

Growing in leaps and bounds

Ambar Nair received his BA in Economics/Finance and Computer Science from Macalester College in St. Paul, MN, USA in 1998, and has worked in several industries with leading companies such as Lehman Brothers in New York, Ajilon LLC in Minneapolis and St. Jude Medical in Minneapolis. He has primarily lived in Minneapolis for ten years, working in the consulting industry as well being involved in starting several business such as a performance automobile company, a graphic design studio, and a software company, before returning to India in 2004. Though his work experience has primarily been in consulting, he has always had an interest in animation, and worked in the field as a hobbyist up until 2005, when he founded Blowfish FX.



“I see more Indian-oriented 3D animated series coming up – some catered specifically to the domestic market, and some making it internationally says Ambar Nair.”

Ambar Nair
 Founder & CEO,
 Blowfish FX

What have been the major projects undertaken by the company

We have worked on Kung fu Beaver, an animated series (Canada-India co-production) pilot; Hell's Henchmen, an animated series pilot (USA-India co-production), three animated short films, one of which has a wacky script that won several awards in the United States and is currently in production; various visual effects shots for independent filmmakers; several space battle visual effects sequences for a science fiction film. We are on the last stages of finalizing an animated feature for an outsourced project, and are beginning production on animated television series middle of the year. Concept artwork and a draft script for an in-house feature is also in progress.

On the major challenges the Indian animation industry faces

The strengthening rupee, weakening dollar, in the case of outsourced projects is one of the challenges. Other challenges include the ability to maintain international standards for domestic animated features (i.e., to not just pass off something with sub-standard animation, just because it'll make money in the domestic market), finding good writers for domestic ani-

mation, and of course, the most important challenge – is the short supply of talented animators in India. There are too many new training schools churning out substandard candidates, and we have to retrain them for production. Many schools only teach the software, and not the basics of animation, which doesn't help us when it comes to actual animation. The demand for animators is increasing, but the supply isn't keeping up at the same pace. The Indian government doesn't give financial assistance to animation studios, though I hear special incentives are on the boards, but we've yet to see any of them. We're faced with stiff competition from Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia, where their government provides a lot of funding and other assistance to their animation studios.

On the product range/ services offered by the company

We provide animation and visual effects services (from pre-production to post) to clients worldwide. Be it a complete animated television series, animated features, visual effects for film, game cinematics, short films, and commercials. We are one of the few studios that have done character design and all pre, production and post for an international television se-

ries. Our focus is not to be a 'one-stop shop' – we definitely do not want to divert our attention from animation and visual effects to other CG services like architectural visualization, game asset development, and websites.

Please tell us your growth strategies for 2008-09

Increase our market awareness by attending more international animation, film and television markets such as Annecy, Mipcom, and MipTV, etc. We plan to attract talented individuals who have at least 2 years of experience at major studios in India. We already have consultants from Australia, the US, Canada and Germany who have worked on major international projects and are very keen on what we are doing, so have offered to come on board to offer their expertise in an advisory capacity. We plan to enter into more international co-productions for animated television and film projects. Our aim is to further market the properties we own (we own half the rights to 3 different animated series and film properties).

We are planning to grow slowly, but steadily, and avoid the pitfalls that we faced when we first started off.

Please comment on the outsourcing animation services to India

It got the industry started and brought it up to where it is today, but we can't rely on it forever. The weakening dollar and the strengthening rupee have made producers more wary of outsourcing to India. Co-productions are seeing a big increase, since it allows producers to share the financial risks involved. As mentioned before, competition from China, Malaysia, etc. are increasing, and even though Indian animation quality is better, ultimately, if the price is right, producers are going to go with a lower costing option.

Where do you see the Indian animation industry in the next five years.

The industry is growing in leaps and bounds. There will definitely be an increase in international quality fea-

ture-length productions, but a fair share of 'quick and dirty' productions with substandard animation will still be around. Everyone wants to make a feature film these days. I see more Indian-oriented 3D animated series coming up – some catered specifically to the domestic market, and some making it internationally. An increased market for visual effects in domestic productions, as well as the increase in the use of CGI in television commercials is also expected.

On the future plans of the company

We want to expand our visual effects department and get into film and commercials. In India, the popular notion is that animation is just for kids. Even my video rental place has animated films in the kids section, including R-Rated animation such as Renaissance, The Animatrix, and Heavy Metal and the South Park Movie – even though the content of all these films is definitely not suitable for kids. We hope to change this perception in the near future. ■