

ATF 2016 ISSUE

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SHIVAAY

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another level in
Bollywood

Into the mind of an Indian
animation film-maker

The Sun Always Rises
in the East

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You are holding the first copy of AnimationXpress's Spark magazine which has been produced for the Asia Television Forum. It is a very modest effort, but it is a first for us for this region.

The first of many more initiatives we hope to take going forward, as India's animation, VFX, comics, gaming, and TV industries begins its forward march to deliver content that international audiences can connect with and watch.

What's pleasing at this year's Asia Television Forum (ATF) is the large contingent of Indian animation studios creating original IP and kids content distributors who have chosen to come and learn, share and partner with Asia's and the world's finest. It is probably the largest Indian delegation to attend ATF in its history.

It's a sign of the times: India's animation studios are not happy just staying at home. They are looking at leaving their stamp globally. While in the first wave studios worked on creating IP that whetted the appetites of consumers locally, today they are working with international animation creators, artists, writers, to create product that can travel.

The march into that territory has just begun. Whether it is a *Captain Cactus* from the Cosmos Maya studio or a *Six Cylinder Samurai* from Green Gold Animation, which made a huge success of its *Chhota Bheem* franchise, the guns are being trained on satisfying the entertainment needs of young viewers the world over. And there is a whole bunch of newbies – digital studios such as ChuChuTV and Videogyaan – which have attained some success with their basic digital animation offerings, that are looking further afield.

Some studios have gone ahead in the past with their international ambitions: the P. Jayakumar-headed Toonz Animation has an European outpost in Imira Studios through which it is making an entry into Europe. DQ Animation which partnered with Method Animation and even took a minority stake in it more than half a decade back has been a pioneer in thinking global.

Will it work this time around? The chances look better than they did in the early part of this decade. The world is becoming increasingly global. The Indian studios have polished their pipelines – whether 2D or 3D stereoscopic CG animation – and are skilling up on story telling, character building, marketing and partnerships. It is quite likely this effort at going global will have a different ending for Indian animation.

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CONTENTS

The Sun Always Rises in the East



Shivaay: Taking Visual Effects to another level in Bollywood



What goes inside the creative mind of an Indian animation film-maker?



Videogyan: a digital creator which makes it look like kids play



Animantz makes a dash for original content



14. Studio News

The Sun Always Rises in the East

Asia and its rich mythical ancient origins and history have always been a magnet for the rest of the world. It is therefore no surprise that content based on eastern culture such as *Kung Fu Panda* or inspired philosophies from the east such as *Avatar* is consumed voraciously worldwide.

While most Asian nations have, for the large part, grown their markets through sub contracting work from Japan (such as Korea and China) and the west, they are now gearing up for the great IP push. Asia is rapidly changing its face from just being a subcontractor of work to an original IP producer largely due to internal co-operation and a very large domestic market.

Strong domestic markets coupled with highly-skilled labour and low production costs, has meant that the Asian animation industries are riding a wave of expansion and growth. A lowered demand due to economic volatility in the Eurozone and the United States has further lead to a major shift to Asia, especially ASEAN countries.

Japan has long been the centre of animation production in Asia due to its strong domestic market and is the oldest modern animation industry in the region having begun in the 1960s. It largely stays buoyant due to sustained domestic demand in anime and



Ankur Bhasin

manga with over 130 new animated TV series being broadcast each year. Japanese animation also finds large takers globally with *Ninja Hatori*, *Doraemon* and *Shin Chan* being highly consumed in various Asian countries.

China was comparatively a late starter with its modern animation industry taking roots in the early 1990s. However, it has fast emerged as not only a



major animation producer in Asia but, with a significant potential domestic market, is on the verge of being a large content consumer. China is endeavouring to become a more competitive player through industry incentives and broadcasting regulations. In particular, regulations such as the one laid down by SARFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television) requiring each TV station to allocate at least 60 per cent of animation airtime to domestic product is fuelling the domestic animation industry. With recent successes at the local

seen both a robust enlargement of the domestic market and the expansion of production companies into foreign markets.

