# MAINFRAME**REBOOTS**

## R E B O O T

BY JENNIE PUNTER

In the world of popular franchise entertainment, human beings are the biggest glitch. James Bond has to be recast every decade or so, new Starship crews must be recruited, or prequels devised to allow for fresh faces. Let's face it, actors eventually get wrinkly, and despite advances in plastic surgery, modern science and technology definitely favours computer–animated characters. They are simply rebooted instead of recast.

After recycling on the small screen for a couple of years, the entire cast of *ReBoot* – the popular computer–animated TV series produced by Vancouver–headquartered Mainframe Entertainment – is back on the drawing board for new adventures with a "wash and brush–up," as Mainframe CEO and *ReBoot* creator Ian Pearson describes in charmingly old–school fashion. Three two–hour movie specials that can be divided into 12 half–hour episodes, plus a single, 13th episode (a musical special, Pearson promises) will comprise what amounts to a fourth season. The first special airs on YTV, the show's oldest broadcast partner, and the U.S. Cartoon Network this fall; the second in spring of 2002.

"What we've done on every season is to bring what we've learned in the previous years of production into the next batch of shows," Pearson explains. "So the characters come up to match the new level of technology. The fans accept this because the characters live in a computer called Mainframe. From an animation point of view, the action stuff is easy. It's the subtextual stuff that is hard. We'll have things in the script like, 'Dot gives a look.' That's much harder to animate than a plane crashing into a building. It's why all the faces have been upgraded. We're getting into a higher level of subtext in the animation than we've ever done before."
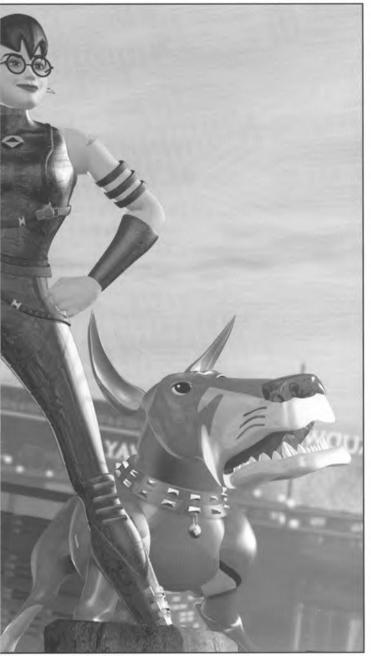
Subtle nuance, however, was not what turned the attention of Mainframe Entertainment – with, at last count, 362 salaried employees and dozens of freelance scriptwriters, voice artists and production designers – back to *ReBoot*. "Ever since the Cartoon Network bought all three (previous) seasons of *ReBoot* the ratings have been solid," Pearson says. "The fan base grew and people started writing in, so the Cartoon Network came back to us and asked if there was any chance of us producing any more episodes." The muscle of that request, combined with the unwavering support of YTV, was the encouragement Pearson needed. A recently rejuvenated partnership with Irwin Toys on the ancillary end and the development of a new interactive game not only completes the picture, but gets Pearson enthusing about a further 13 episodes. "This is the start of a new cycle, or at least that's what I'm trying to turn it into."

The reboot of *ReBoot*, which has aired in 70 countries since its 1994 debut, is a triumph and thrill for its fan base of both kids and grown-ups. Ever since the end of the show's third season, the fans have been clamouring on the Web for more of Bob the Guardian (a brave but brash dude, who wields a super tool called Glitch), Dot (the curvaceous owner of the Diner and overall mother hen), Enzo/Matrix (Dot's brother, former boy wonder and now a full-fledged hero), their assortment of aptly named friends (Phong, Mouse, Raytracer) and, especially, foes like Megabyte and Hexadecimal. Pearson has been right alongside the fans, although, as a mere human being in the world of franchise entertainment, he casts himself as a minor glitch. "At the moment I am writing scripts, which is causing problems for everyone," he laughs. "I'm the worst client Mainframe ever had!"

