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Never has so much attention been paid to one tiny mole. Frame by frame, scene after scene, the slight imperfection just below the actress's eye—apparently deemed grievously unsightly by the film's director—is meticulously clicked over and manipulated with the help of sophisticated, cutting-edge software, until its annoying presence is forever vanished. Goodbye mole.

But why should moles get all the interest?

A different digital artist on the team is carefully scrutinizing and correcting the colour and application of this actress's makeup; meanwhile, an additional person has spent weeks in post-production going through yet another completed film shot by shot to visually slenderize a lead actress's much too obvious pregnancy.

It's this kind of smoke and mirror magic that Niagara-based visual effects company Keyframe Digital Productions—so named because a key frame in animation and filmmaking is a "drawing that defines the starting and ending points of any smooth transition"—deals with daily, seamlessly altering a sense of reality that can take hours, days, weeks or even months to achieve.

Mole masking and baby blurring probably aren't the usual type of "fairy-dust functions" first thought of when one mentions visual effects. Geek-filled daydreams instead wander to bigger, more glorious, in-your-face trickery such as electric-blue creatures in faraway lands, massive sinking ships against ice-cold night air, or pocket-sized hobbits ambling over hilltops. Yet, the suspension of disbelief applies handily to all of these aspects, and the real truth is this burgeoning industry has the consummate power to either tweak the mundane or realize the impossible.

With visual effects studios being contracted to integrate live action footage and fabricated imagery, conceiving environments that look realistic but would be too dangerous, costly, or simply implausible to capture any other way, it's becoming increasingly hard to know what's true-life and what's fiction. When images are created or manipulated away from an actual set, the "virtual truth" is really being generated

at the hands of the VFX expert.

And perhaps paradoxically for this endeavour, the best effects are the ones you might not necessarily perceive; you just accept their presentation wholly at face value, caught up wondrously in their exquisite essence. It's the culmination of a high art and of being cleverly skilled in both creative and technological means, often to the point of leaving one unable to fully appreciate the immense accomplishment it took to devise the brilliant illusion.

Keyframe has been crafting those very illusions since 1997, essentially early days for this industry, and it has allowed founders Darren Cranford and Clint Green to firmly establish the contacts and solid relationships that are fundamental to their success. "That was the hard part," says Cranford about getting those initial connections. "Now we have a good working relationship with many producers, so they want quality, they want to work with a reliable company and have a level of confidence; we deliver what they want."

In the entertainment arena, "everyone wants to get their project made and it comes down to dollars," explains Cranford, who has worked on major films, among them the first *X-Men* and 2012's *Premium Rush*. A script's demands can range from the practical, such as removing the safety rigging for action shots, to the mythical, like convincingly projecting lightning out of fingers, or making a ghost "glow a certain way." The digital artist must find an approach to make it happen, and stay within the imposed limits of time and budget.

For that reason, what most modern filmmaking for TV and movies requires is a VFX authority on-set for continuous collaboration, typically involved at every stage of pre-production and during the actual shooting of the production. Someone able to carefully plan, choreograph and strategize scenes with an eye to the intended outcome, assuring that the overall vision will be attainable in post-production by the VFX crew.

"We specialize in quality work fast and volume, that's why we're so good at television work with a tighter turnaround time," says Green, referring to their recent VFXs on the hit series *Lost Girl* for Showcase, and NBC/Syfy Network's *Warehouse 13*, now in its 5th season. "We do over 200 VFX shots every 10 days. That's a lot," shares Cranford with a pleased grin. It's the sort of stuff that can elicit either a "wow" or a "meh" from a fanatical viewer, and the latter response means you've missed that sky-scraping mark of expectation by a mile, so aiming low really can't be the bar.


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—Darren Cranford, Keyframe

On the animation side, a co-production with Sesame Workshop for the award winning series *Pinky Dinky Doo* has primed Keyframe's devotion to children's programming and led to developing their own



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"The idea, the story, the content, these are most important, but technology should never impede on creativity."

—Tobias Wiegand, Morro Images

intellectual property, *Peggy's Little Harbour*, an HD computer-generated preschool show, with hopes of also turning it into a regular series as they shop it to broadcasters.

