



ARTWORK COURTESY OF TIC PRODUCTIONS, INC.

A TELLING STORY

By Rafaela Ellis

LOCAL TALENT FROM DISNEY'S ANIMATION LEGACY CREATE TALES OF THEIR OWN

»» Three new animation studios launched in Central Florida bring together the professional talents and entrepreneurial dreams of several teams of highly skilled animation industry colleagues. Spurred by a passion for the art form and a faith in the Central Florida business environment, these world-class feature animators opted to combine their experience with hopes of creating their own studios — and a new paradigm for Orlando's production business.

What these three companies have in common are their founders, all of whom honed their craft within Disney's renowned Florida Feature Animation Studio. They also share a passion for, and commitment to, the community they call home.

"The family environment of Florida was really important to us," explains John Webber, co-founder of **Project Firefly Animation Studios**,

a full-service studio providing 2-D and 3-D animation and artwork for theatrical and video releases, television series, commercials, children's books and educational films. "We really grew up together as artists and knew each other's families, and we wanted to stay here."

As a result, when Disney announced plans to consolidate animation operations back to California in late 2002, Webber and several friends employed by the studio decided to stay in Central Florida, putting their considerable experience gained from the world leader in animation to work in a new venture that played on their strengths.

The aptly named company has quickly taken flight. Project Firefly has grown from the original five partners to more than 25 staff members, with expectations for the company to more than double in 2005.

"We are dedicated to the growth of the animation industry in Florida," says Webber. "By providing creative, quality work for our clients, we plan to be a major

part of that growth and create stability for our employees and their families."

The founders of Project Firefly are not alone. A second group of former Disney employees founded the animation company **TIC Productions, Inc.**, while others went to work for



Two scenes of Edgar and Sylvia, the main characters of Cecropia's new interactive film (unnamed at the time of this printing).



Cecropia, Inc., a Boston-based firm that recently opened an office in Orlando.

The new companies have more in mind than simply bolstering Central Florida's animation heritage. They also want to save traditional, two-dimensional animation, those hand-drawn cartoons that defined the genre in the pre-computer days. Despite predictions

that computers would replace cartoon artists, local animators claim the form is alive and well — and they intend to keep it that way by combining time-tested techniques with state-of-the-art computer technology and an employee-centered management style.

TALENT MEETS TECH

Project Firefly embraces this philosophy wholeheartedly — while using the latest tools in computer animation, the team believes its decade-plus of traditional hand drawn experience gives their 3-D creations that "special spark of life".

"We feel very fortunate that we started off in traditional animation," says Dominic Carola, president of Project Firefly. "It gives us the fundamental skills we need to be pulled off into computer animation."

Using Opus Animation technology for its traditional work and Maya 6 software

on the digital side, Project Firefly is focusing on creating family-friendly projects.

"It's safe programming," says Webber. "We all have young families, and we've turned down content that we didn't think the company should be involved with. We want to stay on target."

That shouldn't be hard for a group

of animators (Carola and principles Paolo Alavarado, Gregg Azzopardi, and John Webber) whose collective credits include child-centered projects such as *The Lion King*, *Lilo and Stitch*, and *Pocahontas*, among others.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have all this incredible talent that wanted to say in Orlando," Carola says. "This is a great place in terms of up-and-coming talent, veteran talent and the technology we need."

"We want to continue to build the digital side of the company, and we [are getting] a tremendous response from young talent that we didn't know was here."

Carola points to the University of Central Florida and Full Sail Real World Education, both on Orlando's east side, as "pumping out this tremendous digital talent."

"We do think Florida is growing in terms of technology," Webber says.

And Central Florida companies are also growing an entrepreneurial mindset that gives them an edge in attracting and retaining a highly skilled, creative workforce.

"We allow the artists to multi-task, so you may have people who are doing traditional animation on Monday and computer animation on Friday,"

Webber says. "We [also] try to get even the management folks involved in production," so no one feels hemmed in or bored by a rigid job description.

Apparently, that laid-back management style is working.

"We've only been open for eight months and we've worked on several feature-length projects for large studios," Carola says, although confidentiality agreements prevent him from naming names.

Says Webber, "On a recent trip to Los Angeles, I was pleased to see how many people know about us and what we're doing. Word has really gotten out."