Singapore has long been a major animation hub but with rising costs and arduous procedures in the island to get employment for expats, subcontracting work is not a particular strength. However, with strong IP protection, easy financing options and fiscal benefits, many studios make Singapore their corporate headquarter while producing content in other Asian



box office with features such as *Monster Hunt* (2015), *Little Door Gods* (2016), and *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2016), China's animation industry has sky-rocketed.

The Indian animation industry has been accelerating slowly and has largely been a hub for subcontracting work from western countries and partially due to subcontracting from Asian countries such as Korea.

With many Hollywood films being made partly in India and a gigantic domestic film industry, the country is on the cusp of spurring growth. Though the local industry has been unsuccessfully been demanding broadcasting regulations, an increasing hunger for local content has fuelled the home grown IP scene.

Larger Indian studios have forayed into international co-productions and expanding externally through acquisitions with smaller studios seeming to follow the suit. A combination of high-speed internet and a rise in some areas of film production, such as special effects have also led to an increase in VFX subcontracting making India a VFX hub.

South Korea largely grew due to subcontracting work from Japan and western countries but is slowly promoting its original content. With the domestic market primarily being animated movies in 1980s due to low level of TV ownership, recent years have

countries.

Philippines has largely been the outsourcing choice for most larger studios due to the excellent talent at lower costs. Filipino animators have been behind some of the world's best-loved cartoons and animated films such as *Scooby Doo*, *Tom & Jerry*, *Finding Nemo* and *The Incredibles*. Phillipnes boasts of a strong 2D talent as well, drawing large works from other Asian countries such as Japan, China and India.

Thailand has been seen as a fast growing market for both consumption and production of digital talent on the back of subcontracted work similar to Philippines from countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Mainland China and also western countries such as United States and Canada. Other notable markets include Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The recent past has seen many Asian studios collaborating and co-producing content, specifically to target domestic markets - specifically of China, India and Japan. Additionally, with a larger focus on IP productions and moving up the value chain, the East only has the rising sun to look forward to. ■

The author is the CEO of Bhasinsoft, a Bengaluru based studio producing IPs in animation, apps and games.

Before



Shivaay: Taking Visual Effects to another level in Bollywood

Despite being a toddler studio just a year and half old, NY VFXWAALA – promoted by Bollywood action hero Ajay Devgn - has managed to make a mark in the Indian VFX industry. Having worked on films like *Bajirao Mastani*, *Theri*, *Drishyam*, *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo*, the studio's latest project *Shivaay* has raised the bar further for Indian VFX. Not many know but the film which recently made its way into the Rs 100 crore (\$15 million) box office league, has 4500 VFX shots! Starring Devgn himself, *Shivaay* was praised by critics for its larger than life visuals and amazing cinematography.

The film's visual effects was creatively headed by NY VFXWAALA's Naveen Paul with Pankaj Kalbende and Randhir Reddy playing the role of VFX supervisors and Vinod Ganesh acting as the production head. Paul and Kalbende revealed to AnimationXpress what went into the making of this ambitious project.

Shivaay as a film had at its core, its script and the story. VFX was used as a medium to bring the narrative to life. Even though 70 to 75 per cent of the movie was shot against a blue screen, it was never promoted as a VFX heavy feature. Paul says: "Our prep time was long - we have worked on *Shivaay* for almost one and a half years and it took us about 11 months to deliver the project. We couldn't have asked for a better director than Ajay Devgn as he has the technical knowledge and understands the limitations and strengths of visual effects; knowing how and when to incorporate VFX."

The 158 minute long film has six major VFX sequences and every sequence was designed differently. "We felt

as if we were working on six different films at one time as each shot varied from the other," adds Kalbende who also acknowledges that Devgn is a 'technically sorted director.'

After going through the script, the prep work was undertaken wherein each sequence was broken down and the storyboarding process was initiated. It included details about how the filming will take place - every sequence was once again broken down into smaller chunks which indicated the parts that would be shot against a blue screen and which would be shot live.

