

Felino

About Alex and Michelle

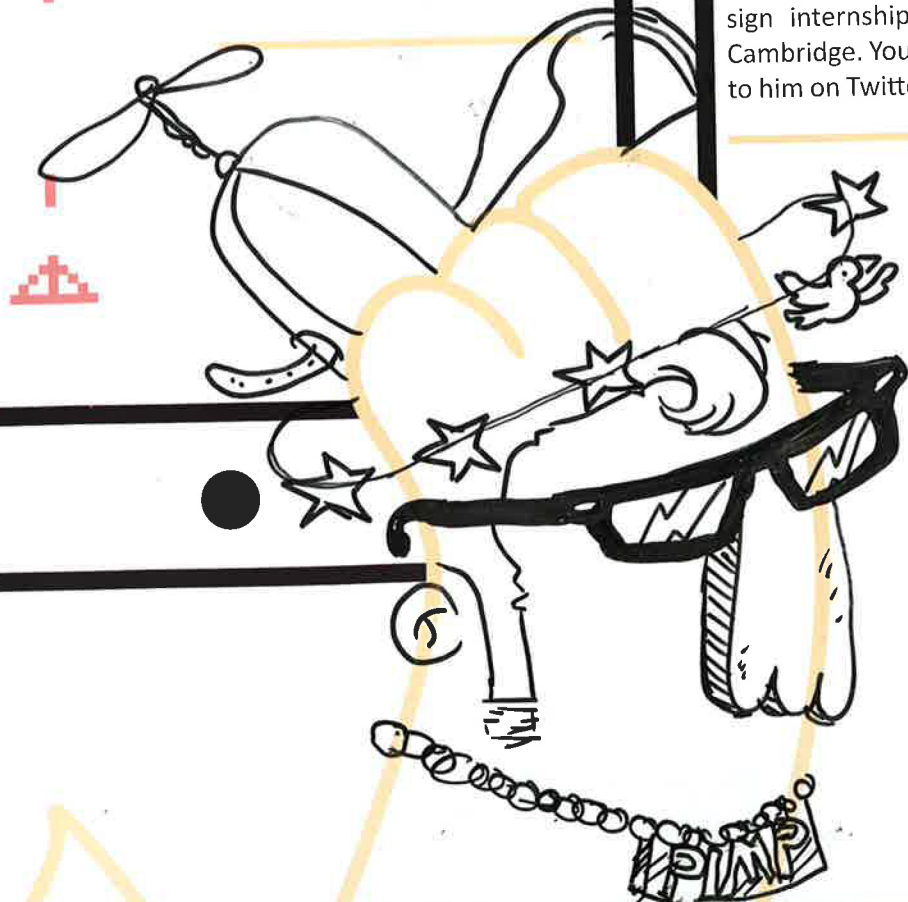
Michelle started IMEM in 2007 and continued with the MMI program in 2011. After this, she spent one year working as a research assistant in the NHTV Research Lab. In 2013 she moved to Sweden where she is currently following an MSc in Interaction Design. You can follow the work on Felino, as well as other crazy animal technology, on her blog: michellewesterlaken.wordpress.com.

Alex is an Italian game developer currently following Game Design and Production at IGAD. He moved to the Netherlands in 2011, and since then he is busy studying, making games and bouncing from one country to the other for gamejams and conventions. He currently lives in the UK, where he is doing a design internship at Sony Guerrilla Cambridge. You can always say ciao to him on Twitter @AlexColorblind.

BECAUSE CATS
LOVE GAMES
TOO

By Anna Winkelhöfer

Alex Camilleri (IGAD) and Michelle Westerlaken (IMEM/MMI) created a game for cat owners and their feline friends. We got to speak to Alex about Felino!





What is Felino all about?

Felino is a tablet game that allows humans and cats to play together. Existing tablet games for cats are extremely simple and they are meant to be played only by the cat. We wanted to try something new. The main objective of Felino is really simple: enjoy and share playful moments with your feline companion. No high scores, no time pressure, no game-over – rather an experience that is more understandable for a cat: time spent playing together.

