

2D Software Selection: A View from the Field



BY JOSEPH GILLAND



From top, Mercury Filmworks and Shaflesbury Films' *Mischief City*, Nelvana's *6Teen* and Alphanim's *Robotboy* use Toon Boom's Opus and Harmony to create 2D animation.

Ever since digital ink and paint (DIP) technology did away with traditional techniques a few years ago, the 2D animation industry has gone through some major changes, to say the least. The concept of stacking an infinite number of layered images is now taken for granted by a generation of artists who have never had to restrict their vision to the constraints of five or six layers of cels. Lucky them! Today, we know no such limitations, and massive 2D crowd scenes, herds of animals or flocks of birds are a piece of cake to composite. We rubber stamp and re-use elements to our heart's content, no longer limited to a finite number of levels.

But how are these DIP software programs working for us today? Are they growing and changing to meet our needs? Are software developers working with animation artists to create the most intuitive tools possible? Are they really meeting our needs, or are we developing awkward production pipelines in order to work with unintuitive, difficult-to-use and ill-supported software?

In 1994, I went to work for Walt Disney Feature Animation in Florida, where I became something of a CAPS (Disney's proprietary 2D digital ink & paint and compositing software) expert. This was my first real experience with any digital ink and paint or compositing software besides Adobe's PhotoShop. Although Disney's CAPS was a powerful tool with enormous potential, its interface was utterly counter-intuitive. Every separate working mode had a different interface, its interactive features worked in visually opposing directions and there was no continuity to its user interface design whatsoever. CAPS was a frustrating mess, really, but we somehow adapted our production pipeline to work with it.

In 1996 Disney sent me up to the short-lived Toronto-based animation studio as a consultant, to help them set up a special effects department to create oodles of pixie-dust in the *Peter Pan* sequel they were planning to produce there (but never did). As I toured the studio they showed me the DIP software package called US

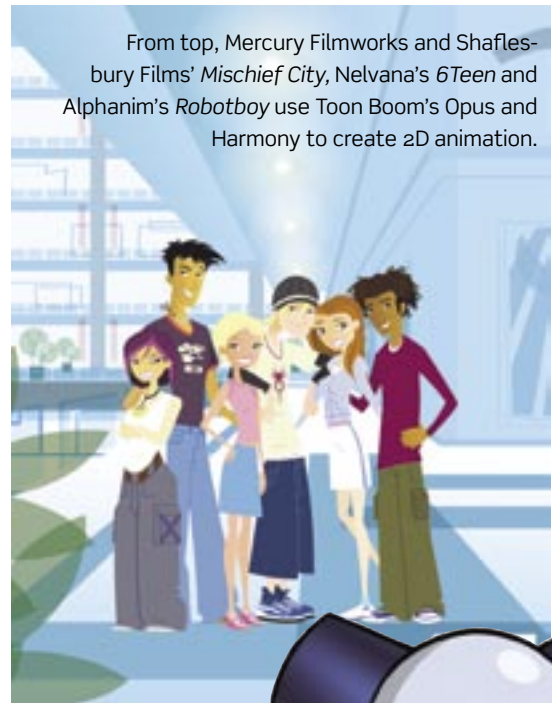
Animation that they were using. I was floored! This was what CAPS should have been. It was intuitive, relatively easy to use and had a directional flow to it that made sense, at least to this classically trained animation artist.

Today, almost ten years later, Toon Boom, the creator of USAnimation, has carved a substantial niche for itself in the 2D animation industry, and has most recently released packages called Opus and Harmony, which are far superior (though more costly) solutions to the 2D market domination of that pervasive little software package called Flash.

Flash, which was not originally intended as a 2D animation production tool, and offers no support whatsoever as such, has cornered a segment of the 2D animation industry, largely because it is extremely inexpensive. To my amazement, the industry has even taken to the bizarre habit of calling animated films created using Flash, "Flash" animation, as if the software we use should describe the animation technique.

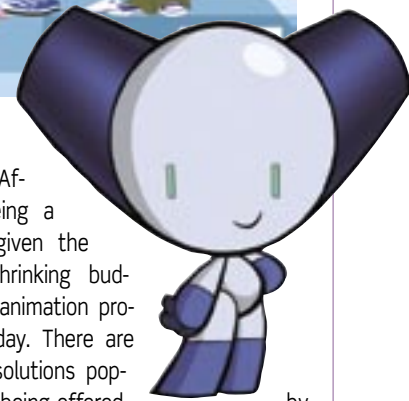
But can Flash stand up to the smooth and more 2D animation production friendly Toon Boom product? Word on the street is that animators at Nelvana, (part owners of the Toon Boom company) working with Opus are able to crank out 10% to 20% more footage than Flash animators. And Toon Boom offers continuing support and solutions whereas Flash, even in light of Macromedia's merger with Adobe, shows no sign of ever offering such support. Animation just represents too little of their market for them to give a damn!

But I am only talking about two players, in a field of 20 or 30 software manufacturers. There are challengers coming on board from all sides, and the real ongoing challenge to all the 2D digital ink and paint software developers is this: Offer us affordable, well-supported DIP software



that makes it easier to do our job. Affordable, being a key word, given the incredible shrinking budgets of 2D animation productions today. There are some new solutions popping up and being offered small upstart companies that are going to give the big players a run for their (our) money if they don't stay on the ball.

Let the games continue! ■
Joseph Gilland is head of classical and digital animation at Vancouver Film School. His credits include *Lilo & Stitch*, *Mulan* and the series *Silverwing*.



by