"As there were many locations where it was impractical to shoot in, VFX came to the rescue. During such situations, possibilities were checked and locations were shortlisted. High resolution pictures and videos were shot which were later converted to CGI," mentions Kalbende. Paul adds, "The biggest challenge was to blend the live and CGI scenes to make them look seamless. Maintaining the lighting and colour was another aspect to be taken into consideration."

Both of them further went on to say that Devgn had no intention to do a VFX heavy film. All he wanted was to make something which has never been shown in Bollywood. Nowadays with filmmakers opening to the idea of taking the aid of VFX for their film, its use can either make or break the film; hence a lot of responsibility lies on the VFX studio's shoulder.

So how can VFX be improved in movies?

"When directors start thinking a notch higher that's when high quality VFX can be delivered. The thought



process revolves around directors and that's one thing Ajay had. With the amount of technical knowledge he possesses, no one could have tried such sequences," explains Paul. 100 artists worked on the VFX for the film.

The six major sequences the studio worked on are:

**The introduction of Ajay Devgn as Shivaay
Avalanche
Gora Kidnap
Falling off the bridge
Pre-Climax (2 parts)**

The introduction of Ajay Devgn as Shivaay:

As the only practical way to execute the sequence was to shoot it entirely in a controlled environment, the decision was taken to do the shoot against a blue screen. The most important part was to get the lighting correct and consistent and hence, it was decided to film with natural sunlight and at the same time, avoid harsh and directional light. The cinematographer, Asim Bajaj took utmost care in doing so whereas art director, Sabu Cyril took care of the 40 foot high mountain set.

Since it was a free fall from the mountain, the body language had to be precise and perfect, falling with the gravity. Since every shot was against the blue screen, the framing had to be right, which meant that they had to get relative scale and perspectives in place. Location recce in actual mountains to study the textures, scales and all other minute details were required to create a CGI model.

To make efficient use of the CGI model, it was divided into six parts, depending upon the magnification of the live shots. Now the most challenging part

was to light it up so that it matched the live action plate. There were multiple passes rendered out before it went to the compositing stage. By default, this entire exercise had to be repeated several times for every shot before locking on to the final version. There were about 170 shots that went through this tedious process.

This sequence was the best example of bridging Maya and Nuke as the mountain was a CGI model and the remaining elements like the sky, the surrounding mountains and the ground were matte paints. While the CGI model was match moved, and rendered out, with a baked camera, the matte paint elements were projected in Nuke. It was very essential to bridge the gap between Maya and Nuke so that there was a common platform.

Avalanche:

The requirement of the scene was to show the avalanche in the Himalayan ranges and how it impacted the people caught in it. Again, it wasn't practical to film in the Himalayas, and so it was decided to shoot in a controlled environment in a studio. A set was put in an area of 100 by 100 feet. The actual challenges began from here, as a photo realistic environment around this fake set had to be recreated. There were four major elements that had to be planned for:

1. The gorge; 2. The mountains; 3. Avalanche;
4. Shoot live plate.

The main challenge was to get the scales and perspective right, followed by the look and feel. Since, the main feel was to get the balance of snow and fresh frozen ice, a lot of videos and images which were available on internet were studied to recreate this concept in CGI. This was just the beginning of executing this horrific sequence of 210 shots.



Now planning for the surrounding environment consisting of huge mountains, stones, trees, etc had to be decided. Again a new concept was worked upon for the mountains. Most of the environments were recreated by matte paint.

generator was used to get the mesh in NukeX. This mesh was edited to extend the gorge and mountains. On the same mesh, the matte paint of the gorge and mountain with the help of 2.5D projection was projected. The entire sequence was not 3D, but a 2.5D projection in NukeX. ■

To fit these elements in a proper way, point cloud



What goes inside the creative mind of an Indian animation film-maker?

To begin with I would like to mention that as directors / producers / film-makers / storytellers our role is not restricted to being only an 'animator'. Hence we are animation film-makers and not just 'animators'.

As a film-maker and storyteller, I select films we work on based on how much the idea / concept / script excites me. Be it client commissioned projects or our own independent films, if the premise excites us, we try to be a part of it. The premise could be an interesting story / script, or an opportunity to explore new styles, techniques or create exciting characters, or opportunity to collaborate with inspiring people or best of all a chance to create something noble for your audiences.

