/profile
Pirata

Founded in 2008, Pirata has already helmed projects for McLaren and Team GB. We quizzed scurvy dogs **Eduardo de Felipe**, **Ade Rowbotham**, **Lee McGuffie** and **Stuart Peddie** about their success

www.piratalondon.com

Location London
Designing since 2008
Team size 26
Expertise UX, design, web development, app development
Clients McLaren, British Olympic Association, Telefónica Digital, Mindshare
Awards One Show Interactive Gold Pencil (McLaren, Winner, 2010), One Show Interactive Merit Award (Robinsons, Winner, 2010), Cannes Lion (McLaren, Finalist, 2010), Webby Awards (Boat Race, Finalist, 2011), D&AD Award (McLaren, Nomination, 2011), FWA Site of the Day (various)
Side projects The Pirata Boat Race

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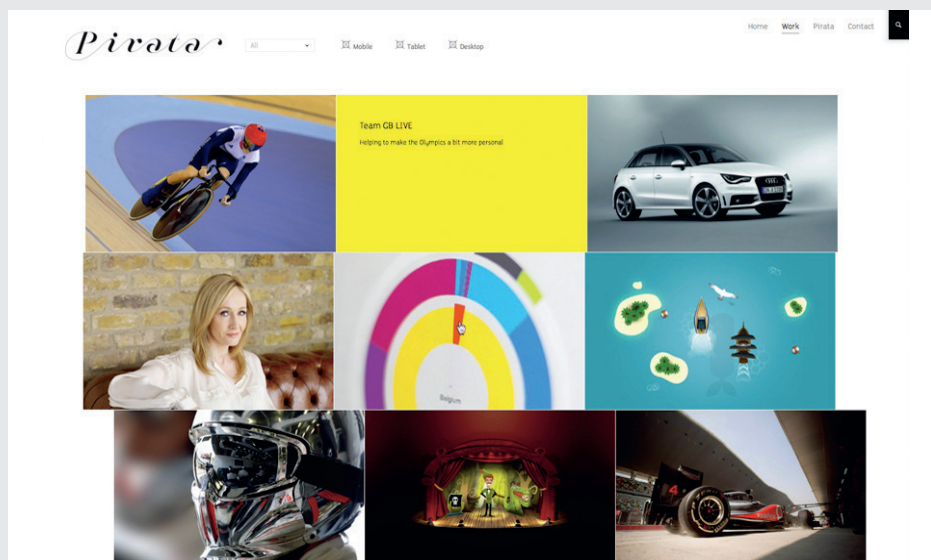
Q&A

.net: Let's start with your history: was there a defining moment or project for the agency?

EDF: Very early on, we took on some pretty ambitious projects. Our first breakthrough piece of work was a project for Robinsons [via ad agency BBH] called 'Put on a Panto' (http://lets.putonapanto.com). Relative to our size back then, it was a huge thing to take on, but we decided to stick our necks out and go for it. It was a defining moment, because we were relatively unknown at the time, and the critical success of the project brought us praise and much-needed recognition in the industry.

However, our defining piece of work has to be The Race 1.0 for McLaren (www.mclaren.com) – a highly innovative product that brought live data from Formula One cars on the track straight to the fans – and became a sort of blueprint for the business we

are today. It won a One Show Gold Award, which helped to raise our profile immensely.

.net: How did you come by the name?

AR: Pirata is Spanish for 'pirate' – our two founders, Eduardo [de Felipe] and David [Boleas] are both from Spain. Having both worked in ad agencies for many years, they wanted to create something truly different; something that embraced the culture of a family but also had a bit of edge. To quote Steve Jobs: "It's more fun to be a pirate than to join the navy."

> ## "Pirata is Spanish for 'pirate'. It's more fun to be a pirate than join the navy"
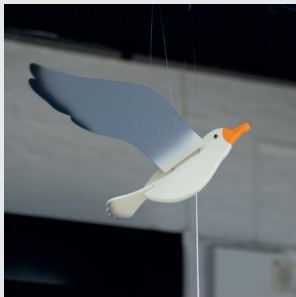> Ade Rowbotham

.net: How large is the company now?

