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## Renaissance of the Nerds



### Summary:

Vancouver's Nerd Corps uses SOFTIMAGE|XSI's Compositor, Net View, Synoptic View, Toon Ink lens shader, partitions, passes, overrides, FX Tree and lots more on 39 episodes of Dragon Booster.

### Nerd Corps Gets Busy On Dragon Booster

By Michael Abraham

Some of you reading this might just be old enough to remember when being a nerd was, at least ostensibly, a bad thing. For the rest of you, just keep playing with your Tonkas and Barbies and let the old folks talk for a minute. If you simply can't amuse yourselves, just scroll down until you see **SOFTIMAGE|XSI**.

We still know the stereotype: tape on the bridge of the coke-bottle glasses, pocket protector full of pens and the obligatory slide ruler (remember those?), pants hiked to reveal an inch or so of pasty white skin, and an uncomfortably ardent passion for **Carrie Fisher**. The image may still be there, but the stigma sure ain't. The last two decades have seen the smart guys getting the fame, the money and the girls. It has been a truly retributive renaissance for those eternally forward-thinking people who endured wedgies and noogies to reach the top of the heap.



Case in point: **Nerd Corps Entertainment** in Vancouver, B.C. clearly represent the new nerds:



"We're more like neo-nerds," says **Chuck Johnson**, Dungeon Master (or Senior Vice President of Production for the hopelessly square readers out there) at Nerd Corps. "We've got the same enthusiasm and affinity for technology, but we're more comfortable and more accepted than our earlier versions. We really represent the evolution of the nerd in a lot of ways."

The evolution of Nerd Corps would have made **Charles Darwin** -- himself a nerd by all accounts, and just look what he did! -- very proud indeed. Three years ago, Nerd Corps Supreme Commander (a.k.a. President) **Asaph "Ace"** started up his own development and production shop. Shortly thereafter, Ace was approached by distributor Alliance/Atlantis and creators of **The Story Hat** to produce a cutting edge television series called **Dragon Booster**. So enticing was the project that Fipke convinced Johnson to start up CG production at Nerd Corps.

Two years of natural selection later, Nerd Corps is now 70 nerds strong and well into production on Dragon Booster which is airing weekly on **ABC Kids** in the US and **CBC** in Canada. From storyboards straight through to final delivery, Nerd Corps provides all animation production services for the series. For all that activity, however, Johnson insists that the last two years have moved along surprisingly smoothly, thanks in part to SOFTIMAGE|XSI:

"It started with just Ace and I and handful of very talented nerds," he says nostalgically. "We worked out of a small office for the first eight months or so, during which time our goal was to convince Alliance Atlantis that we could give them the best show for their money. One of our primary objectives was to figure out the most efficient 3D animation pipeline that would still allow the creative process to flow freely. Our initial pipeline test came in January 2003 when we used SOFTIMAGE|XSI to create a two-minute trailer for Dragon Booster. In December 2003, we got the green light for 39 episodes and by March 2004, we had seventy employees. When we were starting out, we had, what many considered to be, a pretty radical pipeline plan, but with the help and expertise of our top notch crew we managed to realize our vision and now we've got a highly efficient pipeline, a talented crew and a visually groundbreaking series in production. The **Softimage Support** gang has really been integral to this whole process. They've more than lived up to our expectations of a software partner. They really invested time with us, and it had a significant impact on our success."

Johnson also points to SOFTIMAGE|XSI's fully integrated **Compositor** as a key benefit to Nerd Corps work on Dragon Booster:



"Dragon Booster is really graphically styled, and we try to make everything as efficient as possible on a job this big," Johnson explains. "Traditionally, television animation required so much in-scene 3D work that artists had tons of heavy work and rendering to do. SOFTIMAGE|XSI's Compositor has enabled our animators to integrate more post-type effects and compositing into their animations. It has also taken things like camera shake and other time-consuming tasks and made them easy and fast. The Compositor saves us all kinds of time while also getting us the spectacular looks we need for this show."

