

Animation Xpress.com

India's first and only portal for Animation, VFX & Gaming

PRINT

CLOSE

Interview with Crest Animation CEO A.K Madhavan

24 June 2009 06:55 PM

BY ANAND GURNANI



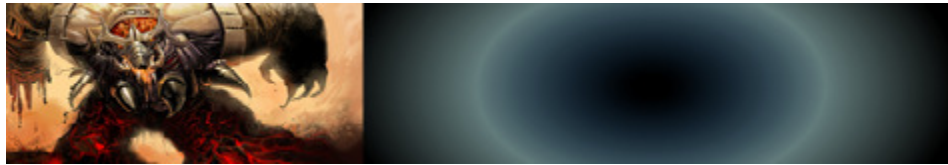
"Alpha & Omega will be a mainstream release in the US and the world over, and it will more or less have the same number of screens as other mainstream animated features in the US."

What are the latest projects that Crest is working on?

We have the second season of *WordWorld*, and we have a very high end DVD feature which we are working for one of the Big Boys, one of the big studios in Hollywood. And of course, we have *Alpha & Omega* our maiden CGI animated theatrical feature film for the global markets which is a co production with Lionsgate for which we are almost in the last lap of deliveries. It's going to be the first animated theatrical going out of India for the global market and that too in 3D Stereo.

Alpha & Omega is co-owned by Crest and Lionsgate and all the revenues across all mediums and revenue streams will be shared between us with the same status. Crest would deliver the movie in 3D Stereoscopy within the next few months, certainly before the end of this calendar year in all aspects. Following which there would be post production at our post house in US which the Lionsgate team and the Crest US team are working very closely on.

Advertisements



It must be quite an exciting phase with the film set to release next year..

Yes! It will be a mainstream release in the US and the world over and it will more or less have the same number of screens as other mainstream animated features in the US. It will have an extremely sizeable number of screens in North America and not in any standards will be perceived as a limited release. But the strategy for distribution will be primarily driven by Lionsgate because they are the co-producers and they have the specialization in distribution, not Crest.

Are there L&M partners on board?

The pitching to partners in the L&M space, as well as exploring of gaming opportunities have already begun and all that would happen as an announcement closer to the time of the release of the movie.

It is going to be a significant achievement for both Crest & Lionsgate as well. This is the first time that they are investing into an animated property and the first time they are going into the full distribution of an animated theatrical. For both of us it's a first so I don't think that strategically we would leave any stone unturned and make sure that we make the right noise.

What is the budget of the movie and how long has it taken?

Look at the product on the big screen and then tell us what the budget should be? (Smiles)

In terms of the time span it has taken from script to screen, it is somewhere in the range of 30 months.

Next year sure is going to be an important milestone! We'd love to know more about the driving philosophy at Crest?

We have always pushed ourselves to add value beyond the deliverables to our clients and partners. Challenging ourselves to set our own benchmarks is in our system. And this has been in place right from the time Crest delivered the Cheetah turning into a Kawasaki Bajaj more than a decade ago with the kind of morphing technique that was seen for the first time. We have stopped doing commercials now, but since then every show that we have delivered whether it be a TV series or DVD or the feature that we are working on, we have set the standards and benchmarks in those spaces.



Right from the first show we delivered in 2003, we made sure there was no compromise in quality and we created an acceptance in Hollywood. The 1st show was nominated for the Annies and went on to win the Emmys and Baftas in the animation category. And it was not one time fluke kind of stuff, there were 52 half hour episodes. *Jakers* established that things can be done at low cost, high quality and opened the market for India.

Even on *Alpha & Omega*, what we are trying to do with reference to the Fur and Mane that we

have created, is kind of unique and I think it's something that will be seen for the first time. And also we challenged ourselves to delivering this in 3D Stereoscopic which again is a first for an Indian Animation studio.

What is important is the way we began this whole exercise, when we went into our drawing board right in the beginning when we chose to get into the animation long form space, way back in 1999-2000 and then the things we identified then and the vision and strategy we laid out then.