LM: There are 26 of us full time, plus close friends we work with regularly when we need certain specialities. We don't have direct plans to reach any particular size, and it's more likely we'll open up more studios internationally than have the London HQ turn into one massive agency. Our directors have all worked in big agencies in the past and we're keen to distinguish ourselves from that world. And being smaller and nimbler is a part of that distinction because size affects the atmosphere in the studio.

.net: Your client list is a *Who's Who* of blue-chip brands. How did you come to work with them all?

LM: We originally set out to provide high-end production to advertising agencies. We started with a big network of contacts from our previous lives at various companies, and that helped us get in to pitch on those early projects.

Like anything in business, it was then a case of making sure we always did a great job and that we left a good impression. This is why providing fantastic client service is so important. Keeping in touch with our contacts as they changed jobs

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Office culture

Ade Rowbotham
Technical partner

What's on your desktop today?
MacBook Air, Acer laptop, Apple LED Cinema Display, iPhone 5, iPad 3, Canon PowerShot G10 camera, Kindle e-reader, wooden desk calendar, too much paperwork!

Little things that make your life worthwhile
Websites/apps Evernote, Instapaper, SoundCloud, Twitter
Audio Science Weekly, Material World, WNYC Radiolab, Resident Advisor
Reading Currently reading *The Quantum Thief* by Hannu Rajaniemi

What do you have on the walls?
Some pirate-themed posters, an agile workflow whiteboard, a huge sitemap-in-progress made with Post-it notes and – weirdly enough – two framed beards that were solidified with hairspray, then cut off in one piece. *[See image 8, left.]*

What will you do for lunch?
Borough Market is only a few minutes' walk away, so there's a wealth of fresh food opportunities there. Alternatively, we tend to go to Bankside behind Tate Modern where there are even more options.

What hours do you work?
We arrive at around 9am, finish at 6pm and tend to all be gone by 7pm. We don't have a regular 'working late' culture, and rarely work weekends, although we do provide race support to the McLaren team when there's a Grand Prix on.
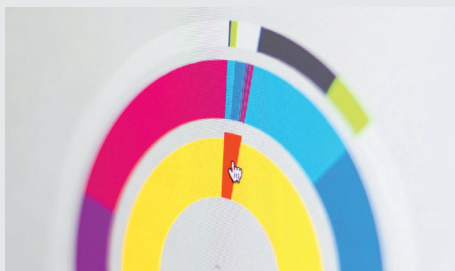
What else do you do in the office?
We have a kitchen and soft meeting space, which are used as social areas.

How often do you all hang out?
We visit the local pub after work around once a week. The last social gathering was our Christmas party; before that, go-karting.

Describe your office culture in three words.
International, creative, friendly.

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eventually led to us forging some direct relationships with various end clients – including, yes, some pretty big names.

Staying proactive on the new business front is also very important; it's easy to let that slip when you're busy.

.net: Have you ever turned down a potential client? If so, how do you handle the discussion?
LM: First, you need to have earned the right to be able to turn down work. More importantly, if you're going to do it, you have to be sure you're doing it for the right reasons. To produce the best work, you need to have a partnership rather than a client/supplier relationship. So it's about making sure that the brand, client and work are right for the studio as much as you being the right studio for the client.

We're not in the habit of turning down work, but at the same time, we won't take it in if it's not right. Take heed, though: if you're going to turn down work in the world of project-based business, do it graciously, considerately and above all,

(1) Pirata launched its current website (www.piratalondon.com) in autumn 2012 to reflect its transition from start-up to mature agency. **(2-3)** The Pirata Boat Race (www.piratalondon.com/boatrace) pits two teams against one another to row themselves to victory. With up to 10 shipmates split between two vessels, the aim is to propel your boat to the finish line using your iPhone as your oars. The site itself acts as a hub, allowing multiple people to huddle around

the screen, snap the QR code on their iPhones and propel their boat via the built-in accelerometer. It has been featured alongside some of the latest and greatest apps in Taschen's *App & Mobile Case Study Book*, and was awarded the second ever FWA Mobile of the Day award. **(4-10)** Pirata's offices occupy the building that used to house the old Southwark Playhouse. Note the appropriately nautical imagery – and the unusual display of framed beards on the wall!

