

Sparx Animation Studios

Paris, France

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

(www.sparx.com)

Autodesk® Maya® software

Our production pipeline is based on Autodesk Maya. It is our principal tool.

—Jean-Phillippe Agati

CEO

Sparx Animation Studios

Hunchback of Another Name.

Sparx Animation Studios uses Autodesk Maya to assist Exodus Film Group and Director Anthony Leondis bring *Igor* to life.



Image courtesy of Sparx Animation Studios

Summary

It's been said that behind every successful man, there's a woman rolling her eyes. Director Anthony Leondis' *Igor* begins with a similar premise; that behind every mad scientist obsessed with creating life, there is a long-suffering laboratory assistant who knows he can do it better. Before the film's titular hero could create life, however, somebody had to create his life. Exodus Film Group called on one of France's leading animation studios to get the job done.

With a combined team of 250 artists working in their offices in Paris, France, and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Sparx Animation Studios created 70 environments, 125 characters, and 250 objects for the ambitious 3D animated feature film, starring the voices of John Cusack, Molly Shannon, John Cleese, Steve Buscemi, among many others. Due to open on 2500 U.S. screens in September 2008 and on many more worldwide throughout the autumn, *Igor* was completed in just 19 months using a production pipeline based on Autodesk® Maya® software.

The Setup

"*Igor* is the first big internationally distributed animated film to be handled from start to finish in France," says Jean-Phillippe Agati, CEO of Sparx. "From the conception to final visual and audio post production, everything was created at and through Sparx and our partners. We can't help but be proud of that fact. Our production pipeline is based on Autodesk Maya. It is our principal tool."

Sparx began their adventure with *Igor* in the late autumn of 2006. Once Thierry Malherbe, Sparx Head of CG, and Fabrice Delapierre, Sparx CG Supervisor learned the film's main storyline and scope, they initiated the design of the major characters and environments, and began assembling what they knew would become a very large CG team. They also knew the sheer size of their undertaking, let alone the tight timeline, would require the most efficient workflow:

"We needed a production pipeline and workflow that were efficient and reliable," says Malherbe. "Sparx has a long history with Maya, but we had to be sure it was the best system for a project as important as *Igor*. We spent several weeks evaluating all the animation solutions on the market, and we came to the conclusion that a project this ambitious simply needs Maya."

Having settled on their choice of 3D software, the Sparx Animation team got right to work. Creating the large team was eased by Sparx's choice of software, according to Delapierre:

"We saved a lot of time because so many people are already familiar with Maya," he says. "For *Igor*, we simply created specific teams for different portions of the overall pipeline. The entire production was done using Maya from A to Z."

Autodesk®

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The Challenge: From ideas to Igor

As any director will tell you, however, bringing a team together is one thing; bringing a project to life is quite another:

“On the morning of November 6, 2006, we had no idea what the main characters would even look like,” says Agati. “Seven weeks later, we had a team of 20 people creating *Igor*’s universe. By mid-January 2007, we had 10 people modeling characters. By the end of May, we had created a 3D animatic with music and sound. Still, we weren’t sure whether the scenes we were working on would be major or minor to the film as a whole, so we had to make everything as detailed as possible. Creating an animatic in parallel with development meant Thierry and Fabrice had to be able to modify animations easily, insert new characters and environments, as well as the director’s subtle touches.”

As complex as it was to bring *Igor* to life, however, it was still more challenging bringing life to *Igor*. More than anything, *Igor* is the story of essentially human characters feeling human emotions, all of which needed to come through on their faces. Nowhere was this element more important than for the character of Eva, the imposing, vaguely neurotic, and ultimately loveable “monster” *Igor* creates:

“A turning point in the film is when Eva evolves from *Igor*’s monster into a beautiful, sensitive heroine,” says Malherbe. “All of that transformation had to come through in her facial expressions. We were striving for a subtle facial quality, much like you might see in a film from the 1950’s, one with strong expressions, realistic nuances and wrinkles, and an exceptional level of quality.”



Image courtesy of Sparx Animation Studios

The Result

In all, the Sparx animation team created some 1437 shots, including a climactic battle scene involving huge crowds, an enormous stadium, and some serious render time:

“Our challenge was to create this complex, seamless scene as quickly as possible,” says Delapierre matter-of-factly. “Maya enabled us to get exceptional quality on this huge scene, exceeding even the director’s expectations and hopes.”

From the start of the project, Malherbe and Delapierre knew they would be relying heavily on the Maya integrated mental ray® renderer, but knew it would require specific enhancements and features for use on *Igor*:

“We worked hand in hand with the Autodesk Research and Development teams to make sure we had the best integration of mental ray and the most efficient optimization of our workflow,” says Malherbe. “We have lots of ideas to improve our productivity, and we’ve been able to work closely with Autodesk to implement those ideas into future versions of the software. That’s very gratifying.”

“Maya is robust and reliable, solid and stable,” says Delapierre. “You can really push the system to the limit and rely on it all the way. We were able to make quick corrections to the animation, characters, and textures, based on the subtle suggestions of the director and artistic director. We had the stability to run the kind of tight production that would only have been possible using Maya.”



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—Fabrice Delapierre
CG Supervisor,
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