For me the style is always dictated by the story but I must confess that at times tight deadlines and budgets also dictate the styling or the choice of medium!

Approach to a project varies based on the premise. When you are creating a commissioned film for a client, you are telling someone else's story, handling someone else's brand. The client brief becomes your start point. You try your best to understand your client's goal and direct every ingredient of the film to achieve that. However, when you are telling your own story or producing your own film, you need to create your own brief! You need to tap into your own self to understand what excites you, what you want to say and how you want to say it.

As a studio we have worked with a variety of mediums and styles right from traditional hand drawn 2D animation, digital 3D animation to physical 3D stop motion techniques and mix media films. For us going from one medium to the other is extremely refreshing.

As an audience we have all grown up on a variety of stories – right from mythology, folklore, Bollywood to politics! We are surrounded by stories everywhere - heroic stories, happy stories, tragic stories,



Vaibhav Kumaresh

magic stories, ghost stories, and so on. The huge success of Bollywood today proves that we not only love new ideas but also new ways to present old ideas! I believe as animation film-makers we have a lot to learn from Bollywood.

For the past 13 years Vaibhav Studios has been successfully entertaining the Indian audience with its animation shorts. The challenge we now face is to achieve the same in long format film-making as well. The performance of our animated films on the big screen so far has been dismal. So the task is all the more challenging! We are currently producing our maiden feature film. Our learning so far is that making a good film is just half the job. We have a lot to learn about its advertising, distribution and exhibition. I'm sure we'll learn when we get there. ■

The author is the founder of Vaibhav Studios, a Mumbai based studio that scripts, directs, produces, designs animation content.





Videogyan: A digital creator which makes it look like kids play

Kids shows, pre-school content, cartoon videos for toddlers - you name it! Videogyan has, for the last five years, been serving up a web show menu that has had kids salivating and smacking their chops in anticipation for the content that is being cooked.

It has a subscriber base of more than 3.5 million and has notched up close to 3 billion views – 2.8 billion to be exact at the time of writing in late November 2016. That's courtesy the kids content creator's relentless and persistent efforts to create funny and innovative original IPS such as *Minnu-Mintu*, *Timboo-Tusker*, *Too Too Boy* and *Zool Babies*, to name a few.

With talented employees and artists, operating from their Jayanagar (Bengaluru) office, Videogyan has already tasted its fair share of success which includes three silver button awards from YouTube for its three different YouTube channels (Videogyan 3D Rhymes - Nursery Rhymes and Kids Songs, Minnu and Mintu Telegu Rhymes and Videogyan Kids Shows - Cartoon Animation for Kids) and one golden button award for Videogyan 3D Rhymes channel.

Having a creative team that is data sensitive and which analyses the recent online viewing trends and brainstorming on new concepts and a production team that comes up with high quality 3D animation, Videogyan has always spread joy among its viewers with its weekly uploads of new rhymes and shows.

Founded in 2011 by Vishal Thatti, Ranga Rao T M and Thulasinatn, Videogyan has been growing from strength to strength and has seen a near trebling of its views since late 2015 when the channel entered the billion views league. Thatti, who is the CEO, believes that it is the combination of rhymes, great music and visuals which have made Videogyan's offering engaging for both kids and parents alike.

“It all started in the year 2011, when we began creating e-learning content on Youtube in various categories including gadgets, music, business, finance, tutorials, e-learning content for kids, etc. Since our vertical of kids content took off very well among young kids we continued developing more of pre-school learning and entertaining videos in 2D. Many of our 2D rhymes and kids songs are quite popular on major digital platforms including YouTube,” shared Thatti in an Autodesk case study in 2015.

According to the Autodesk case study, Videogyan receives approximately two million views everyday on their YouTube channel from across 140 countries. The larger share of views comes from English speaking countries like US, UK, Canada, followed by India, Russia, Turkey and Vietnam. Most videos on Videogyan's YouTube channels boast of views in millions.

