

COMPANY

HALON Entertainment
www.halon.com

LOCATION

Santa Monica, CA, USA

SOFTWARE

Autodesk® Maya® software

Life of HALON.

From blockbuster films to virtual cameras, Autodesk software is always part of the story at HALON Entertainment.

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—Brad Alexander

Partner and Senior Previsualization/
VFX/CG Supervisor
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The Beginning

When Brad Alexander was looking to turn his love of drawing and movies into a living, he hadn't yet discovered 3D software. Just out of the U.S. Air Force and still uncertain what to do with his life, Alexander headed to film school with a deep-seated desire to "work on *Star Wars* movies." As luck would have it, Alexander was soon introduced to some of the earliest versions of (what would become) Autodesk 3ds Max and Autodesk Maya software: "My mind was blown," he says. "I was just floored by what the software could do."

Alexander's discovery lead him first to learn as much as he could about 3D animation and software, and then to apply to an anonymous job posting for a 3D animator. Little did he know that the prospective employer was Lucasfilm, or that his first project upon being hired would be *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002). In late 2003, Alexander partnered with his long-time colleague and friend Daniel Gregoire to found HALON Entertainment, a full-service previsualization company committed to "a digital process where technological complexity yields to the creative process."

To say things have been going well for HALON is a rank understatement. In addition to working on Episode III of the iconic franchise, HALON has gone on to work on a long series of commercially successful, critically acclaimed, and award-winning feature films, including *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), *Spiderman 3* (2007), *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), and *Avatar* (2009). In 2012 alone, the company brought its previs magic – and its Autodesk Maya skills and systems – to *The Hunger Games*, *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, and the Academy Award-nominated *Prometheus*, *Snow White & The Huntsman*, and *Life of Pi*, to name only a few.

The Challenge

"In our business, no two projects are ever the same," says Alexander, who now serves as Partner and Senior Previsualization/VFX/CG Supervisor at HALON. "Every director and every film holds a different creative vision, and it is our job to help get those ideas out of their heads and on to the screen as smoothly and accurately as possible. Working with Ang on his vision for such a fantastical story was an absolutely invigorating challenge."

Based on Yann Martel's 2001 fantasy adventure novel, *Life of Pi* tells the often surreal story of Piscine "Pi" Patel, a young Indian boy who, through a series of unfortunate events, finds himself adrift in a lifeboat with a spotted hyena, an injured zebra, an orangutan, and a full-grown Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Combine that scenario, the creative mind of Ang Lee, and the previs talents at HALON, and some bizarre and stunning visual effects seem all but a certainty.

Though his larger team was based in Los Angeles, Alexander began work on *Life of Pi* by moving to New York City, where he worked out of Lee's loft for about six months. The previs expert then joined the celebrated director on far-flung journeys to scout locations in India and Taiwan, all before settling down in the latter country for another half a year.

"*Life of Pi* was definitely a global project," says Alexander matter-of-factly. "I was traveling all over the place with Ang, but I always had my satellite team working back in L.A. Even when we were on planes, Ang and I would be doing previs on some part of the movie, and I'd take his notes into remote finishing sessions with my team in L.A. When we were based in Taiwan, we had a six-member team there, and another six-member team in L.A. Taiwan is twelve hours ahead of L.A., so I could give my revisions to the team at bedtime and have them pretty much covered by the time I woke up. It was a very efficient system for such an ambitious and complex project."

The Solution

Running such an efficient operation, around-the-world and around-the-clock, is certainly not as easy as HALON made it look. In addition to the undeniable talents and tenacity of his team, Alexander is quick to give points to Autodesk Maya, HALON's preferred

3D system for all of the company's history, for both helping to realize Lee's vision and keeping HALON's disparate teams in sync.

"Autodesk Maya is our baseline standard system at HALON," he says. "Every project we work on is different, but Maya is always a good fit. Any visual effects companies we tend to work with use Maya pretty extensively, so transfers are seamless. I've used all of the other systems out there, and Maya has the most natural and comfortable ergonomics I've experienced. On *Life of Pi*, we were able to easily package our Maya files and shoot them back and forth over secure VPN. We set up our hierarchy to be exactly the same on either end. When we sent small reference files back and forth, they would automatically link up with the scene files on either end. That helped a lot."

The HALON team also used Maya to devise a fast and efficient way to handle the evolving vision of the film as production progressed. Based on a succession of "story beats" – one or two line sentences describing a scene – determined through his conversations with the director, Alexander was able to determine which models, rigged characters, and environments would be needed for a particular scene file.

"Before sitting down with Ang, I'd figure out how to pose the characters and set camera angles for how we wanted the idea of each story beat to look," he explains. "Once we got through that, I could distribute shots for all the beats to my artists for animating. When I'd get the animated shots back, I'd edit them down and sit down with Ang to figure out what worked and what didn't. That's pretty much how we massaged all of our sequences out."

Asked if there was a single feature that was particularly valuable to his team, Alexander barely hesitates:

"Throughout the process, our biggest advantage was being able to do everything in Maya's Hardware Renderer. We rely heavily on viewport playblasts. Being able to twirl around and pose in real time, and to receive instantaneous feedback is invaluable on a job like *Life of Pi*. It really enabled both our team and Ang himself to fully visualize what he wanted in each beat and scene, and to see what worked and what didn't."

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For more information about Autodesk Maya software, visit www.autodesk.com/maya.

For more information about Autodesk software for Media and Entertainment, visit www.autodesk.com/me.