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(11) Mindreader (http://mindreader.mindshareworld.com), Mindshare's survey of digital consumer behaviour and demographics covers five continents, 36 markets and 36,000 people. Pirata's solution gives users the ability to organise the data in nice, relevant, bite-size chunks they can filter by age and gender, comparing up to four regions side by side. **(12)** A1 Sportback (you can find a case study at: http://netm.ag/audi-238) is Pirata's second interactive iPad ad for BBH London and Audi.
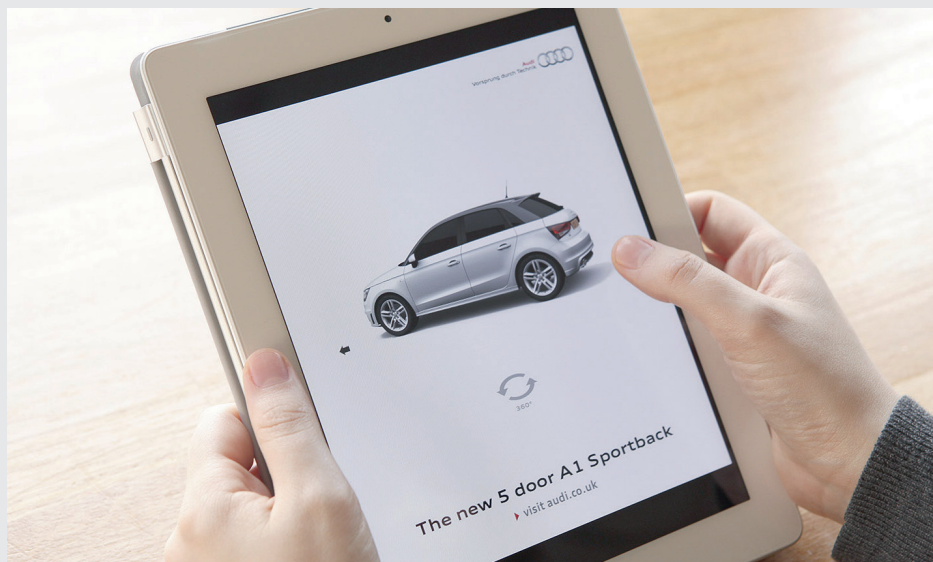
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>> leaving a potential client thinking about the next project they might ask you to look at.

.net: How do you manage clients with unrealistic technical or creative expectations?
AR: Clients – unrealistic? Surely that would never happen... but if it did, we'd attempt to break the news to them tactfully and without egotistical technical snobbery.

The most common unrealistic expectation relates to how much time a client thinks something might take. We turn things around pretty quickly, but if we think it's too risky we'd rather gracefully decline a project than risk delivering it late.

.net: Your tagline is 'We create digital products'. But what exactly is a digital product?
SP: We call our work 'products' because we treat every brief as a piece of digital product design. This immediately makes everything tangible. The product design process places the consumer at the heart of every decision and, just as if we were creating a physical product, we carry out research, create prototypes and test things to their breaking points in order to find the right solution.

.net: How closely are you involved with your clients' brand identities and brand strategies?
AR: We sit somewhere between being a digital agency and being a more typical production studio. We are more about digital craft and ideas for execution than strategy, yet we're far more than just a build shop or technical consultancy. Where we come in varies from project to project, but we're most effective when we can bring our experience to the table to help shape the creative product. Typically we'll work closely with a client to help them shape their ideas or execution, then we'll go into prototyping, UX, design and development. UX and design are a big part of our offering; we're fortunate enough to have some extremely talented designers.

