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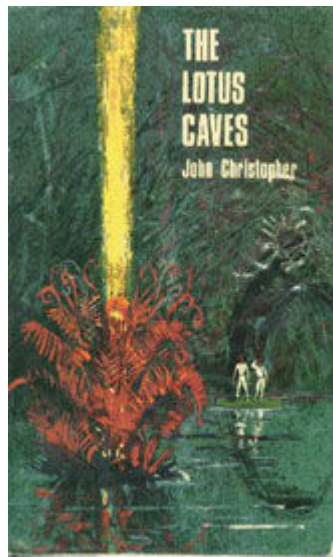
The Digital Eye: Dissecting A Previs Roundtable -- Part 1

In this month's edition of "The Digital Eye," Bill Desowitz reports on a recent Previs Roundtable discussion he moderated at The Art Directors Guild.

Last year, I was approached by Production Designer Alex McDowell (*Watchmen*, *Bee Movie*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) to moderate a roundtable discussion he was organizing about previs, to be held at the Art Directors Guild and sponsored by the ADG & ASC Joint Technology Committee. Naturally, I was thrilled to participate in the Dec. 15 event, and proceeded to work out the details with ADG President Tom Walsh and Nicki La Rosa, the tireless ADG Technology Coordinator.

The panel participants turned out to be a who's who of previs stars: Daniel Gregoire & Brad Alexander of Halon; Brian Pohl & David Dozoretz of Persistence of Vision; Colin Green of Pixel Liberation Front; Ron Frankel of Proof; Chris Edwards of The Third Floor; Steve Yamamoto of Unit Eleven; Laurent Lavigne of Versailles; Anupam Das of EA; and Rpin Suwannath, who worked on the first two *Chronicles of Narnia* movies and has now made the transition to directing the upcoming feature from Walden Media, *The Lotus Caves*.

Unfortunately, McDowell, who serves as co-chair of the ADG Technology Committee, couldn't make it due to a last minute change in the *Watchmen* shooting schedule. As a result, I tried to focus as much attention as possible on the role of previs as a design tool since this was an ADG-focused event. Besides, as many of our *VFXWorld* readers already know, McDowell strongly believes that previs is a central tool in the change from traditional linear production into a centralized, non-linear virtual production space, and that there is a need to remove the separate distinction between pre-production, production and post. And, so, the central question becomes: How can previs be used to educate producers into a new global filmmaking mindset?



Rpin Suwannath has made the transition to directing from previs with the upcoming feature, *The Lotus Caves*, an adaptation of the John Christopher fantasy novel.

However, the roundtable wound up addressing a number of fascinating topics and concerns about the role of previs and how it can be improved. So, what I thought I'd do is provide a brief snapshot of this unique exchange among colleagues and competitors. The first part consists of an overview while the second part, in keeping with GDC next month, will focus on Das' game-related comments about his work at EA.

Gregoire, whose most recent project is *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, and who refers to previs as "the wild, wild west," discussed the current state of previs: "We're all using 3D software that's at a high enough level to compete with visual effects studios. We're all trying to push the medium forward in terms of being able to interface with a visual effects house or with a production design team, the visual effects or the special effects people... the stunt guys, everybody else in the production.

"I think at the end of the day, we're all really trying to accomplish the same goal here, and that is to really help everybody out on the production so that the communication is flowing, so that nobody's wasting time, doing things that, you know, we've already proved to be impossible, impractical or too expensive. That's really what we're trying to focus on in turn, instead of trying to specialize ourselves too highly in terms of proprietary development or software or techniques. It's really about listening to the customer, and every customer we have is different."

Then Gregoire described what it's like collaborating with Steven Spielberg as his go-to guy: "On *Indy 4*, we were brought on the production first, actually. We were second week of January, before production design, before anybody else was involved with the project -- we were in a room, working with Spielberg to start building environments that he had envisioned in the script years prior. That's an unusual situation.

"He tends to get involved very, very early in the process. It's literally



Daniel Gregoire (l), Steve Yamamoto, Anupam Das, Colin Green, Brian Pohl, Chris Edwards, Ron Frankel, Laurent Lavigne and *VFXWorld* editor Bill Desowitz. All photos courtesy of Nicki La Rosa, Art Directors Guild.



Adam Somner, the first AD, ourselves and him. Adam starts to schedule out the stuff, based on what we're doing, and we're working one-on-one, building shots. That's an example of working with a director. It depends on who hires us. If we're working with a director, it's usually because they want to control their message, control their vision and to be able to visually disseminate it out to everybody else in the production.

"If we get hired by a visual effects supervisor or producer, it's usually because they want to be able to control the costs and estimate the costs and do high level bidding of the visual effects that are going to be coming down the pipe and also to have a tool to show the director or the producers..."