Special effects and compositing itself falls into the realm **Sandro Di Segni**, Nerd Corps' Lord of Illusions (a.k.a. VFX Supervisor). In addition to heaping more praise on Softimage support, Lord Di Segni singles out the **FX Tree**, Compositor, **Particles** and more for special praise on Dragon Booster:

"The FX Tree was very useful," says Di Segni. "We have also been working very closely with Softimage to further enhance the Compositor and we believe it's only going to get stronger. SOFTIMAGE|XSI Particles and ease of modeling broken pieces of geometry and textures has been a great help to us. Partitions, passes and overrides are really strongly built in XSI, and that made all the difference when we were trying to get all these layers rendered for effects. **Net View** and the **Synoptic Views** have allowed us to organize our production in a way never before seen. We have also used Net View to organize our rigs and to make extensive documentation about them. Simply put, SOFTIMAGE|XSI provides features that, once you've used them, you can no longer live without them."

For **Michael Monks**, Nerd Corps' Lord of Digital Massing (a.k.a. Modeling Supervisor), SOFTIMAGE|XSI holds still more benefits for Dragon Booster:

"I considered our biggest challenge on the show would be to achieve a truly unique look," says Monks thoughtfully. "Getting the look meant producing a huge volume of models in a relatively short amount of time. I

found the **Toon Ink Lens Shader** really powerful, with sufficient control to draw good outlines around and inside the characters that have held up to the scrutiny of all of our episodes to date. One of the most useful aspects of SOFTIMAGE|XSI involved **Scripting**. With the help of our software team, we've been able to create a lot of productivity-based programs through Net View that handle many time-consuming tasks that would have otherwise bogged down production. That gives us more time to focus on the artistic rather than the technical."



Supervising Animator Rex Ahn is quick to agree with Monks regarding SOFTIMAGE|XSI Scripting before describing a few favorite features of his own:

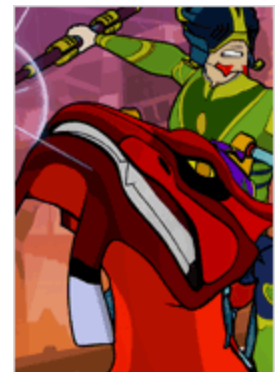
"I believe the flexibility of SOFTIMAGE|XSI has helped us immeasurably," says Ahn. "Through its scripting capabilities, XSI is so customizable that we can really make the software cater to our needs. Instead of fighting against the software, which I was very accustomed to, the system actually helped us battle our deadlines. It helped all of us to fully realize our unique visions. We know that if we run into a problem, there is always a solution."

Ahn pauses for thought before continuing:

"I really like SOFTIMAGE|XSI's rendering philosophy with **Passes** and **Partitions**," he says matter-of-factly. "Instead of breaking up layers into separate scene files and spending so much time loading, deleting and saving, layering shots can be done in one single scene. If there's an error, it can be repaired and set-up to be fixed on every layer in one pass instead of having to fix multiple scene files. The concept is wonderful and the execution is solid. Having a built-in compositor that is as powerful as XSI's FX Tree is a great boon to our production. Instead of having comps that are just 'overs', we can spice up shots and make each one look that much nicer. Simple features like **Child Comp** and **Constraint Comp** make rigging things very easy and quick. **Pose Constraint** is my favorite, actually: I use it all the time."

And speaking of time, the Nerd Corps will be spending much of their time on Dragon Booster over the next couple of years. Much, but definitely not all, according to Johnson and Fipke, who have tailored their pipeline and company philosophy to ensure their cadre of nerds live balanced lives.

"One of the biggest challenges that Ace and I anticipated at the beginning of this project was how to ensure we could keep the work looking great without burning out our crew," he says philosophically. "Sometimes, episodic television can seem like it never stops and the amount of content that needs to be produced is just astronomical. We knew from the beginning that we were instituting a radically different pipeline and approach to production, so we were a little anxious about it working the way we hoped. Essentially, we've spread responsibility for the creation and execution of this project across a wider group of people than usual. We've tried to take down the walls between departments and utilize different people throughout the various stages of production. What's more, we were absolutely adamant about one thing: we wanted our artists to have a good balance in their lives. We did a great deal of planning on the front end to make sure that our employees are able to perform their jobs in a standard workweek. We want our artists to work hard during the day to produce work they're proud of and then go home and live their lives."



Suffice it to say that these nerds made it their way, and now they've got it made! ■

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