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PALO ALTO: You've come a long way, baby

Palo Alto company hits it big with the computer-animated "Dancing Baby"

by Dwana Bain

Anyone who watches television or surfs the Web these days has probably seen the prancing toddler.

He has a recurring role on the television show "Ally McBeal," and advertises Blockbuster Video.

From his humble beginnings as a sample software file, the translucent, stone-faced cyberbaby who dances in nothing but a diaper, has risen to celebrity status.

What many people don't know is that this Internet icon and television star was conceived in a garage in Midtown Palo Alto.

Michael Girard of Palo Alto's Unreal Pictures had no idea just how popular the baby--also known as "Baby Cha"--would become when he originally used the surreal figure as a sample to show off his animation software.

"It really sort of happened by accident," said Girard. Its creation was "Frankenstein-ian," he said. The baby was "hacked together by a number of people."

Girard designed the "cha cha" dance several years ago, as an example of his company's "footstep-driven animation," a technique the company patented in January 1997. He wanted to show how the figure could turn and move to different rhythmic patterns. Others working with the company elaborated on the original choreography. A shoulder movement here, an air guitar riff there, and a star was born.

On Jan. 5, 1998, Baby Cha appeared as one of television lawyer Ally McBeal's hallucinations, and as a reminder of her ticking biological clock.

"All hell broke loose after that," Girard said. A media frenzy surrounded the virtual superstar, including an appearance at the Golden Globe awards, features on CNN, Bryant Gumble's Public Eye, articles in Newsweek, Entertainment Weekly and many more.

The cyber tot comes in a dozen or more variations and has as many nicknames. He's an odd-looking invention, to say the least. He does have chubby cheeks and wears a diaper. But there the resemblance with a real baby ends.

"If you look at it closely, it's a little disturbing: no expression in the face, and very adult-like motion," Girard said.

And although the baby is as accessible as your nearest website, it takes a little sleuthing to find his real parents.

Girard and his wife and business partner, Susan Amkraut, run Unreal Pictures out of a converted garage in their Palo Alto home. The company remains unlisted, and there are no signs hanging above the studio.

"We're a small software company," Girard explained, "It's helpful for us to be anonymous."

The couple met in the late 1970s when they were both computer science students at University of California, Santa Cruz. Then computer animation was still in its infancy. They both went to graduate school at the Advanced Center for Computing in the Arts and Design, at Ohio State University, where they met their third business partner. John Chadwick, who now lives in Germany.

After graduate school, the couple taught for two-and-a-half years at the National Institute for Computer Animation in the Netherlands before returning to Amkraut's hometown of Palo Alto in 1992 and starting Unreal Pictures.

"We knew we had a knack for developing software," said Girard. "At some point we realized that we love that more than teaching."

The company designs high-end special effects for commercials, feature films and video games.

Although Girard and Amkraut own a copyright on the footloose infant jointly with Kinetix--the company that distributes and sells Unreal's Character Studio software--they are not about to get rich quick from their invention's success. They don't get royalties from the baby's recurring dreams on the "Ally McBeal" show or from Blockbuster video's ad campaign.

Anyone who buys Unreal Picture's software can use the baby's image for animation purposes. But that's not to say that the company won't profit from their creation. The company will eventually reap the benefits from the sale of T-shirts and other promotional materials.

Girard and Amkraut, who have a 4-year-old son, say they enjoy operating out of their from home for now and they don't plan to move the business, unless it expands.

According to Girard, working from home is a growing trend in the high-end software industry. Girard and Amkraut hold conference call meetings with Kinetix once a week. Chadwick joins in from Germany. Animation files are also sent back and forth over the Internet.

"It wouldn't have been possible to do business this way 10 years ago," Girard said. "Our company and others are helping to usher in a new form of animation. In the animation of the future, the difference between what's real and what's synthetic will start to blur."

One day, the dancing baby will be known as the "talking-singing-dancing baby," Girard said. The next challenge for Unreal Pictures--and computer animators in general--is animating facial expressions, according to Girard.

"Our eyes are acutely trained to recognize when faces move realistically and when they don't," he explained. Emotions like disgust and sadness are a challenge for computer animators.

Lip-synching presents another obstacle. The challenge is not so much fitting the movements to the mouth, Girard said, as it is making the surrounding areas of the face change correctly as the lips move. Right now the process is agonizingly slow. In the film "Toy Story," for example, one minute of lip-synching took weeks of effort.

"We think we have a solution to that, but we can't discuss it now," Girard said. "We're working on a facial animation system."

And, just as the company's footstep-driven animation is transferable from one character to another, it will one day be possible to transfer facial animation from one character to another, he said.

Though Amkraut and Girard say they don't mind the company's newfound celebrity, they don't let it define them. Before they go down in history as "the dancing baby" inventors, they have a few more projects up their sleeves.

They are collaborating with famed choreographer Merce Cunningham in his latest project, "Hand-Drawn Spaces," the first dance for the computer by a major choreographer.

"It's going to be a monumental presentation involving up to five large screens," Girard said.

They will continue working with choreographers in the future. They have already completed a session with choreographer Bill T. Jones, and may soon collaborate with the Frankfurt Ballet.

Girard jokes that it would be possible to take the choreography from Cunningham's dance, and map it onto a group of dancing babies. A strange concept indeed. But, Girard said with a smile, he hasn't got permission from Cunningham yet.

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