Gregoire also addressed the high wire act that previs people often find themselves on when trying to serve multiple masters with different agendas and without the luxury of their own department: "I really I think how we need to come together as a group and how we need to help communicate with people in the industry is to sort of slowly and respectfully build our niche, build our area in the production process so that when we come in, it's treated sort of like the art department or like the visual effects people or like the special effects people in that we have our role to play, and it's individualistic, but at the same time, it's part of the cohesive."

Meanwhile, Gregoire suggested that realtime is the holy grail of previs because it's all about speed, interactivity and rapid prototyping because "most of our job is really not to figure out what's working, but, more specifically, to figure out what's not working." However, according to Gregoire and some of his other roundtable colleagues, the problem is that most of the major realtime engine manufacturers don't have a business model to suit them -- and certainly not at \$1 million a pop for an engine.

And, despite the fact that you can't get into the game engine just yet and start manipulating vertices and changing objects and moving images around, Gregoire remains optimistic. "I think that a lot of these videogame manufacturers are interested in getting into the cinema space, and they are listening to our concerns, and they are building nonlinear editors for editing animation and cameras and all these sorts of things together."

However, stereoscopic previs is definitely a reality, given all the 3-D work in live action and animation these days. POV's Dozoretz discussed their recent stint on *Journey to the Center of the Earth 3D*: "It worked out great. Because of the cost and technology in viewing, we only did anaglyph [previs] versions, the old red and blue glasses, but, of course, the film's going to be shown in a much more sophisticated manner than that. But it was extremely useful... you need to be concerned with depth and how certain shots cut as far as their depth plane goes. Does this scene have the depth that we want and create the emotion and the storytelling effects that we want in not just the 2D work, but in the three-dimensional work, too? Is this the right place for this type of effect?"

But Pohl & Dozoretz cautioned about the changeover to a new nonlinear paradigm. "I think ultimately, what's being asked is a change in the modality of the way the studios do their business," Pohl said. "And we're asking them to think this all over again and start from scratch. And they don't want to abandon the tried and true methods. So it winds up being this big political game that we always talk about."



Daniel Gregoire most recently worked on *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. He was one of first crew members brought onto the project and worked one-on-one with Steven Spielberg. © & ™ 2008 Lucasfilms Ltd.



ADG President Tom Walsh (center) leads the panelists in a discussion.

One of the developments that Dozoretz would like to see is the use of previs to help green-light a film. "You might need to spend a million dollars to [previs] an entire film. So you could green-light the film ahead of time, but don't shoot anything that you don't know an audience is going to react to, or you think is going to end up on the cutting floor."

PLF's Green defined his previs role and addressed going deeper with more sophisticated lighting techniques. "I think the job of the previs supervisor is to set the level of look and feel that's appropriate to the needs of the film and lightweight enough and simple enough to be fast and still contain the feeling of the film that you're trying to make. And I think adding lighting beyond just the level that the film needs is slowing everything down and wasting time to some extent... Who are we making the previs for? Is it the director's design tool? Is it the studio's budget approval tool? Who's the audience? In my opinion, it has to be the director."

Frankel, a longtime collaborator with McDowell, explained that he's been working very closely with the ADG and ASC for the past year, addressing how to further integrate previs into film pre-production.

"For us, previs is really an artist-driven effort. It's about finding the right artists to get into the production who are going to work well with that

particular group, whether we're hired by the production designer, by the director, by the visual effects supervisor.

"It's understanding what the kind of the nature of the film is, what the goals of the film are and finding that right artist who's going to be able to create that collaborative environment. And that's the thing that is happening more and more on films [with] the director, production designer, visual effects supervisor, in some cases cinematographer, and that's something that, working with Curtis [Clark] and the ASC Technology Committee, we've been talking about how to bolster that particular aspect of it.

"You know, on more films, we're coming in where they're looking to have that kind of collaborative group gather around previs and use it as this tool. But, in most cases, it's usually one of those people who has worked with previs before. It's the director or the production designer or the visual effects supervisor, and a lot of times the burden is on the previs supervisor to kind of reach out to those different members and draw them in and kind of say, 'Hey, we're working on a particular issue here that not only would be of interest to you, but we really need your input on this.'

"I mean, one of the primary job responsibilities of the Proof previs supervisor is to really go out and draw in all those different members, to create that collaborative unit, if it doesn't already exist within the production... Clearly, the big development over the past few years has been into storytelling: story development, mood, pacing and the cinematic essence of the film. And I think we've been encroaching on the cinematographer's turf for the past couple of years. So what we've been doing through the ASC Technology Committee is basically exposing them and saying there is this rich fertile ground in which decisions are being made. They're being made by the director. They're being made by the visual effects supervisor. They're being made in a lot of cases by the previs supervisors and the previs artists working on the show. You guys should pull up a chair and sit down with us, and start telling us where to put the camera and how to move it and what kind of shots you want and what kind of compositions you want. But I think one of the big hurdles is that the DPs usually aren't in there early enough. I mean, that's the other bit of the puzzle that you're hearing from everyone: that we're being brought on earlier and earlier and earlier... So the DPs usually are kind of out there in the schedule, but by the time they come on, the majority of our work is done. So that's a developing mechanism in getting the DPs to come back, which Curtis has likened to the DI process..."