Advertisement



Learn Animation With Hollywood Edge

Learn From Reputed Animation Experts Such as Philip Edward Alexy Worked for Jumanji, Star Wars.

www.picasso.co.in

PICASSO
ANIMATION COLLEGE
A Mahatishi Group Initiative

What was the vision and strategy?

We were certain that over a period of time we want to move away from a pure work for hire kind of a play to co-owning and building own IPs. We also took a call that since we had the in-house technology capability, we will look at only the CGI Animation space as a focus, rather than getting into multiple types of animation, and though we were doing commercials at that time we decided to put that into a long format space.

And secondly we were clear that we had to go on and zero in on the creative sensibilities and so we went ahead and acquired Rich Animation in LA in 1999-2000.

In terms of strategy we put together 3-4 very critical things in the past decade. These include Creative through Crest Animation US, high end production delivery pipeline at our studio in India, the finances and we have also got the global distribution element strongly addressed with our tie up with Lionsgate for *Alpha & Omega* and two other features that follow this.

That said it has been a long journey and perseverant effort. Getting into the United States and getting into a new space, India was not known in the animation space then. To establish that you can deliver good quality at low cost on time was a challenge to meet with. And secondly upgrading yourself from delivering television to higher quality like a DVD feature and then convincing someone that Crest had the capability and potential to match a theatrical release is not a very easy thing to do.

What we tried doing is we made sure we delivered good quality in the television space, good quality in the DVD space and now the world is watching as we make our first delivery in the theatrical space. And this time being delivered in 3D and co owned and coproduced by us.

But this does not mean that one has arrived, because every time and every year, the benchmarks keep changing obviously set by the Pixars and the Dreamworks. If you look at the quality of textures, rigs, acting , animation, effects from a Toy Story to a Ratatouille to an UP, the entire chain in the last 15 years has kept on evolving. Even the early movies that PDI Dreamworks did, to the movies now being done by Dreamworks Animation now... they keep evolving.

It just means you have arrived to kick yourself to work harder, but its fun because what has been a culture in this organization is look we don't fear the benchmarks and the challenges. Of course one has limited resources in terms of capital and skills but within that we have been able to learn and meet expectations of quality when it comes to global projects.

Has work begun on the next feature?

Yes. There is a process of development which takes time and it goes through draft 1, draft 2, draft

3 and you keep tweaking the action, the comedy and the punches from draft 1 to 3 to 4, you keep polishing it and then it goes through what is called as a green-light process. And unless it gets greenlit, you really don't go into production. It goes through multiple stages and it takes time.

So whilst we were working on the production of our first movie which is Alpha & Omega, we began our exercise in terms of identifying the stories and right properties for our next, getting scripts done, getting the broad talent in place, who is going to direct it, what kind of voice talent are you going to engage for the product, develop some scribbles and look and feel and even of course post green-lighting, the development and continuous research doesn't stop. That's a constant process.

Also the creative pipeline can't rest with 2 or 3 ideas. You have to constantly develop ideas. There could be 2-3 ideas on the floor or 20 ideas on the floor and the ideas don't just happen with the in-house team it could also happen with teams coming and pitching ideas. So there is a creative review team which literally on a daily basis is hearing pitches and reading books and looking at optioning stories and titles.

Are you looking at the Indian market as well? As in IP targeted at the Indian markets?

Absolutely! We would be foolish if we did not, it's all about the timing! I have been listening to pitches for the last five years, and we have kind of zeroed in a couple of ideas. Crest is one of the companies which is always wanting to do things in India. We are the ones who have opened up the outsourcing market for India.

And we should be announcing our Indian feature soon! By the time we produce it, it will be a couple of years, and then I think it will then be the right time.

What do you think of the current scenario in the Industry?

