



Rebooting

FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

By Mark Freedman

With \$26 million of financing in place and a brand new 60,000-square-foot facility, Vancouver's Mainframe Entertainment Inc. is ensuring its leadership position in the world of computer-generated imagery (CGI) well into the next millennium. Mainframe has built upon its initial success with the very popular *Reboot*, garnering even more attention with the hit television series *Beasties* (known as *Beast Wars* outside the Canadian market). Based on the popular Transformer toys, *Beasties* has consistently been in the top three rated shows for its time slot and was awarded with an Emmy for the show's design in 1998. What isn't well known is how close that season and its third and final season came to never being animated.

In late 1997 Mainframe renewed agreements for a second season of *Beasties* unaware that the Canadian Television Fund (CTF) would change the licence-fee program guidelines to ensure it would be funding "distinctly Canadian programming." The new guidelines stipulated eligible productions must be based on "Canadian source material, i.e., treatment, outline, concept or original script written by a Canadian, or based on Canadian underlying work." As long as the material was not previously adapted for television, nationality would not be a factor; however, if the program was based on a toy or game, the toy or game would have to have been created by a Canadian.

With ever-increasing demand for these limited funds, the revised policy was implemented to ensure more "Canadian" programming. The only problem, as Christopher Brough, CEO of Mainframe likes to point out, is that "while an animated show produced from script to postproduction in Vancouver would be

ineligible for funding, live-action shows like *F/X: The Series*, *Nikita* and Alliance Atlantis's *Total Recall: The Series* would still qualify under the guidelines since none had been previously adapted for television by a non-Canadian. The irony is that we created all of the *Beasties* characters and helped design the toys. We support the CTF's move from an industrial to a more Canadian cultural basis, but *Beasties* is produced entirely in Canada and its production is strengthening a Canadian company. There aren't many internationally recognized Canadian toys, games, books and characters that could be turned into a successful animated series. And this is a policy from a government that has licenced the rights for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to Disney!"

After two stressful years, Brough can now reflect that in the end, "It forced us to take an enormous risk and make up the \$1.3 million-plus budget shortfall ourselves. Had we not been able to work cooperatively with our various broadcast partners and renegotiate our distribution agreements, the CTF decision may have devastated the company." Compounding Mainframe's funding woes at the time was that its new series *Shadowriders*, scheduled to begin a 40-episode commitment, faced similar funding problems. Mainframe was forced to roll in all of the broadcast presales and many years of merchandising advances just to start up production. Now in its second season (it debuted as the number one syndicated show in the United States), *Shadowriders* was Mainframe's initial alliance with the U.S. toy company Trendmasters. Its success has encouraged both companies to create three new CGI series over the next few years. "These long-term relationships are another key component of our corporate strategy," says Mainframe's director of communications, Mairi Welman. This is most evident with the recently announced \$16-million IMAX investment which includes guaranteeing the production of at least three full-length feature films, the first based on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, to be released in the summer of 2001.

"We have worked hard on cultivating our relationship with IMAX, one that began a few years ago when we produced two short *Reboot* films for the IMAX RIDEFILM motion-simulation system. These films have proven to be even more successful than we anticipated, so it was natural for us to take the next step and partner with IMAX on feature films, a part of the industry we have been anxious to get into." With IMAX's planned expansion of theatres, this joint venture will benefit both companies, providing IMAX with important feature-length content without the costly IMAX on-location expenses and Mainframe with the opportunity to produce 3-D CGI ideally suited for the IMAX screen.

An additional \$10-million equity investment by a group of prominent Canadian financial institutions will also stabilize the company and help produce a full slate of television productions. This includes the premier season of *Weird Ohs* (which debuts this fall on YTV in Canada and the Fox Family Network in the United States), *Shadowriders*' second season and *Beast Machines*, a spin-off from *Beasties* (distributed internationally by Sony/Tristar and seen on the Fox Kids Network in the United States). As one of the very select companies to successfully and consistently produce CGI programs, Mainframe can take great pride in claiming that regardless of content material, and unlike many Canadian 2-D animated companies that must go overseas to complete their animation, every frame of every episode produced by Mainframe is animated in Vancouver, and is, as their CEO proudly claims, "very Canadian." ●