.net: Of all the projects you've worked on, which got the most positive user response?

SP: Undoubtedly the work we did for Team GB in the run-up to, and during, the London 2012 Olympics. It was a great privilege to be involved with something with so huge a natural fan base. With so many pairs of eyes on Team GB, we had a great responsibility to get it right – which, thankfully, we did.

We've done some pretty high-profile projects, but in terms of pure traffic, we've never seen so many thousands of concurrent users on one of our sites before. It was really satisfying to finally sit back and watch everything working as we'd planned it to, and to watch Twitter light up with some wonderful positive feedback. It was a proud moment.
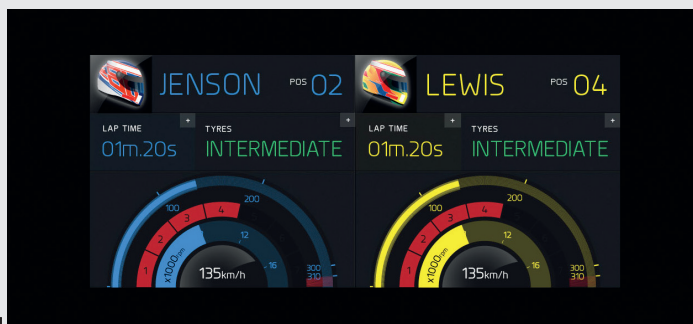
.net: What technologies excite you at the minute?
AR: We do a lot of work that centres on the presentation and visualisation of data. While the design and frontend work (HTML5 and so on) is always the hero in these projects, we get just as excited about the wiring behind the board.

As frontends become more app-like, you need super-optimised web services to power them.

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Timeline
A life on the online wave: Pirata from 2008 to now

November 2008

Pirata is founded by Eduardo de Felipe and David Boleas, following their departure from Dare.

February 2009

Adrian Rowbotham joins the studio as technical director.

Sept 2009

Pirata moves into Playhouse Court, its current residence. It used to house the Southwark Playhouse.
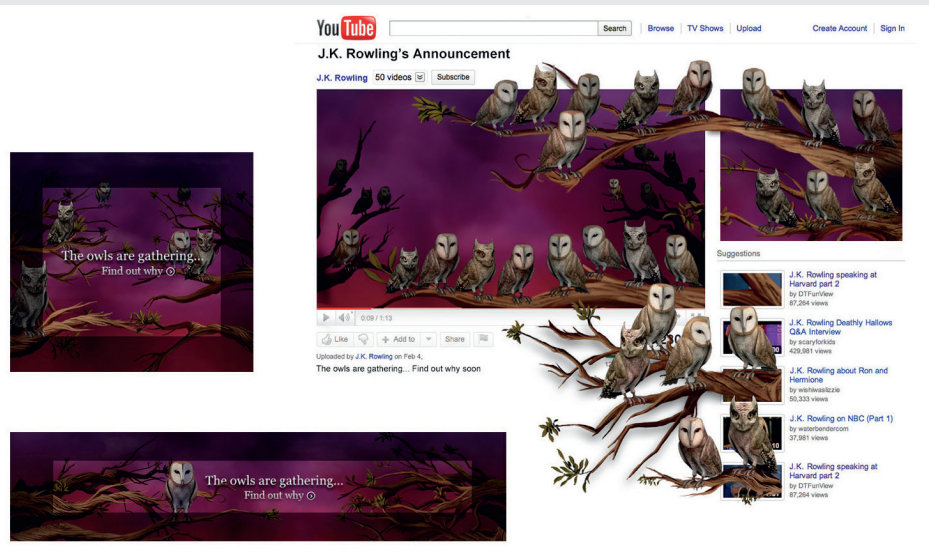
October 2009

Robinsons' Put on a Panto wins Pirata's first FWA Site of the Day award.

