Animation Schools in the Digital World

By Paul Townend

The monster hampster in *Nutty Professor II: The Klumps* © UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

With *A.I. Artificial Intelligence, Final Fantasy, Shrek, Laura Croft: Tomb Raider* and *The Mummy Returns* dominating the box office this summer, it's safe to say that digital filmmaking has arrived in full force and special effects are no longer so special. *Stars Wars*, released back in the dim past of 1977, not only made its creator, George Lucas, a very wealthy man, but more importantly, it changed the way movies were made. No longer did a film need actual human beings to carry the story when multi–million dollar animated and special effects could do the trick.

This public taste for eye–popping effects work has proven insatiable and created a growth industry in computer animators. "I think the industry is going to expand," says Larry DeFlorio, who is the coordinator of the digital media centre in the School of Communication Arts, Seneca College, Toronto. "There's always jobs for talented animators. At the beginning of this industry it was strictly the technicians who were using the software and it was tough to use. But slowly artists have seen what the technical people have been able to create. If you get an artist behind these machines and on the software, you start to great incredible work. What has happened is that the artists have flooded into the market over the past three years and bar has continually risen. The work is now close to photorealism, and I predict in five years that you won't be able to tell the difference."

Seneca offers 16–week programs teaching Maya and Softimage programs, and the students accepted are traditional animators, graduates of Sheridan or Algonquin colleges. "We looking mainly for artists to come into our program. Experience with computers is not necessary. We start with the basics," says DeFlorio. "We are looking for very talented, artistic people." Seneca graduates can expect to find placement from Montreal to Vancouver to Halifax to Los Angeles. Seneca grads are working at Industrial Light & Magic and PDI, Pacific Data Images, which is now owned by DreamWorks.

One of the largest Canadian effects house is C.O.R.E. Digital Pictures located in downtown Toronto. When *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk (Montreal–born William Shatner) was developing his four *TekWar* made–for–television movies in 1994, instead of contracting out the enormous amount of special effects work need on the series, he formed his own company and hired Kyle Menzies and Bob Munroe to oversee the work. C.O.R.E. has expanded to 125 employees since then. "*TekWar* was one of the first Canadian television series to used digital effects, and C.O.R.E. grew out of that series," says Bret Culp, visual effects supervisor at C.O.R.E. "In Canada, we have some of the best animators in the world, and we draw 90 per cent of our staff from local sources such as Sheridan, Algonquin and Seneca. We have better tools and software that is is more intuitive and allows people from different disciplines to use it, not just programmers. We have people at C.O.R.E. who have no computer experience but are fantastic artists. Once they are up to speed with the software, they apply their skills as artists to the project." C.O.R.E. created and animated the rats and owls for *Dr. Doolittle*, the monster hamster in *Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*, and crafted the 3–D map of Manhattan used in *X–Men*.

"The high-end studios like Disney and DreamWorks are always going to be pushing the digital envelope because they can afford it, but to get into the digital world of filmmaking the start-up costs are phenomenal," says Paul West, coordinator from Algonquin College. "So there will always be a need for traditional, hand–drawn animation. It will always be with us and there will always be need." Algonquin, located just outside of Ottawa in Nepean, offers a three–year traditional animation program as well as a four-month, fast-track digital-animation program to place graduates in Ottawa's growing computer–gaming industry. "Our mandate it to teach the foundations of animation and that way our students are able to learn the basic skills in three years and then they can go on to computer animation," says West.

Certainly there is a growing demand for highly skilled computer animators, not just tech–heads, but artist who can work in the digital world. "I think things will become 100 per cent digital in the next five years, and I may be stretching it," says DeFlorio. Culp at C.O.R.E. Digital offers up this final observation: "We are moving away from film to the use of 24p (progressive) HD video cameras, and this will happen sooner than later. Lucas's *Star Wars* Part II is going to be almost entirely digital. It's going to be a wake up call to the industry."

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