I am very positive about the Indian space for any market. I strongly believe that there is a tremendous future but it is a question of time. My estimate is 5-7 years by the time the market will get into a growth phase. Any product any brand any country goes through this introduction stage and growth stage and stability stage and decline stage. So I believe animation is still at the introduction stage, so a few failures here and there means nothing to the larger picture of it. It's a common saying, Thomas Edison said he didn't fail 999 times when he invented the bulb but it was 999 steps he went through.

So its not because couple of movies bombed or couple of studios shut down, it means nothing. In fact it's a huge learning curve and I am glad that one is realizing that it's not easy and there is no short cut and you have to go through that phase to build an industry. I am very bullish and I am very confident about Indian Animation.

If you ask me and I am willing to put it in black and white and carve it in stone, we are still not an industry, I also strongly believe an industry doesn't come into existence or gets that status of an industry unless you go through that 15-20 year cycle. It's impossible to build an industry in 7-10 years. So whatever we went through in terms of speed, and so many shops opening up, some closing down, so many announcements, its more of a wave. More of a fashion and fad.

Bollywood yes is an industry because it has been there for so many years. Animation is so new and I am willing to challenge this....? When did the first 3D Animated TV series go out of the shores of this country. Six years is not enough to give shape to an industry. It brought in awareness and knowledge, today there are 10s of thousands of parents who know of this as a career.

It will take its own time. Even if 2-3 movies would have been hits in the last year, even that would not have made it an industry. Within the entertainment space, I would say television is an industry because you have 200 networks feeding content for the last 15 years and that has

evolved. Animation is more of a space.

What about the spate of layoffs happening currently?

Crest has not had layoffs by the numbers that we hear about some of the other studios laying off, given month 60-100 people kind of stuff, largely because we were never really overstaffed. We didn't go and recruit hundreds or thousands in a hurry. We have been at a 500-600 number for a few years and we remain at those numbers and we haven't gone through those swings of huge recruitments and huge layoffs.

We didn't go into multiple activities, we didn't go into gaming, we didn't go into flash, 2D, VFX, commercials. We were very focused. We didn't see good times and bad times in terms of peaks and valleys. We have not seen good times and we have not seen bad times. We have been kind of steady. Not had those stresses of giving pink slips to 150 guys or 200 guys.

Every Industry whether it is brick and mortar whether it is airlines.. automobiles... all of us go through good times and bad times. ... it's a life cycle. No organization or industry can be at a constant growth phase. Long term I am bullish about Indian animation.

Of course...

It will evolve definitely in India from a commonsensical fact that the demographics of this country are the most exciting worldwide, so if the age profile average is 26-28 category and if you say the middle class is getting affluent and if you see that the opposite sex is getting more career oriented, you will sit in an environment in the next 10 years where you will have both the husband and wife working and what do the kids do at home? The kids would be gifted with DVDs to watch cartoons, that's the cycle one would go through, how do I engage my Kids? You will put them into the habit of watching good animation products.

During Christmas time there are huge DVD sales in the United States, or if you look at the habit of DVD rentals or DVD purchases. Similarly you will have immense growth of retail with thousands of outlets across the country. What will you fill in the shelves? Every outlet will have reserved space for Kids products and DVDs and toys and merchandise.

What is your communication to the Industry?

I would say that each one of us have to play a role, some will occupy leadership positions, some will occupy follower positions. Distribution is very important and the effort has to be in ensuring that distribution kicks in, merchandise needs to grow as well. It is a question of patience and sustenance, those guys will stay forever who sustain through this. Distribution and reach is key. We also need to aggressively lobby with the I&B, saying that DoorDarshan should have a 24 hour Cartoon Channel of its own, because it can reach the larger geographical area...

The right kind of forums are also needed. We still don't have a single forum which is common, you have FICCI doing some initiatives, you have CII doing some initiatives, you have NASSCOM doing some initiatives. There was an effort to make an animation based forum but there is no commonality, but all that will happen.

connect@animationxpress.com

Advertisement

To connect with  write in to sales@crlindia.com

URL for this article:

<http://www.animationxpress.com/?file=story&id=20461>

PRINT

CLOSE

© 2006 animationxpress.com. All Rights Reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.