Mad Libs brings their best-selling games to Google Assistant with Interactive Canvas

Opportunity

Originally created in 1953, Mad Libs is a best-selling game enjoyed by children and adults alike. Traditionally played on paper, Mad Libs has evolved with the digital era, spawning a suite of mobile apps which have been downloaded more than 15 million times.

As voice-controlled devices began appearing in more and more homes, Mad Libs wanted to explore how voice—and specifically an Action designed for Google Assistant-enabled Smart Displays—could add a new layer of engagement and fun to the classic game. Knowing they lacked the technical resources and expertise to build an Action in-house, Mad Libs hired software design and development agency Matchbox Mobile to help. Sara Dayton, Director, Strategic Projects, at Penguin Random House (Mad Libs's parent company) explains, "As this was our first Action, we thought we could benefit greatly from working with an expert. Matchbox is immersed in voice: They guided our technical decisions and development, and also resolved any glitches and bugs. Since voice is fairly new and the technology and requirements are frequently changing, it was wonderful to have a partner who was on top of that. It paid off in dividends."

> *"Our Action gives users an entirely new way to enjoy Mad Libs. Building for Google Assistant has enabled us to reach new audiences with a completely new and innovative voice experience. There aren't many comparable brands that combine gameplay, creativity, education, and laughter into one experience. Not bad for a brand that is over 50 years old!"*
>
> **Adam Royce**
> **VP Creative Strategy Director**
> **Penguin Random House**

Mad Libs Action showing how to play a game
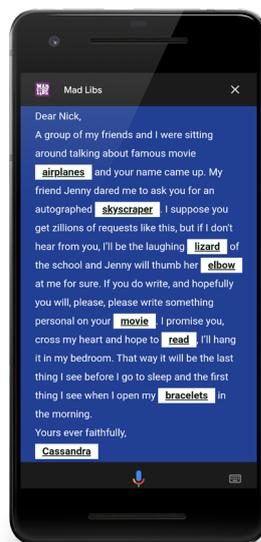
Mad Libs Action showing the final story of the game

Get started with Actions on Google at: **developers.google.com/assistant/interactivecanvas**

Approach

Mad Libs began their collaboration with Matchbox Mobile in late 2018 and knew they wanted to build a gaming Action for the Google Assistant to "help users interact with and access content in new ways," Adam Royce, VP Creative Strategy Director, Penguin Random House, explains. "There aren't many comparable brands that combine gameplay, creativity, education, and laughter into one experience. And while many brands struggle to reach new audiences with voice products, Mad Libs almost feels as if it was created for the Action."

Matchbox Mobile made the Mad Libs Action come to life with Interactive Canvas, a framework that allows developers to build full-screen experiences with custom layouts and animations using web technologies such as JavaScript, HTML, and WebAssembly. Interactive Canvas made it easy for Matchbox Mobile to add visual, immersive, and interactive elements to the voice-powered game.

When users play Mad Libs on a Google Nest Hub (or on any Android phone), the screen displays ideas for words to include in the stories, and users can either suggest their own words or tap words on the screen to play. For those using devices without screens or playing at a distance from their Smart Display, a narrator guides the players through the game, and anyone in the room can suggest a word. The voice experience allows for Mad Libs to be a hands-free and multiplayer experience, and there are even shorter stories for players looking for a quicker game or an intro to Mad Libs. At the close of a game, the device reads the story aloud to the delight of the players. And in cases where users don't finish a game, the Action remembers the user or users' place so they can either pick up where they left off or start a new game the next time they play.

Best Practices

After this experience, Matchbox Mobile has a number of tips for people creating Actions with Interactive Canvas. Andrew Farrell, CEO Matchbox Mobile shares, "Developers should understand that when building Actions with Interactive Canvas, your users won't necessarily be physically close to the device. While animations can augment the experience of a game, you still want to start with voice-first design."

Due to the success Mad Libs had with their Action, they decided to launch "MadLibs Mini," a shorter version that only requires a few words to complete. Farrell explains, "While initially shortening the game was a challenge, we applied Google's feedback* and the Action now has a broader appeal and is easier for new users to try as measured by the number of new users that were retained after their first game, the percentage of first-time users that make it through a session, and other qualitative feedback." He suggests that other developers may also want to create entry-level content to entice users to try a new game.

Lastly, before releasing their Action, Matchbox Mobile worked closely with a partner, Pulse Labs, to carry out user testing. "Testing user-proofs your game and lets you launch with confidence, knowing your users will have a great experience," notes Farrell.

*Penguin Random House participated in an Early Access Program which provides additional services to selected partners. If you're interested in learning more, please reach out here.

> "We felt that Google Assistant offered a broader scope of functionality than other voice platforms, especially around tie-in with Android UX. We were hoping to create a fantastic example of how voice-first UX could be fun and engaging over time, as opposed to a short-lived gimmick"

Andrew Farrell
CEO
Matchbox Mobile

Google Assistant
Actions on Google

Results

Since launching in August 2019, Matchbox and Mad Libs are excited about an average of 84K monthly active users and an average of a 6.8% weekly retention rate. The companies continue to work on product development using lessons from the Actions on Google Console Analytics to add additional functionality and improve the user experience. Mad Libs' parent company, Penguin Random House, is considering releasing more games and even exploring native voice-first games in the future. Farrell says, "Users and brands are establishing clear, authentic, and honest relationships through voice. We are starting to gain a better understanding of what's possible and what works. At the end of this, we'd love to come up with a truly authentic voice app on a Smart Display."

Next steps:

Check out our Interactive Canvas code sample or get started right away with a codelab.

Engage with our Actions on Google community on Reddit at r/GoogleAssistantDev or follow @ActionsOnGoogle on Twitter for more of our team's updates.

Get started with Actions on Google at: **developers.google.com/assistant/interactivecanvas**