

# PLAYBACK

ABOUT PRODUCTION, BROADCASTING & INTERACTIVE MEDIA IN CANADA



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Production Technology

## Mr. X steps out of the shadows

by [Mark Dillon](#)  
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Toronto 3D animation and f/x house TOPIX/Mad Dog and visual effects supervisor Dennis Berardi have launched Mr. X, a cg studio focusing on long-form projects. The new division brings together t/md, a well-established shop specializing in spots, and Berardi, who supervised, produced or managed the f/x work on such films as *The Cell*, *Fight Club* and *eXistenZ* at Toronto post house toybox.

Explaining his departure from toybox last fall, Berardi offers, "toybox is very post-heavy and more of a commodity service provider, and is very good at it. But in terms of design, pre-visualization, and fully developed cg for storytelling for films it was a little bit of a limiting situation."

Berardi met t/md executive producer Sylvain Taillon while working at post house Cinebyte, and the two became hockey-playing buddies. They often spoke of collaborating again off the ice.

"TOPIX/Mad Dog was looking to reinvest and grow its business a little more," Berardi says. "We're in the same building and do complementary work, and we're able to take advantage of some of their video infrastructure. I think it will be a very symbiotic relationship."

Mr. X is fully integrated via digital video lines, routers and network into t/md's digital Betacams, rendering horsepower and Infernos (f/x and finishing systems from Montreal-headquartered Discreet). Mr. X is completely standalone in production capacity, however, with a centralized file server and data storage array. The shop opted for a Gigabit Ethernet network, which is 10 times faster than standard Ethernet. It is also equipped with new dual processor SGI Zx10 Windows nt-based workstations and Linux-based rendering boxes for Pixar's RenderMan and Maya rendering.

Mr. X has chosen Maya, from Toronto-headquartered Alias|Wavefront, as its animation software of choice on eight workstations. According to Berardi, the system's openness is a major benefit.

"We're able to develop and script for it with mel, the Maya expression language," he says. "It's more of an artist-based program and the learning curve isn't terribly steep. It's very intuitive and powerful, and rendering is now free. Also, it's easier to find a good mid-level Maya animator locally than a good Softimage or Houdini animator."

Berardi says Mr. X plans to incorporate its digital expertise not only in the post process, but beginning in

preproduction and throughout the shoot as well.

"Whereas before [cgi] was more of a post "fix" mentality, now you have films where it's actually integrated into the story," he says. "Directors now are able to speak to [us] in more advanced language. They understand the toolset and see it as part of their palette in terms of storytelling."

Berardi adds that cg houses are increasingly contributing material beyond the "wow" visual effect, such as compositing invisible to viewers but which help tell the story. He says that bit of mystery is behind the name Mr. X.

"We wanted to be the guys people were asking about - 'Who did that?' 'How did they photograph that?' " Berardi explains. "We want to integrate [our work] into the filmmaking process but not in a very flashy or heavy-handed sense."

Berardi also confesses his love of film noir played a role in the company moniker. The Mr. X logo - a shadowed figure clad in trench coat and fedora - is based on a famous shot of Humphrey Bogart as shamus Sam Spade.

Although Mr. X has an emphasis on features, it is taking on music videos as well. It is currently working on a project with director Nobel Jones for Texas blues artist Doyle Bramhall on the rca usa label.

"We're doing a big cg opening where the camera starts in on this girl unwrapping a beautiful white vinyl record, which the camera pushes in on and then we take over in cg and go on a subatomic ride through the grooves of the record," Berardi explains.

Berardi sees videos as a fruitful way of earning stripes, building a reel and establishing relationships.

"If you look at the example of Propaganda Films [the u.s. production house that yielded the likes of David Fincher and Spike Jonze], you'll see the music video directors of today are the feature film directors of tomorrow," Berardi says.

One film director of today with whom Mr. X is collaborating is Canadian David Weaver. Weaver and producer Victoria Hirst are in post on the \$750,000 feature *Century Hotel*, starring Colm Feore, Tom McCamus, Mia Kirshner and singer Chantal Kreviazuk in an episodic tale of a hundred years of goings-on in a single hotel room.

Mr. X is providing the film's opening sequence and seven other sequences, one of which involves compositing ghost characters. It is also supplying cg snow for a closing pull-out shot, a montage segment featuring numerous flashing bulbs, and a lighting effect that helps the film jump time frames.

Mr. X is also working with cross-town f/x house gvfx on the Hallmark Entertainment mow *Prince Charming*, starring Christina Applegate and Martin Short. The shop is helping with a period sequence.

"There are a handful of shots with a castle that has to be set-extended in matte painting and cg to make it look like it's part of an entire town square," Berardi elaborates. "It's nice to have gvfx trusting us with some of these shots."

Currently in development is *Pool Shark* for director Chris Trebilcock and producers Carmelo Giardina and Amy Goldberg. The feature is a dark comedy about a janitor at a Toronto university who discovers a

mechanical shark in the school's swimming pool.

"We're helping them out in script-level stuff, breaking it down and helping them budget it, and if it gets a distribution deal it's a go," Berardi explains. "This represents our goal - to be the first people on and the last people off and fundamentally contribute to the process."

If the film does get the green light, Berardi expects Mr. X will work with Trebilcock on the design of the shark and then build it in cg. The shark's head would then be constructed as a mechanical prop a la Jaws.

Mr. X has a staff of 10, including Colin Withers, t/md's former technical director, who will oversee the studio's technical aspects and help develop custom software tools for broadcast design, 3D animation and post.

Other t/md transplants include Aaron Weintraub, who will be manning the shop's Flame (Discreet's f/x and compositing system), and f/x compositor Marco Posinelli. Other team members include digital matte artist/ animator Kristy Blackwell, character animator Brian Anderson, and animators Sean Cohen, Shane Glading and Mark Stepanek. \*

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