

Company Profile 001 – Mainframe Entertainment Inc.

Our first featured company is [Mainframe Entertainment Inc.](#) a world leader in computer generated animation and a big Canadian success story.

The story

By Jessamyn Horsman, Grade 10

Mainframe Entertainment Inc. started in 1991 by a group of 15 people, mostly animators. Their aim - producing a quality television show comprised solely of CGI animation. Back then, computer animation was still crawling along, with only a fraction of the animation programs now used. The images were “shiny” and fake looking, and details, movements and facial expressions had to be painstakingly added to the frames without the help of convenient animation technology.

The ground-breaking animators from Mainframe started designing their own programs to lighten the load. One of the most important programs converts a typed script into phonetics, then applies the appropriate facial position for the sounds. Since all the animator had to do was enter the script into the program, the time it took to program the scenes was cut down significantly, allowing more time for editing and adding details to the scene.

What Mainframe does

The technology

Normally CGI animation uses people wearing motion sensors as a map to program a character’s movements. The Mainframe animation team chose to painstakingly program in every facial expression and body movement possible for the character before starting a set of episodes. This meant renewing them every time new animation technology was adopted. The effort paid off.

The result was greater versatility in animation, allowing for scenes to be programmed, and facial expressions changed with ease. Now Mainframe technology allows for amazing details, such as cloth texture, hair, or even individual eyelashes to be portrayed more realistically. Shadows are more lifelike. Fog can be instantly added to a scene. Characters have a softer, more “alive” feel to them, and light ripples across “liquids” with amazing resemblance to the real thing.

Despite the leagues of competitors waiting on the sidelines, Mainframe continues to gain fame and reputation as a quality animation company and program designer, and there are still even more animation programs being developed.

The shows and films

With its distribution of four television series, Mainframe is the world’s most prolific CGI animation company.

ReBoot, the show that launched Mainframe in 1993, was based on a group of characters that live inside a computer, in a city called, strangely enough, Mainframe. For the first two seasons, the plot revolved around “computer conflicts” such as computer viruses, games, and errors in the system.

The shows from the first two seasons have aired in 65 countries. The third season was considered “darker” and less of a children’s show, expressing more conflicts than battling a virus or playing a game. Nevertheless, most patron countries, aside from the US, appreciated the quality of the script and animation and welcomed the new, more complex plot.

The fourth season is on hold simply because Mainframe is too busy with other projects including:

- Continuing seasons for three shows “Beast Machines” based on transformers, “Weird-Ohs” based on 60s toy cars that came with “monster” drivers, and “Shadow Raiders about a group of planets at war,
- A second Reboot ride film,

- A movie called “The Sign of the Seahorse” based on a children’s novel,
- Three IMAX films: “Gulliver’s Travels”, featuring an eight storey tall Gulliver, “Pandora’s Box”, and “the Pied Piper”,
- A film called “the Scary Godmother” based on a storybook as well “Casper” (in conjunction with Harvey Entertainment inc.), and
- Two new television series called “Closing Time” and “Starship” (based on Gene Roddenberry’s) book are starting to come to life.

The future

Mainframe hopes to produce mainly feature films in the future, and has completed a “strategic alliance” with IMAX, and a toy manufacturing company called Trendmasters Inc.

What it’s like to work there

Employees are exceptionally happy working for Mainframe, they are given quite a bit of creative liberty and wonderful technology to work with as Senior Software Developer Dave Fracchia will attest. There are also the rotated schedules. Animators like Anne L. Davis are put to work in groups of eight on one episode, which takes eight to eleven weeks to complete.

Interview with Dave Fracchia / Interview with Anne L. Davis

Anne talks of the way characters can be created seamlessly, with more than one animator working on the same character. For the next rotation teams are redistributed and set to work in new groups on a different episode, possibly on a different show. This lets the animators get an all-around “feel” of the material that the company produces as well as preventing boredom with one character, setting, or specific animation style. This program seems to be working wonderfully.

Brag book

Mainframe Entertainment Inc. is one of the best examples of innovation, talent, organization and good business management, creating a successful business without super-commercialization, huge budget, or a large faceless staff. This company has already achieved international recognition as a top-rate, trailblazing CGI animation studio even before releasing the monstrous number of productions they have in the works.

Mainframe has won many awards including:

- Worldfest Houston Awards, 1998- gold award for animation,
- Worldfest Houston Awards, 1999- gold award for animation + web site design, and
- Gemini Award, 1995, 96, 97- best animated program or series, and many others.

How you can get to work there

Animator Anne Davis says “it’s all about self-motivation.” Her advice is to talk to people, read magazines and papers on the subject and “decide what kind of animation you want to do –games, special effects or character animation”. And think it through because it’s an expensive education to get you there.

Dave Fracchia, who’s working on some of the 3D IMAX animation, suggests you need a bachelor’s degree in the area. You also need to be able to work in teams as well as on your own and put in long hours- and tolerate coffee. He too suggests reading all you can on the subject to understand the literature and get experience where you can, volunteer if that’s an option. “The demand for animators is high, but so are the expectations”.