

# International CG Collaboration: Good, Bad, or Just Impossible?

## Moderator

Frank Foster (Tigar Hare Studios)

## Panelists

Carlos Arguello (StudioC)

Evan Hirsch (Immaginare)

Jai Natarajan (Independent)

Bill Schultz (Taffy Entertainment/Mike Young Productions)

Rajesh Turakhia (Maya Entertainment Ltd.)

## Overview

We live, work, and collaborate in a global economy. Some artists move overseas to find work. Some local supervisors hire artists and companies in other countries to produce work for local productions. Some local companies are creating entire subsidiaries in other countries for local productions. The implications are vast. Far beyond time and language differences, cultural differences are sometimes insurmountable, but global production brings income and untold opportunities to all kinds of artists and technologists throughout the world. In this panel, supervisors, producers, and artists from all over the globe convene to talk about the good, bad, and impossible of outsourcing creativity and production.

## Position Statement: Frank Foster

Perhaps, the topic is not so much outsourcing, as it is about the democratization of computer graphics. In the 70's and early 80's CG activity was primarily limited to North America and Europe. But since then Asia, led initially by Japan has exploded into a major supplier of digital content. Similar trends have occurred in Latin America and the rest of the world. Computer graphics belongs equally to everyone. Communication is a basic human right.

Today students all over the world have increased access to the tools of computer graphics thanks to cheaper more powerful PCs and software. Over the last several years the SIGGRAPH Computer Film Festival has begun to showcase some of this work.

On the other hand, many North American CG workers have seen their job opportunities that skyrocketed in the 90's start to diminish over the last few years. Even the pinnacle of digital content creation, the academy award for best visual effects, has gone to out sourcers for the last 4 years prior to this year's award. Many high visibility feature films are now have some parts quietly animated and composited in Asia. The trend is likely to continue. Whether it is an opportunity or problem may depend on the eye of the beholder. Either way is a reality and one that seems to be following the same offshore path that 2D animation took over a decade ago.

## Biographical Sketch: Frank Foster

Frank Foster has attended well over 20 SIGGRAPHS and been a member of the conference planning committee twice as a computer film festival chair. In 1998, He directed SIGGRAPH's first official feature-length documentary "The Story of Computer Graphics." He was a founding vice president at Sony Imageworks and watched it grow from 2 people to over 600. As part of his

responsibilities at Sony he traveled the world to research outsourcing, starting with India in 1995. Foster produced one of the first CG features to be made in China, "Through the Moebius Strip" and is currently preparing a CG animated feature to be produced entirely in India. He is currently the CEO and executive producer at Tigar Hare Studios in Sherman Oaks.

## Position Statement: Carlos Arguello

In the early 90's, when the union of computer generated images and film was cast in titanium with the likes of "The Abyss," "Terminator 2," and "Jurassic Park," Hollywood imported some of the best and brightest minds from around the globe; artists, supervisors, software developers. Cheaper hardware and software has given a whole new generation all over the world the resources to learn the technology and techniques necessary to create "Hollywood quality" images. At the same time, film and television clients are wanting bigger and better FX in less time and for less money. Like many industries in the US, we have to find ways to more competitive, which may mean looking for solutions in other parts of the world. It's about more than cheap labor, though. It's about providing opportunities for people with limited options, about growing the industry beyond the Hollywood borders, and about putting some of those foreign box office dollars back in the pockets of film-goers in other parts of the world. Sure out-sourcing has its problems; communication, data transfer, dealing with cultural differences, but the positives far outweigh the negatives.

## Biographical Sketch: Carlos Arguello

Carlos Arguello, former Creative Director for PDI and Visual Effects Supervisor for Cinesite Hollywood with credits including "Space Jam," "Sphere," "Armageddon," and "Devil's Advocate," now owner and Creative Director for StudioC with credits including "The Chronicles of Riddick," "The Ring 2," and "The Interpreter" and offices in Los Angeles and Guatemala City, Guatemala.

