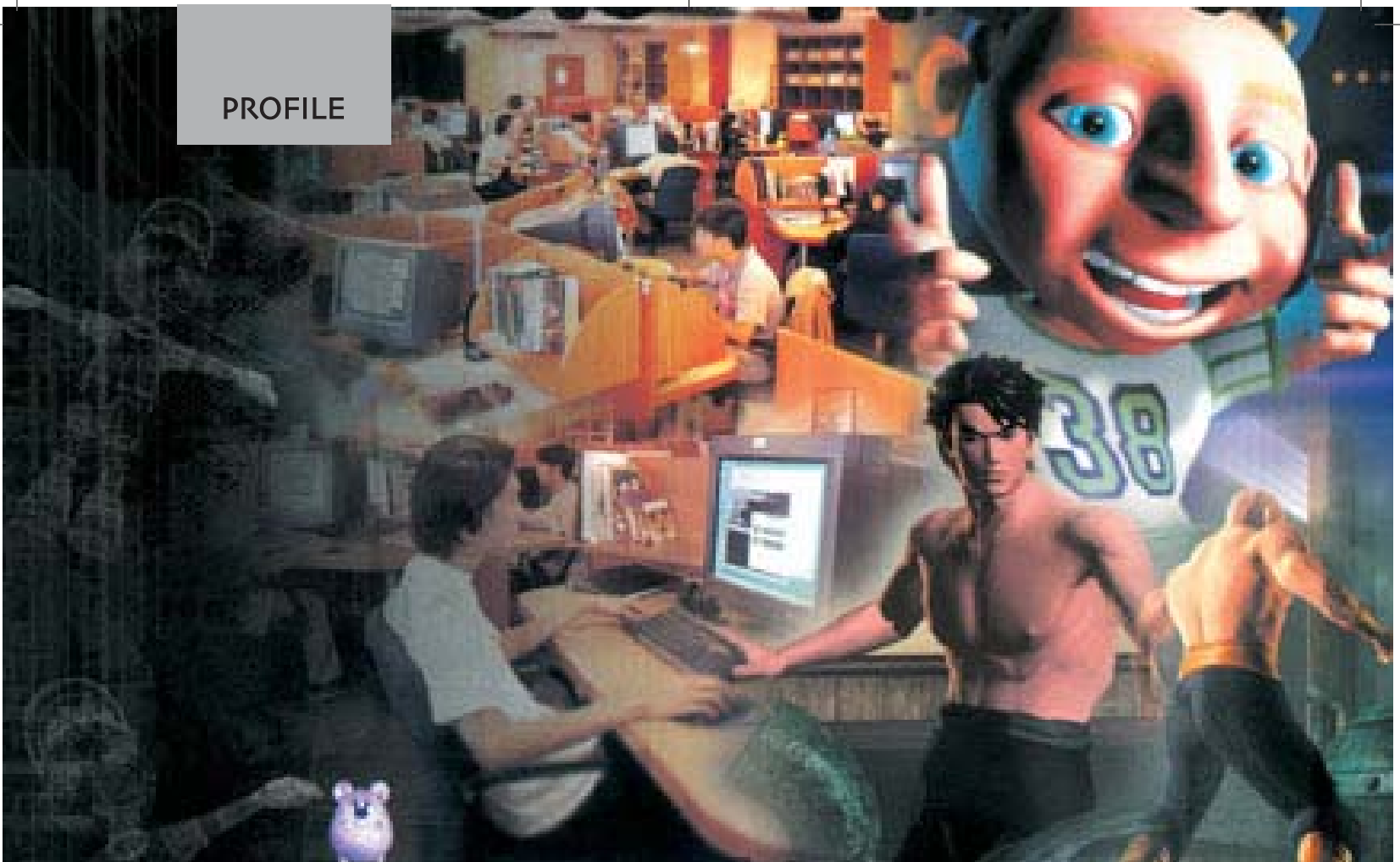


PROFILE



Serious Cartoons!

Today's animations have widened their appeal from just an audience of children to adults who invest heaps of money to produce exquisite animation characters, some of which are vying for the same jobs that their human counterparts are currently performing. By Hanani Izzati

Have you seen Myra at work? Pretty and extremely talented, she's the perfect virtual human. Myra, the 'hot babe' that hosts her own show, Domain Myra on ASTRO, is no ordinary girl. In fact, she's not even human! With a to-die-for figure, an angelic face, and tons of talent, she's the dream of every producer. Brought to life using motion capture and Maya software, she is indeed the pride and joy of her creators at Persistence of Vision Sdn Bhd (POV).

"A virtual host is a computer generated person that hosts its own television program. We don't only have

Myra, we've created a whole 'family' of virtual humans," said Steve Bristow, executive director of POV.

An animator, Bristow's involvement in animation started when he was doing a Film & Animation course at Victoria College in his homeland, Melbourne, Australia.