Covering multiple languages nationally and internationally, Videogyan will keep pushing the envelope further to more success and countless achievements. ■

Animantz makes a dash for original content



In business for 11 years, the Chennai-based studio is developing ‘Fun Run’ a 13 episode series which will be released in 2017.

Back when the animation industry had just begun to sprout in India, outsourcing was used as a safe way to venture into this space, learn and generate revenue. The fairly young industry didn’t have enough resources, skill-sets and exposure to determine whether original IPs would prove successful.

However, now we are witnessing a paradigm shift in the Indian animation industry as the studios are slowly moving from producing just outsourced content to coming up with their own IPs. Among these is Chennai based studio Animantz.

With a “never compromise on quality” attitude, Prabakar T founded this 2D animation studio in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu (Chennai) back in 2005 and from then there was no turning back.

“I was running a franchise of an animation education institute in Chennai from 2002 to 2008. During this time we were getting a lot of enquires to develop websites, so I formed a small team of four and started developing websites and other graphic work and later owing to my passion in movies, I worked for a lot of movies in the south doing titling and other graphic work,” reveals Prabakar T on his initial journey into animation.

Gradually as the technology evolved, the studio started developing flash games and animations for e-learning and episodic animated content for its clients. Now with an experience of 11 years in the industry,

Animantz is focusing more on episodic and movie animation, providing pre-production, production and post-production services for local and international projects. Derived from the amalgamation of ‘animation’ and ‘ants’, Animantz believe that just like ants are proactive and self motivated, so is the company driven when it comes to achieving its vision.

Currently the team is working on a French animation project “Carolina” which is a series of kid’s episodes and the second season is on its way.

Along with that, the studio is finally ready to dive into producing its own IP. Named as “Fun Run”, the 52 x 6’ animated series is of the slapstick genre. Animantz is also developing upbeat animated kids’ songs for its YouTube channel - Happy Bear TV.

Prabakar T exults: “We have managed to sustain in this uncertain industry due to our core production team. We always have had a small but effective and an experienced team.”

Leading the band of Animantz is creative director A. K. Sudhakaran, who has around 17 years of experience in 2D animation and storyboarding. That’s not it. Sudhakaran has also directed up to five animation movies and has worked in many a major 2D animated episodic projects in India.

Prabhakar T assures: “We never scale up to project needs by compromising on the quality and we work on projects within the strengths of our team.”

Animantz plans to release 13 episodes of its original production “Fun Run” starting May 2017. ■

VedAtma Animation Studios

VedAtma Animation Studios, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, has a sincere and dedicated team of highly skilled and creative people working endlessly with a passionate aspiration to change the face of the global media and entertainment industry with the use of traditional and digital 2D and 3D animation and other post-production processes. The key strength of VedAtma lies in the fact that it provides the best of all worlds, offering exemplary imaging services, cutting-edge state-of-the-art animation technologies, diversified cultural compatibility and conducive management techniques. Though the focus is on creating global IPs, VedAtma is also in the ever-demanding area of services and is able to successfully perform in both the domains.



www.vedatmaanimation.com

Astute Media Vision



Astute Media Vision has indigenously produced a wide range of award winning kids content from live television series to telefilms and full length theatrical movies in 3D animation, 3D stereoscopy, live action CG and visual effects genres from concept to final output under one roof. Recently, Astute launched an English 3D rhymes YouTube channel - Pankoo Kidz and has created 50 popular and good quality 3D English nursery rhymes for kids, which are open for distribution / syndication / licensing on all platforms. By end next year, it plans to complete 300 3D rhymes including 3D animated web episodes. At ATF, Astute Media is looking for distribution / syndication / licensing of its 90 minute live action VFX Hindi movie 'Billu Gamer' for kids / youngsters on all platforms. In India it has already been acquired by Turner for a limited period.

www.astutemediavision.com

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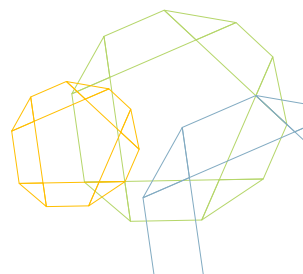
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