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(13-14) The McLaren Dashboard 2012 (www.mclaren.com/formula1) was launched for the 2012 Monaco Grand Prix. It pulls in live data from the cars on the track, showing each of the drivers' live speed, position, gears, g-force and tyre selection, along with live commentary from a McLaren commentator, from the pit wall, and of course, from the drivers themselves. Both Dashboard and commentary are now also available in the local language (or languages) of the country where each Grand Prix is taking place.
(15-17) Pirata worked with PR agency Adam & Eve for the announcement

of Pottermore (www.pottermore.com), J.K. Rowling's huge online home for Harry Potter, collaborating with TH_NK, Capture and Atomhawk Design. **(18-20)** Last summer, London played host to the biggest competition on earth – the Olympic Games. Pirata was given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create the destination for its home nations: the Team GB website (www.teamgb.com). "Getting it live was a bit of a mini Olympics itself! Incredibly tight deadlines meant the team pulled out all the stops to deliver something we are truly proud of," comments the studio.

We're working mostly with Python and Django on the backend, running behind Nginx (http://nginx.org) and/or Varnish Cache (www.varnish-cache.org) as proxies. We're also using Node.js (http://node.js) fairly regularly, where it's appropriate. On the frontend, we work a lot with Raphaël (http://raphaeljs.com) and have more recently started using Marionette.js (http://marionettejs.com) for Backbone.js. For managing style sheets, Sass is indispensable. Oh, and Sublime Text 2 (www.sublimetext.com/2) is our text editor of choice (apart from Vim, obviously).

.net: How do you think the 'internet of things' will change web design and development?
AR: It's changing it already. We're doing some really interesting work at the moment with a huge telecommunications company that's leveraging the potential of putting SIM cards in all kinds of machines, vehicles and devices that wouldn't until recently have been connected to the internet. As new objects hook into the net, there is going to be a

whole lot more data to manage which, in turn, will require new visual interfaces to monitor and control. For example, I can now use my mobile phone to turn on the central heating in my house before I get home. That's exciting. No, honestly, it is.

**.net:** How should young designers looking for a job at Pirata go about approaching you?
EDF: We get a lot of CVs sent our way, so make sure that yours stands out. Go to some effort: even if you're a developer and not a designer, make sure your website looks good enough to eat. Make sure we can't miss your best piece of work. And get the details right. It's all about the details.

.net: What's your formula for success?
AR: Failure cannot cope with persistence.
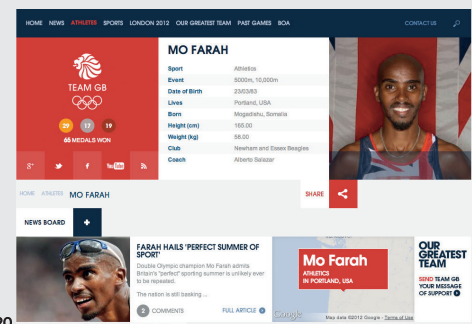
.net: What's the most bizarre request you've had?
AR: There was someone who essentially wanted us to create a clone of Facebook in its entirety – with their brand's logo at the top. In about a month. ●
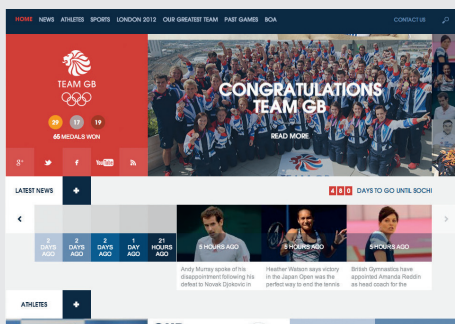
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March 2010	May 2010	July 2010	March 2011	June 2011	July 2012
McLaren – The Race 1.0 launches: Pirata's groundbreaking live Formula 1 race destination.	The Pirata Boat Race wins the second ever FWA Mobile of the Day award.	Stuart Peddie and Lee McGuffie join Pirata as creative director and managing director.	The second iteration of www.mclaren.com is launched.	Heavily involved with the launch of the then top-secret www.pottermore.com for J.K. Rowling.	Partners the British Olympic Association on www.teamgb.com – for London 2012 and beyond.