How did you come up with it?

In the past three years, Michelle has dedicated her studies to research towards technologically mediated human-animal interaction. She believes that we, as human beings, can use our abilities to develop technology to improve the lives of animals that live in our society.

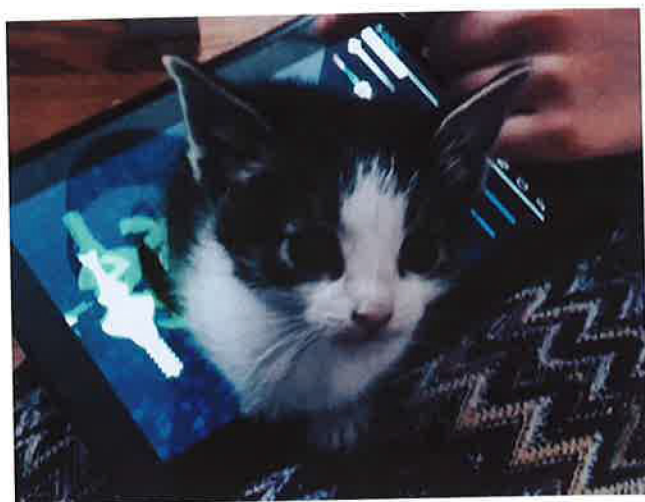
Last summer we tried to come up with a game for humans and animals that we could develop in our free time. We had two Android tablets and we knew some cats. The warm Sicilian sun made us believe that it was a good combination.

What are you hoping to achieve with Felino?

Michelle's thesis for the Master in Media Innovation resulted in the publication of a research paper written together with IGAD lecturer Stefano Gualeni. In this paper they tried to propose an initial framework for the user testing of playful artefacts that are designed for animals.

With Felino we want to put this theory into practice and develop a fun and unique game that can be enjoyed by both humans and cats.





Are there any surprising findings or happenings that you came across while designing, researching and developing the game?

All the design decisions in Felino were guided by existing research on cat's perceptions and behaviour. We learned many interesting facts, for example that cats mainly see blue, yellow and grey, or that they only see sharp from 30 cm or more. These insights helped us make informed design decisions and develop every part of the game with the cat in mind.

Other interesting facts emerged from the user testing: we figured out that some cats liked to sit on the tablet, roll on it, and lick its edges. Some cats, especially from the older generation, didn't even seem to care much about the game. Good thing is that the majority of them showed interest in Felino and seemed to have a really good time!

Were there any obstacles in the process you had to overcome?

The biggest challenge for me was to change the target audience from humans to cats. The moment your player is not a human being anymore, many design assumptions start falling apart. It's really interesting how buttons, for example, are not the most logical solution for the user interface anymore.

Another small problem is that it's not so easy to find testing participants if you're making a game for

cats. Luckily, thanks to the amazing help of Animal Shelter Breda we managed to test Felino with a lot of new feline friends, which helped us make important design changes.

Is Felino only for cats?

We are creating Felino with cats in mind, but other animals such as dogs, rabbits, cows, tigers, turtles and giraffes are welcome to try it and see if they like it too. Keep in mind that the nails of cats are really thin and therefore don't create scratches on the surface of the tablet. We can't guarantee the same for tigers.

And now tell us something why cats are so amazing...

I can tell you why cats are so scary to me! They are totally unpredictable; they look cute at times, and one second afterwards they are trying to kill you for no apparent reason.

Michelle doesn't agree with this at all, of course; she grew up with cats and fostered many shelter kittens. She is the one that conducted the testing for Felino. I was too scared, and I just filmed what was happening from a distance.

What's next?

Now that the first testing phase is concluded, we want to implement the design iterations and eventually publish Felino on Android and iOS by the end of this year.

Michelle will continue her research with the final goal to improve the life of animals through the use of technology. Where a capitalist society is mainly interested in the use of technology for mass production, she wants to focus on the life of the cow rather than the amount of milk it produces.

In the meantime, I will support her noble goal while continuing making self-reflective and bizarre experimental games.