Cranford and Green both hail from Newfoundland and met there while studying fine art in university. As Cranford relocated to Niagara after graduation to live and work locally, Green was studying for his Masters in Fine Art at Guelph when Cranford lured him to this area with making some money in the gaming industry here. After a time, they decided to take the leap and start up their own artistic-minded business in a field they knew would be rapidly emerging in coming years, armed with passion, drive and determination to thrive in doing what they love.

Now with Keyframe's 30-person den of digital artists in Niagara-on-the-Lake, a purposeful decision by Green and Cranford to work where they want to live, they are running a Toronto office—open for about a year with seven employees—to take advantage of that city's filmmaking prominence, and they have one representative in L.A. to maintain a nimble presence in the Hollywood sphere, making it much easier to source new projects as they arise. Their enterprising savvy within this region has also been noted, as they've been recognized with two Niagara Entrepreneur of the Year Awards so far, a 2011 Niagara Original Award and a 1999 Youth Award.

Similar to Keyframe, Morro Images' St. Catharines location is solidly Niagara, but its stretch is international, with a sister company in Germany to cover the two continents. Tobias Wiegand, co-founder of their original European company and now president of the Canadian office, has five employees here and currently 18 in Germany. One of their current, in-house productions is *StrAngel - The Angel of the Odd*, a 20-minute, hand-animated, stereoscopic 3D-animation based on a bizarre narrative from past literary master, Edgar Allan Poe.

Describing the company's daily efforts, Wiegand says, "We utilize 3D scanners, 3D printers and our Motion Capture Studio (a system to record motions to be able to apply them to 3D models), and we try to constantly push technological and content boundaries and take on many different types of projects," but the paramount ambition he cites for Morro is even more enduring. "Most importantly, we put content—the 'soul of everything'—above all else," he clarifies. "Any production, be it movie, TV show or computer game, is the content or 'story.' Anything that takes the viewer away from it destroys the experience. I don't think there could be a higher praise for a VFX artist than the audience did not notice his or her VFX shot."

With technology getting better and better to serve the greatest storytellers, Wiegand is energized by keeping things fresh and accelerating

in a business already relentlessly in flux and progressing. "From the get-go of a project you have to be free of any 'left-side-of-the-brain' thinking. The idea, the story, the content, these are most important, but technology should never impede on creativity; you must never become afraid of it. Finally, you find a way to bring your initial idea to life and give it its own soul," he says.

This is a repeated theme for these two companies from Niagara. Telling a compelling story is the main enterprise here, with VFX being a tool to facilitate and produce worlds that can support this in a believable way. But as the visual medium has grown to be overtly significant in the communication of a message, relating those stories is causing its own unique set of demands.

In the endless pursuit of wonderment, it takes a risk to make something truly special, and being an architect in uncharted territory is a costly practice when one is testing infinite possibilities and potentially forming surroundings that haven't existed before. The reality is undeniable, totally manufactured worlds take time and money.

Notably, Rhythm & Hues, the VFX studio responsible for creating the astonishing, credible digital tiger in the movie *Life of Pi* that took well over one year to perfect, recently succumbed to money issues and filed for bankruptcy. The difficult irony is a sad and startling disconnect between process and end results. On the heels of their financial woes, they won an Oscar this year for their film's pioneering achievement.

While it may be a tough lesson to be smart and not over-extend your capabilities, there are so many variables at play in this domain that the reprimand doesn't seem warranted—timing of production schedules and delays, budget constraints, reworking effects around other considerations that arise spontaneously—any number of "perfect storm" unknowns can capsize an entire ship. However, it does seem necessary in the wake of Rhythm & Hues' demise to raise some consensus on the real value of doing this type of work.

"The excellence of the work we do should always be our focus," comments Wiegand about this concern for the industry. "It's important that nobody gets left behind. Not the artists who do the everyday hard work, not the investors who put so much into your company, not the client who is purchasing your products. And last but not least, me, who continually has to somehow figure out how to sail this ship. If it's a team effort and everybody on the ship works together, we will master quite a few more storms to come."

Expanding our perceptions and imagination one visual effect at a time, the chance to tell tales not yet told and to fashion exciting, new worlds along the journey is an idyllic challenge and opportunity, calling to mind the inspiring mantra, "See things not as they are, but as they can be."

"Dream on, be fearless and constantly push your boundaries," encourages Wiegand when he relates the business and creative lessons he's learned over the years, because when unbridled visionaries turn lofty ideas into visual delights, thrills are invoked, enchantment is realized and realities are forever altered. NM

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