During a visit to Mainframe's bustling headquarters (you can take your own virtual tour at www.mainframe.ca), I was shown a clip of new shows in various stages of development, which explains why Pearson is on overdrive. *Gate Crasher* (based on a Black Bull comics superhero, "a normal teenager with a secret life") and *Dot's Bots* (a spunky 12-year-old and her younger brother weld together four eccentric robots in their grandfather's junkyard) are but two. "There's a hellish war of attrition on development when you go into a sales period," he explains. "Mainframe sticks with its projects longer than most other studios. We make sure the horse is dead before we get off and this is the first time more of our projects have stuck to the wall. We also have the work-for-hire projects coming in such as *Barbie's Nutcracker* for Matell [featuring the New York City Ballet in motion-capture animation, which is due for broadcast this fall]. It's either a yes or a no as they come in."

Dot and Frisket

and Dot. It gives us an excuse to explain some of the rules of the *ReBoot* universe a little better. In one of the flashbacks, Dot and Enzo's father is much like someone here on earth contemplating the existence of aliens. He is trying to prove the existence of other systems, and he builds a machine to prove there's life out there. So we go back in time to the start of the Internet, but I can't tell you anything else."

While the debut of *ReBoot* in 1994 came after the start–up of the Internet, the show's lingo was slightly ahead of its time. "When we started *ReBoot*, we were talking about concepts like e–mail and the Internet that people didn't know about yet, but now the expressions on *ReBoot* are so commonly used they've become part of the mainstream culture."

Story and character development on the page are dear to Pearson, but pencil pushing only goes so far. "For example, if you're writing a scene for a live–action feature where a guy goes into a bar and says, 'My wife just left me,' you can write that because it's character–driven. But if the guy is made out of molten lava and comes from a fire planet, there's going to be a different language–set because of how he was brought up. So without visuals, how does the writer get across that idea? I mean, the Inuit have 300 words for snow, the Arabs probably have 1,000 words for sand. And when you're in a fantasy environment, you have to employ a different expressive language. So when we get a script into the story reel, we look at it and see how much of the dialogue we can take out and put into visuals. Or we realize we need to change the language. Just recently I wrote something like, 'They're just covering their bets,' and someone suggested the line should be, 'They're just covering their ASC IIs.' We get a computer term in and no one in standards and practices can stop me! We're always looking for the visual puns."

While Pearson and *ReBoot*'s creative team honour the fans, they've long ago given up on trying to fool them with plot twists and surprises. "When we started writing the scripts for the fourth season, we had to go back and relearn *ReBoot*. It was terrifying. If we step out of line, the fans are going to rip our heads off. Once you start on the continuity line, you can't get off. *ReBoot* moves forward, not like the *Power Rangers*, where the same formula was used week after week. At one point we thought about changing something in the script because of something one fan on the Internet guessed would be in the storyline. But then we realized working against someone's expectations is what they actually want. So in the end, if fans have guessed something in the story-line, well, they're not going to be disappointed."

*ReBoot* is definitely a yes and all systems are go with the first movie (four episodes) tying up loose ends of season three. "There was a super virus called Daemo threatening the entire Net, so we deal with the evil of Daemon and leave the first movie with a cliffhanger," Pearson says. "It walks the fine line between drama and humour because the storyline is pretty serious, but we're balancing it with songs and comedy. We're also doing flashbacks, so there are origin stories of Megabyte and Hexadecimal, and the first meeting of Bob

With *ReBoot*'s fourth season, and the toys and games that accompany it, Pearson's overall concern is the integrity of Bob, Dot, Enzo/Matrix and the rest. "Franchises are about characters, not concepts. When you go to see *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, you don't care about the Temple of Doom, you care about what Indiana's up to. So all I care about is protecting the characters." Just call Pearson "Bob," the Guardian of *ReBoot*. Complete with a "glitch," of course.

TAKE ONE