

December  
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# ANIMATION<sup>TM</sup> MAGAZINE

The Adventures  
of Tintin:  
How Spielberg  
and Weta  
Re-animated  
the World  
of Hergé

The Return of  
Happy Feet's  
Singing and  
Dancing Penguins

+

The Muppets,  
The Chipmunks,  
Arrugas and Alois Nebel





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**Click With Animag Online Every Day!**

Click on [www.animationmagazine.net](http://www.animationmagazine.net) every day for your chance to win toon prizes! This month, we are giving away DreamWorks' *Kung Fu Panda 2* on DVD! [Courtesy Paramount Home Ent., available December 13]



**Cover:** Paramount releases Steven Spielberg's fully CG-animated epic *The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn* on December 21. To celebrate, this issue comes in three collectible Tintin covers featuring Tintin, Captain Haddock and, of course, Snowy the dog!



To order additional covers, visit [animationmagazine.net](http://animationmagazine.net) or e-mail [cro@animationmagazine.net](mailto:cro@animationmagazine.net).



#### Top Secrets of the Trade:

Modeling backgrounds in 3D allows the Archer team to create a range of realistic sets—from ramshackle interiors to the island Pirate Fortress seen in Season 3's three-part premiere episode, "Heart of Archness."

## Building a Multi-Dimensional Spy's World

**Mixing traditional animation with 3D-generated backgrounds allows for cinematic directing in FX's animated hit series Archer. by Jim Lammers**

**S**uper spy Sterling Archer lives in a timeless netherworld that is part 1960s-style Cold War and pop art, but with modern trappings such as cell phones, Internet and video players. Archer's world also appears to be shot like a movie, with unique camera angles for each shot to help move the story forward. This is possible due to Atlanta production house Floyd County's choice to use 3D environments for the show backgrounds. Rather than use traditional cel animation's flat panoramas for panable backgrounds, or completely switch to a purely 3D approach, Archer has taken a unique hybrid approach that blends 2D characters with 3D environments. Now beginning its third season, the show has been a breakout comedy hit for Fox's cable network FX.

The show's art style uses a realistic representation of human shapes and movements, eschewing squash and stretch and all other unphysical exaggerations, so the more literal backgrounds jibe well with the characters. Art director Jeff Fastner explains: "It was always Adam's [Reed, Archer creator/writer] intention for the show to have these characters based in a more realistic world. It

helps to define and push the reality of the series." The characters are animated using Adobe Illustrator and After Effects, starting from photographs of costumed models.

Having developed techniques for both characters and backgrounds during production of the cult hit *Frisky Dingo* (which aired from 2006 to 2008 on Adult Swim), art director Neal Holman knew that the environments for this more complex show would present a challenge. "For *Frisky* we actually scouted Atlanta locations and secured permissions for photography/broadcast on many of the backgrounds. We would then process the photography for a painted look." With *Frisky Dingo* set in the present day and scripts that occurred in ordinary settings, this approach was effective for the 11-minute episodes.

However, when Archer's pilot moved forward in 2008, Holman expected to switch to a traditional painted background approach since there were so many sets of such indeterminate date, and the show's 23 minute length meant many more sets. When this got off to a slow start, Holman used his own 3D tal-

ents to prove a point: "I had done several backgrounds in 3D for *Frisky Dingo*, so I knew that process of painting over the renders was one that could work. I built Malory's office over the weekend, shot a test render to (backgrounds director) Eric Sims and by that Monday, we had a process we were all in love with."

The 3D environments take more time to develop than a simple painting or other 2D backdrop, but once produced they allow for very low cost for any additional angles, variations and color schemes. Finished sets can be saved so it is also inexpensive for a future episode to return to any previously built set, even when new angles or paint schemes are required.

As the show moved from pilot to production, it was clear that there would be a lot of 3D work to do. Floyd County surveyed its options and ultimately awarded the 3D production contract to Kansas City-area animation house Trinity Animation. Trinity was able to meet the demands of fast-turn, low-cost and high-quality, starting with its first test set—the KGB office of Nikolai Jakov. Trinity's diverse experience of architecture, product simulations and technical presentations helped with the unique requirements of the show as well as its fluctuating labor demands.

Complex and highly detailed worlds have the potential to compete with the characters, especially when camera techniques like depth-of-field (distance blur) are not generally used. The paint process allows the hybrid techniques to blend visually. Neal Holman relates that "the thick, black outlines of our characters

keep them from being overwhelmed by the detailed backgrounds. Our painting process has evolved from the pilot in a lot of subtle ways to keep them sharp without taking attention from the characters."

Going 3D with the environments makes for new challenges but gives new freedom for creativity. Movies are usually made with a single camera, repositioned shot by shot for the best ways to draw in the viewer and tell the story. The rapid pace of producing for television means that live-action shows are often shot in a near-live approach where a director picks the best angle of three mobile cameras as the scene unfolds in real time. The much slower methods of making an animated series make it even more risky to include a large number of unique and original backgrounds, but Holman and Fastner have found it liberating.

As Holman explains, "Once an environment is built, I can move my camera anywhere I want, with any lens I want. Once rendered, a finished paint of that background can be done in three hours. For a recent episode that was in an entirely new environment, we had 143 different shot setups. We could not have done that using the traditional process on our current schedule."

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**Jim Lammers is CEO of Trinity Animation and author of the Maya Fundamentals book series. You can find out more at [3dcartoonbackgrounds.com](http://3dcartoonbackgrounds.com) and [trinityanimation.com](http://trinityanimation.com).**