldn't cut up the final composition from the Photoshop file as a whole. Instead, I gave Jason a screenshot from the browser and he adjusted the position of the baubles to match it.

TIP!

You can spend days trying to make everything exactly like in the PSD, or, you can spend a few minutes updating the PSD. It's your choice. #efficient #parallax #webdev

FIREPLACE AND TITLE - THE THIRD SECTION

When the site went live this section was only animating two parts, the fireplace and the text. The fireplace moves a little bit slower than the text, but nothing else was broken down into multiple pieces. The sharing buttons were still dropping from the top as they currently are.

I saw big potential in the crafted layout and details of the text and wanted to do something "cool" with it. I chopped it into the smallest possible assets and created the animation as you can see now.

I believe that having the same amount of details in each of the three sections contributed to the overall experience.

TIP!

Distribute the number of details into each section evenly, or some of them will stand out and some will feel like a disappointment.

OTHER FACTORS

I believe that these other factors also contributed to the overall success and helped us to get it over the line.

The campaign would not be the same if:

- There was a strict brief we would have to stick to
- The designer and developer were not tweaking things on the fly
- We didn't have a deadline
- We would have a lot of time available
- We would wait for the design to be completely finished
- We would try to build it exactly as it was designed
- We would try to build it for all devices and screen sizes

CHAPTER 4 - FAQs

WHICH PLUGINS WE'VE USED AND WHY?

I have played with a few other animation libraries and plugins, but used Skrollr.js on my most recent project to create a simple parallax effect.

Easy to understand syntax, precise control over the speed, timing, and the positioning, made it a pretty clear choice to use Skrollr.js again for this project.

WHAT DID THE PROCESS FROM PSD TO THE BROWSER LOOK LIKE?

As I have mentioned previously most of the hard work was done in the browser.

I tried one thing, tweaked it until I was happy with it, then showed it to Jason and Petr.

Their first reaction was very important. Many times during the development I was quite happy with the way things were moving, but only showing it to the both of them, getting their feedback and tweaking the animations further made it look even more crafted.

TIP!

Always share your work in progress with others, you will be amazed how small tweaks will result in a much better experience.

WHY IS THE SITE NOT RESPONSIVE OR MOBILE OPTIMISED?

Knowing upfront that we are building an interactive, storytelling one-pager with a lot of animations, made it pretty clear that mobile and touch devices are out of the question. I knew from the beginning that unless we finished much earlier, we wouldn't have had the necessary time needed to tackle it for other devices.

If any of you have ever worked on a responsive site, you know that it takes little bit more time. The same applies to working on a parallaxing website.

At the end of the day we just wanted to wish a Merry Christmas to all designers and developers in the most fitting way possible. We thought that since they're sitting in front of their computers for the majority of the day, it seemed like the logical thing to do.

In my opinion the "scrolling" parallax experience is really only usable on larger monitors, so why to waste time and limit our creativity by trying to optimise it for mobile and touch devices?

Yes ,we could have made it fully responsive, but that would mean "going live" at the end of January and sort of missing the Christmas boat.

Instead we aimed at a great desktop experience first.

Looking at my Google Analytics stats – 90% of visitors came from a desktop computer, so I’ve decided to delight them with a creative experience and only show a simple message for the rest.

I am sure most of them came back and checked it out anyway :)

TIP! 

Always look at your target audience first before trying to please everyone. #smart #webdev

HOW DID YOU WORK OUT THE RIGHT POSITIONING AND TIMING?

I will explain this for the tree and baubles section, but similar thinking went behind the other sections too.

POSITIONING

I have used a mix of position fixed and absolute. I have placed all the baubles in the center of the parent container (left: 50%, top: 50%) and tweaked their margin to move them to the correct place.

This was the first step, so in your stylesheet you have your values for the objects in the right place.

Then I have used CSS transform and moved them out of the viewport. Skrollr then animates them to the place at a speed set in the data attributes.

TIMING

Timing is very important and it takes time to get it right. Things were taking longer at the beginning but became easier for the following sections.

I set ‘some’ Skrollr settings and offsets for all the baubles, refreshed the browser, and scrolled down to that section using the mouse wheel.

I tried to use a “natural” amount of the scroll wheel speed, not too much, not too little. When I was happy with the timing of the baubles coming into view, I let others scroll to see how they reacted. I then tweaked it to the final result.

When the baubles were coming to the view at the right time, I broke the Skrollr settings into multiple groups to add more detail. Using a calculator and simple maths, I very quickly had 3 groups of baubles animating one by one.

I then broke these groups and tweaked individual baubles and their offset to randomise their animations even more.

I’ll be publishing code examples and the Skrollr data-attributes on my blog, so stay tuned for more hands-on examples here at:

LINK! 

<http://ihatetomatoes.net/the-making-of-merry-christmallax>

Believe it or not, but the “Get Scrolling” indicator was put on the site after a day or so. Why? Because working on the project for so long and scrolling millions of pixels down, I assumed that everyone would just ‘get it’. It took Jason’s girlfriend a few seconds to point out that “some form of scrolling indicator is missing.”

THE BUG:

There is actually a bug with a fixed positioned background when viewing the site in Google Chrome on a Retina Display screen. The Christmas tree disappears while scrolling through the second section.

I realized this a bit too late and had to release it with that.

From the thousands of visitors though, nobody complained about it. So I guess it was a good decision to let it go live, even if it was “imperfect”.

TIP!

Don’t let a small bug stop you from shipping it live. You can still have a big impact and tell your story to the world.

CHAPTER 5 - THE RESULTS

Let the numbers do the talking here. The main win for us was to see Merry Christmallax travelling around the world and putting a smile on designers and developer faces.

Total pixels scrolled

554,854,783

Pixels scrolled per pageview

37513

Pageviews

14,791

Countries

133

Likes

542

Shares

306

Comments

131

Tweets

113

Plus One's

82

CONCLUSION

I hope you have learned something new in this eBook and feel free to share it with other like-minded individuals.

I would also love to see your examples of trendy creative one-pagers. Share them with me in the comments section and if you have any questions, feedback, or comments, please let me know.

PETR TICHY
WWW.IHATETOMATOES.NET



Check out my blog at www.ihatetomatoes.net/blog



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MERRYCHRISTMALLAX

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