MORE FOR LESS

While Project Firefly has gained a lot of press attention for its efforts, another young company of talented animators is quietly making its own inroads in the industry. **TIC Productions, Inc.** was founded in 2002 by a group of young graduates from University of Central Florida and the University of Florida who had previously worked together at Disney.

"We're fairly young, and that's part of our vibe," says Dan Picard, a 29-year-old



Top: Cecropia, Orlando Animation Director Broose Johnson (right) and artist Dan Gracey (left). Bottom: Project Firefly Animation Studios Animator Travis Blaise.

partner at TIC. "We're a bunch of young dudes. We're very hungry, [and] we like working hard, but we also like hanging out together. It's a pretty cool crew."

Picard's relaxed persona aside, TIC is deadly serious about carving out its niche in the animation biz. He and partners Neil Leiba and Dave Artura drafted Ashish Kapadia, a former healthcare management executive, to serve as the firm's CFO and have managed to nab

some big-name clients in just two years of operation. The company has completed projects for Universal Studios, VH1, AT&T, the Orlando Magic and yes, the Walt Disney Company. Now, the group is embarking on a project for the Discovery Channel.

Picard says the key to satisfying such high-profile clients is cutting costs and tightening production time.

"The innovative process we use to make our animation streamlines it a bit, so it makes it less expensive for them," he explains. "Instead of them paying money for a bunch of [in-house]

"We are dedicated to the growth of the animation industry in Florida. By providing creative, quality work for our clients, we plan to be a major part of that growth and create stability for our employees and their families."

**— John Webber,
Project Firefly Animation Studios**

animators, we do it for them for less."

Although Picard and his partners have backgrounds in traditional animation, he definitely sees computer animation as the wave of the future.

"Those were really time-consuming processes," he says of 2-D animation. "With the advent of computers, you can draw right into the computer instead of on paper, and then you can use it on the Web or for print and it's all there."

Computers also make it easier for a client to map a project's progress, Picard says.

"We can show them stuff every day — stills, animation, composites — and that's invaluable. When someone is paying a lot of money, they truly grind you to see how you're spending it."

Like Project Firefly, TIC considers an employee-driven business model to be its biggest asset.



TIC Productions, Inc.'s animated music video project produced for Sony Music.

"A lot of times, working for someone else, the best ideas get shot down," Picard says. "We just want to make our own stuff, to stay the course and keep making as much original content as possible."

KEEPING IT REAL

When **Cecropia, Inc.**, a Boston-based computer gaming company, was seeking a way to bring its new, character-driven games to life, opening an Orlando office seemed the natural answer.

"We realized what we really needed was something called personality animation, and that is something that was founded by Walt Disney," says Ann Marie Bland, the company's president. "As we were searching for our solution, we came across a resumé from somebody from Disney, and we found out the studio was about to close."

Working with Disney's outplacement department, Bland and company found 14 full-time employees and 10 freelance contractors in Orlando to help develop their game, scheduled for release in March 2005.

Unlike other local animation companies, which create mostly broadcast materials, Cecropia is attempting to invent a new product: a storytelling video game in which players control not just the characters' actions, but their emotions as well.

"This [is] a new form of entertainment, a new delivery form of storytelling using technology," Bland says. "Players can actually participate in a film. They control the characters emotionally and how they socially interact with other characters."

Using a simple dial controller reminiscent of the early video game Pong, players of Cecropia's "story games" can become as emotionally involved with their characters as they would with a film or television personality. The key, Bland says, is to combine high tech gaming technology with traditional animation techniques.

"Three-D animation looks great, but if you look at the characters' faces and how they walk and talk, it's very plastic," she says.

Using proprietary software

designed by its in-house engineering staff, Cecropia instead has created characters whose facial expressions and body language are the very clues that lead players through the game.

"What we're producing is a romantic comedy with our star players, Edgar and Sylvia," Bland says, referring to the two main characters in the as-yet unnamed product. "It's like an animated feature film, and it's entertaining to watch not only the characters and how they move and animate, but the social psychology of how people play it."

But it's the social psychology of Cecropia's Orlando office that perhaps best reflects the newfound vibrancy of Orlando's animation business.

"Our guys and gals have amazing talents, and they can really stretch their wings far here," she says. "In any large corporation, it's hard to cross into a new department or a different function, but that's what smaller companies can provide. Everyone we've hired has really embraced that, and they've grown within themselves." ✕