## Position Statement: Evan Hirsch

The vast majority of artists and TDs across the film and gaming industries view outsourcing with, at best, contempt or more likely as a threat to their very existence. There is little doubt that many of the newer facilities coming on line in Asia, India and Eastern Europe will in the short term only further the current situation of too much "supply," the reality is like it or not, here they come. At present, the output from these far away places may be noticeable and the work comparatively simple (wire removals, simple composites, basic models, etc), but just as we were once hungry, they too will learn and grow.

As professionals in the "1st World" of CG we have more experience with bending technology to our will and the need of our client's stories or game designs to deliverer the most breathtaking results. Will we become provincial and foolish, ultimately encouraging our employers to look elsewhere? Or will we adapt, to ensure that the more exciting aspects of the work stay where it is. With some care and desire, there is a lot of technique and approach that can be learned and "borrowed" from some of these emerging facilities.

Most importantly, this trend cuts both ways as the companies that send work overseas often learn that paying a fraction of what you would pay in the 1st World of CG doesn't always save the time or money that was promised. Cultures, time zones and languages (including English) all come with hidden costs, and benefits. As TDs and artists, we can either hide underneath our desks and bury our heads in the proverbial particles, or we can continue to innovate, learn and excite ourselves (and clients) while we continue to drive the medium to new places.

#### **Biographical Sketch: Evan Hirsch**

Evan Hirsch is based in London, where he works as a CG Supervisor and consultant to companies that include Cinesite, THQ and Midway. From 2003- 2004, he was 3D Supervisor at Vanguard Animation where he oversaw the Modelling, Layout, Rigging and Tools departments on "Valiant," the first Studio backed, 3D Animated feature to be done in Europe. He was responsible for establishing much of the CG organization for the company including development of the initial pipelines and workflows for the production as well as the recruitment and hiring of over 100 of Vanguard's employees.

Prior to joining Vanguard, he worked briefly at Cinesite Europe as Production Manager for their Digital FX facility. From 1996-2002, he worked at Electronic Arts in Vancouver and England, ultimately as Head of Visual Development for EA's Worldwide Studios, during which time he worked with 11 EA studios across North America, Europe and Japan. He started his tenure with EA at their Vancouver Motion Capture Studio where he supervised Motion Capture shoots on 25 games that each sold over 1 million units. Before joining EA, he was a Partner at Acme Animation Group, a small, design and CG consultancy. He is a member of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) and SIGGRAPH in addition to being a Contributing Editor to Computer Graphics World since 1990. He received his BFA in Industrial Design from Rochester Institute of Technology.

#### **Position Statement: Jai Natarajan**

CG Outsourcing is already a reality today. The cost and capacity advantages are too compelling to ignore for clients. Conversely, in countries like India, CG offers a great way up for artists who are not necessarily a part of the English-speaking middle-class which is benefiting from the BPO boom.

However, to date, only a few isolated cases have been outstanding successes. My argument is therefore focused on the issue of how to make this a viable global business and not just a project-based experiment.

We know that the creative output and the delivery strength are improving as the industry matures. It is harder to validate the business model underlying our business. Providers go through traumatic business cycles similar to studios in LA. Few examples of successful large-scale companies exist. Profit margins have

been small in comparison to the BPO and software sectors. It is therefore important to create a compelling success story for dispassionate investors.

CG Partnering offers a better alternative. Clients and providers alike can achieve better stability and efficiency. CG Partnering for the client means involving the provider in the IP creation process from an early stage, establishing a realistic pricing model, and working on a repeatable business collaboration model, with shared up-sides. For the provider, it means reduced cost of marketing, better capacity utilization and a more long-term design of pipelines. Only CG partnering can maximize the industry's global growth, creating enough jobs for everyone who wants to be it.

The challenge I lay down to industry leaders on both sides is to provide a stable platform for the artists to showcase their talent globally. Failures of financing and delivery can only be avoided through long term relationships between clients and providers. Captive units, virtual captives, co-production and multi-year/multi-project agreements are some ways to achieve this.

