

CIS Vancouver
(www.cis-vancouver.com)
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Autodesk® Maya® software
Autodesk® Inferno® software

With the help of Autodesk products, we intend to retain the feeling of a comfortable boutique, with the option of bulking up when we need to.

—Dennis Hoffman
Senior VP and General Manager
CIS Vancouver

Big Projects, Bigger Plans.

CIS Vancouver Keeps Getting Bigger and Better Projects. Time for Autodesk.



Changeling © 2008 Universal Pictures. All Rights Reserved. Image courtesy of CIS Vancouver.

Summary

CIS Vancouver just keeps getting bigger and better projects. Early in 2008, industry giant Deluxe acquired Rainmaker Visual Effects and rebranded it CIS Vancouver, and over the last year it has provided visual effects and animation work on a number of big budget features including *Tropic Thunder*, *Changeling* and *Twilight*, in addition to a multitude of television and commercial projects. Things are busy, but the increased demand for the company's services is not exactly surprising to the people who work there.

Things have been moving at a steadily increasing pace for the last six years, according to Jason Dowdeswell, Head of Digital Studio at CIS Vancouver. These days, the company is typically handling seven or eight projects simultaneously, with the help of much-used software including Autodesk® Maya® and Autodesk® Inferno®. Dowdeswell and CIS Senior Vice President and General Manager Dennis Hoffman got on the phone with Autodesk to talk about the team's more challenging projects, its transition to the Linux® operating system, and its plans to significantly restructure its production pipeline and digital asset management system.

The Challenge: Bigger and Better Projects

"A lot has changed since I joined the company six years ago," says Jason Dowdeswell, Head of Digital Studio at CIS Vancouver. "Shortly after I started, we were awarded a job with about 400 effects shots, which was a then-record for us. Since then, the jobs have been getting consistently larger in scope and higher in profile. Our average shot count has

climbed from around 200 shots per year to between 2000 and 3000 shots per year. That is phenomenal."

In addition to recent high-profile projects like the Clint Eastwood-directed *Changeling*, (starring Oscar® nominated, Angelina Jolie); *Tropic Thunder* (starring Ben Stiller, Jack Black, and Oscar® nominated Robert Downey Jr.); and the screen adaptation of *Twilight*; (the first in a series of teen vampire tales by #1 New York Times Best-Selling novelist Stephenie Meyer), CIS creates compelling visions for commercials; television series such as "The Guard," "The L Word," and "Stargate|Atlantis"; and work on smaller features such as *The Butterfly Effect 3*.

Recently though, it is the feature work that has taken center stage. For *Changeling*, the CIS team, lead by Visual Effects Supervisor Geoffrey Hancock, was tasked with the evocative recreation of 1928 era Los Angeles:

"Changeling required a lot more than just set extension," Dowdeswell explains. "It was vital that we not just build a skyline, but also a palpable sense of the time and the place. Using Maya for the modeling and animation, together with Inferno for matte painting and a little bit of compositing, we were able to create an effect that is essentially invisible to the viewer. We created digital characters, cars, trolleys, even a look at what was the busiest intersection in North America in the late 1920's. It is an odd, but gratifying, feeling to work so hard on effects that will hopefully not be noticed by audiences."

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Autodesk Maya is a mainstay tool for us. The flexibility of the software means we can get in under the hood and customize it. Maya is a perfect fit for our new pipeline.

As anyone who has ever seen a Dirty Harry movie will tell you, it isn't easy to say no to Clint Eastwood. Fortunately, when the Hollywood legend decided to submit an early version of the film to the Cannes Film Festival, significantly accelerating the production schedule and process for CIS, the 20-member team didn't have to say no.

"Cannes shortened our schedule by about six weeks," says CIS Visual Effects Supervisor Geoffrey Hancock. "To hit the deadline, we maintained the broad strokes of several scenes without applying final polished touches until after the Cannes delivery, when we went back to add the finishing touches. With great clients like Clint and Michael Owens, and with Maya and Inferno, we were able to increase efficiency and bypass what could have been much longer process."

The visual effects community has taken note and Changeling has recently been nominated for two Visual Effects Society (VES) awards -- Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects in a Motion Picture and Outstanding Matte Paintings in a Feature Motion Picture.

To create some 120 more evident effects shots for the phenomenal Twilight, CIS used Autodesk Maya to create everything from baseball bats and balls to believably super-speed running vampires to a complex, yet believable ballet studio full of mirrors.

"Autodesk Maya with the integrated mental ray renderer was a huge help on those scenes," says Hancock. "For the scene in the ballet studio, in particular, we used Maya for some elaborate, technical previsualizations. All of the walls in the scene are covered with mirrors. Naturally, the film crew members were reflected in the mirrors, as were the rigs that helped the actors perform all their acrobatics in the scene. We used the previs to devise a way to hide the crew and remove the rigs. We were able to show our client what could and would work in the scene. It was great, because we had no doubt that our tools would work."

The Solutions

While all the extra activity has been exciting, it has also prompted CIS Vancouver to ask some important questions about the way they work.

"Historically, CIS has been more of a boutique than a big effects studio," says Dennis Hoffman, Senior VP and General Manager at CIS Vancouver. "When we got into bigger and bigger projects, however, that needed extensive 2D and 3D, we began to see that a reevaluation was in order.

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Changeling © 2008 Universal Pictures. All Rights Reserved. Image courtesy of CIS Vancouver.

Pretty quickly, we decided that we needed to extensively revamp our production pipeline and digital asset management system in order to handle the increased demand. We're confident that our new pipeline will not only increase our internal efficiency, but also make it easier to pass assets between Vancouver and our CIS colleagues in Los Angeles. We're still very much in the thick of the transition, but we have a pipeline support group for the transition, and it is all going smoothly so far. With the help of Autodesk products, we intend to retain the feeling of a comfortable boutique, with the option of bulking up when we need to."

For Dowdeswell, the restructuring of the pipeline will satisfy three overarching objectives. As the company handles such a major transition, Dowdeswell is quick to point to Autodesk Maya software as the "mainstay of the facility," and reserves particular praise for the software's Maya Embedded Language (MEL) scripting capabilities.

"Right now, it's the greatest thing about Maya for us," he says. "The extensive coding functionality and flexibility makes it so easy to integrate whatever pipeline we might want to introduce. With MEL scripting, we can customize the Maya interface for individual artists. Artists can then easily and intuitively select important tasks to drive other systems. Customization is huge for us."

Aside from customization, however, CIS has identified the need for greater version control and asset management:

"There are now so many assets involved in our projects that there is a heightened possibility that a single artist's actions may cause confusion down the line," says Dowdeswell. "On a recent project, for instance, we discovered that several different CG buildings in a scene had been rendered with different camera lenses. The more consistent things are, the more efficient we can be. Tight version control has also become absolutely crucial to an efficient project, and is really not something the artist should be controlling or worrying about in any way. Autodesk Maya is exactly what we need."

About CIS

CIS Visual Effects Group is an award winning international visual effects entity with facilities in Hollywood and Vancouver. The company services high-end feature film, television, commercial and gaming clients in the global marketplace. CIS Hollywood, founded in 1984, is one of the industry's most respected visual effects facilities. In early 2008, the company expanded by acquiring Rainmaker Visual Effects, rebranding it CIS Vancouver. With its boutique accessibility, the company has the capacity to service its clientele wherever production is situated. CIS Visual Effects Group is a division of Deluxe Entertainment Services Group Inc., a wholly-owned subsidiary of MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings Inc. www.cishollywood.com

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