Third Floor's Chris Edwards advocated the move toward a non-linear pre-production design process, which would mean that smaller groups of artists work together at the same time and can explore technology early on.

Edwards of The Third Floor, in echoing Frankel, advocated the move toward a non-linear pre-production design process. "This means smaller groups of artists working together at the same time, artists and technicians getting together and using the technology to explore the possibilities before things get expensive and before the weight of production really forces the directors to make compromises. So any technology that facilitates this immediacy of this collaborative process will be adopted quite quickly, and it's being done so every single day.

"For example, motion-capture suits and handheld virtual camera systems like the ones I had a chance to use on *Surf's Up* and *Beowulf* will become quite invaluable. And so revolutionary developments like these will bring us around full circle. We're finally putting the camera controls back in the hands of the filmmaker, and using these tools, we imagine that the combined nonlinear pre-production team will become the short order chefs of the film industry."

Yamamoto of Unit Eleven addressed a common previs challenge of being brought in earlier and earlier: coming up with designs that have not been thought through. "I do find that we are stepping on art directors' jobs, cinematographers' jobs, stunt coordinators' jobs and visual effects supervisors' jobs, and it's becoming this meld where everything comes together before people get their say. So one of the hardest parts of this job is being that political ... just being sure that everybody's ideas gets involved in it and making sure that nobody's feeling like you're getting ahead of the game... And part of the fun and the challenge is to make it so that you can change what you're doing with the visions of five or six other people and melding together."

Speaking of coming on board early, Versaille's Lavigne discussed his work on Doug Liman's *Jumper*, on which he started before the movie about teleportation was green-lit by Fox. "I was brought in to present cool stuff to show to the studio, that it could be doubled up actually by cranking up the cool factor."

But Lavigne's previs actually became much more useful in determining the stylistic look of the jump as well as its emotional impact. "So, essentially, instead of working on the actual visual effects of the jump, I said, 'You know what? Let's look at the effect on the environment, and it's going to be more like *Bourne Identity* than *Star Trek*.' And so that's essentially pushing the visual communication of this concept, which is fairly difficult."

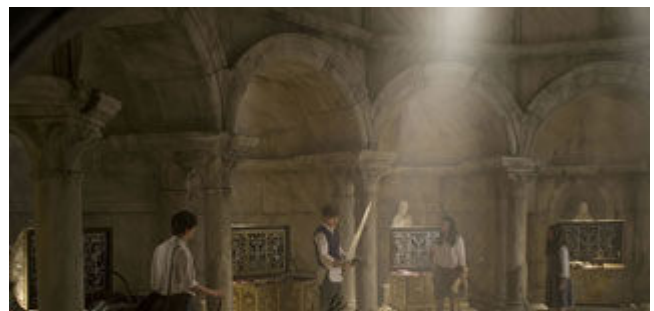
And, finally, Suwannath, who is collaborating with The Third Floor on his directorial debut, *The Lotus Caves*, an adaptation of the John Christopher novel about two boys living on the moon, discussed his approach to previs.

"The approach is to look at previs as another department in the production process, not a part of visual effects, not a part of the art department, but its own identity, because it's just overlapping too many things. Generally, previs works better if you have concept art to go up, because the previs artists might be really good storytellers, really good animators, but a lot of time they're not always great designers. And so, there's a whole process that happens in the art department that deals with design language, color palette, all that sort of thing, which will help and just makes the previs look better.

"On the *Narnia* films, we started previs before the art department was there, so it was sort of backwards because we were designing or



For Edwards, motion-capture suits and handheld virtual camera systems, like the ones he used on *Surf's Up*, put the camera controls back in the hands of the filmmaker. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Animation © 2007 Sony Pictures Animation Inc.



making up sets or locations to fit the story and action. But in the end it all worked out. But the stuff that I'm doing right now, I have concept guys first, working on a moon vehicle. And, I couldn't have possibly asked The Third Floor to previs like that without giving them at least what I have in mind for the vehicle. So I think it's really important to have all parts of the process going simultaneously, and I think it's a really good model and very efficient, because doing it this way, having worked on these bigger movies, my art department can be half the size of a big art department. And because everyone's sharing assets, we can go to construction drawings a lot quicker. And because it's easier to see things, it's easier to approve things."

Bill Desowitz is editor of VFXWorld.

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