#### **Biographical Sketch: Jai Natarajan**

Jai Natarajan is a freelance CG Supervisor who cut his teeth at ILM and Sony in the US, with film credits including "The Perfect Storm" and "Mighty Joe Young." He has been working with the Indian CG industry as a creative, technical and business consultant for the past three years, bridging clients with providers, including setting up the technology for an outsourcing animation studio in Mumbai, consulting for a US-based game services startup with operations in Bangalore, and supervising projects for overseas clients. He has written and spoken in India about VFX and technology issues, and about bringing more engineers into the industry there. He has an MS in Computer Science from UCLA, and undergraduate degrees in Math and CS from BITS, Pilani, in India.

#### **Position Statement: Bill Schultz**

With the popularity of CGI as a medium for television series programming it is necessary to develop a methodology and identify sources for mass produced high quality episodic television. With 2d having gone through a similar evolution there are many lessons to be learned. Those that can fulfill this need will have tremendous opportunity for growth and financial reward. There are many opportunities for those with the CGI skill set to factor into this equation. It will take some education and motivation to spread the word on why this is important. As a producer and distributor of CGI series television, I am frontline aware of the appetite that exists for CGI and also aware of the lack of proven sources for a production pipeline reliable and experienced in the series production model.

#### **Biographical Sketch: Bill Schultz**

Bill Schultz is the owner of Taffy Entertainment / Mike Young Productions. He has worked at Marvel Productions, and at Film Roman, where he was the recipient of two Emmy Awards for his work on "The Simpsons."

**Position Statement: Rajesh Turakhia**

Outsourcing can never be the problem. IT IS A SOLUTION IN WHICH ALL THE PLAYERS WIN.

At Maya Entertainment Ltd., we have helped boutique studios execute interesting jobs which they would have not been able to take on for cost and capacity reasons. They have now not only ended up doing the job with our participation, but also getting nominated for awards. The joint execution of a project using the strengths of both the outsourcing arms, has resulted in high quality animation at a reasonable cost and on an aggressive schedule.

The typical small studios do not have an employee strength on payroll to be able to bid for projects at short notice. Their knowledge that a studio like ours – with multiple teams armed with latest hardware and software always available on payroll – will be able to come on board and help execute the project on time, gives them the freedom to bid confidently.

The sourcing studios do the pre and post production which helps retain a high percentage of the budget. The production is farmed out to studios like ours while they retain creative control and migrate their good artists upwards into leadership roles.

Larger studios have also approached us when faced with a resource crunch and benefited in completing their projects on time and within their budgets. They are also able to greenlight more projects in their portfolio and mitigate their risks while growing the footprint of CG shows globally.

This alliance with studios resulting in better budgets will only generate greater demand within the industry, creating premium opportunities for local talent, resulting in a win/win for all.

**Biographical Sketch: Rajesh Turakhia**

Rajesh Turakhia is the CEO of Maya Entertainment Ltd. (MEL), a leading VFX and CG animation studio in Mumbai, India. Under Rajesh, MEL has built on its pioneering presence in the domestic VFX market, and has also developed a reputation for quality and speed of delivery in international CG and VFX projects. This has fueled the expansion of MEL to almost two hundred employees. Most recently, MEL delivered the top rated Christmas special "The Tale of Jack Frost" for BBC Worldwide. MEL was also part of the team which created the GDC-nominated game cinematic "Golden Eye: Rogue Agent" for Electronic Arts.

Prior to being CEO, Rajesh was VP of Maya's Education division, MAAC. He was responsible for growing MAAC from a single center in 2001 to India's leading animation training franchise with thirty-five centers, 1500 alumni and three thousand current students. Rajesh has previously been an entrepreneur in the computer and software distribution businesses.

As a leading spokesperson for the Indian animation and training industries, he is a frequent speaker at various industry forums. Rajesh holds an MBA from the Univ. of Hartford, Connecticut and is an amateur stage actor and Indian classical vocalist.