"After graduating in 1983 with a diploma in applied sciences media production, I realised that my love and passion was in animation. So rather than going into other streams, I decided to pursue animation, which at that time was a little known, brand new technology," he explained.

Bristow came to Malaysia in 1990 to help broadcaster TV3 set up an animation department. Later, he set up Fat Lizard Sdn Bhd, an animation outfit that produces advertisements and now also acts as a consultant to POV.

"I came into animation through Steve when we became partners!" said Low Huoi Seong laughingly. Low, chief executive director of POV, confidently leads the business development side of the company, drawing from his experience in television production, distribution and marketing from the Vision New Media group.



“Vision, the company that I am with, was already in the broadcast content business. Over the years our view of content has grown not into just TV programs but all forms of content. Along the way, we decided that animation was something that we had to look into. Rather than try to create it ourselves, we joined up with Steve,” Low explained.

The birth of POV

Launched in June 2000, POV is part of the Vision New Media group of companies. It is also a joint venture with the Multimedia University (MMU), Cyberjaya. POV was set up to do long-form 3D animation and high-end postproduction works, such as special effects and TV commercials. Besides the core business of animation, POV also provides new media and broadcast design as well as web innovation and software engineering services.

“It was by coincidence or by fate that we came into contact with Dr Abu who was then the Dean of the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, at a

time when MMU was looking for commercial partners to go into this industry. Having our facilities at the university and providing a place to intern students, MMU will have its fingers on the pulse of the industry, which will feedback into the curriculum. We, on the other hand, get to utilise state-of-the-art equipment and funding for capital expenditure. So basically we’re happily ‘married’,” laughs Bristow.

The recipe to success

Apart from being undeniably good at what they do, the recipe to POV’s success is in its bold approach to business.

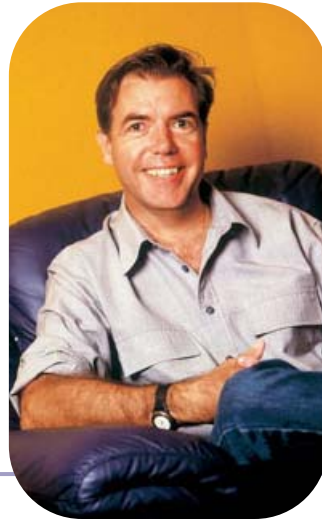
“Although we are a MSC-status company, we are not dependant on the Malaysian Government to provide us with everything. Only when we are successful on our own ‘feet’, will the initiatives and incentives given by the Government through the MSC make sense,” said Low.

“The Government has already done as much as it can by setting up the infrastructure and the opportunities;

it’s up to the companies to take advantage of that. We firmly believe in this and wish more companies would stop whining and start doing!” he continued in a serious tone.

POV proved its mettle when it made Malaysian history by undertaking production of a 22-minute episode of the Stevie Stardust television series. The production, commissioned by *Stardust Entertainment Filmproduktion* of Germany, revolves around a young boy whose parents decided to move to the countryside from the hustle and bustle of the city. With an old movie camera and Spielberg-like aspirations to be a movie director, Stevie takes us on his many adventures, as seen through the eyes of a child.

“Working on that project gave us the confidence and credibility in the international market. It proved that we could produce world-class products. Stardust Entertainment was very satisfied with our work. The series in its totality is not yet complete so we might be doing more work with them in the future,” smiled Low.



From left, Low Huoi Seng, chief executive director of POV and Steve Bristow, executive director of POV.

“Of course, the milestone of our success has also been our virtual human project, especially Myra, who gave us the confidence and skills to create more of her kind,” added Bristow.

Current projects

Following Myra’s success, POV is creating a complete talent agency of 3D virtual characters. Designed to be highly customisable, these virtual talents will be marketed to broadcasters and clients as actors, models, newsreaders and spokespersons.

And, POV is also actively working on a ‘special project’.

“It’s long-form animation for a television show. We showcased it at the National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE) Conference & Exhibition, held in Los Angeles, USA, in mid-January this year,” said Low.

NATPE is known throughout the global television industry as the leading association for content professional. The NATPE Conference & Exhibition is held annually and is recognised worldwide as the key global media event. It is the event at which every attendee not only has the opportunity to buy and sell products and services, but also make new contacts, meet one-on-one and gain insights from content professionals from around the world.

Local talents

As more institutions of higher learning, such as the MMU, offer numerous courses and training in animation, Bristow is certain that looking for local talents to make up the animation industry workforce would become easier.

Although not a training facility, POV lends a helping hand in building up the pool of local talents by offering two months’ internship to some of the MMU students. These interns are put on development programmes, modeling jobs and other assignments that are ‘safe’ to be entrusted to students, as Bristow puts it.

“We work on very tight deadlines for commercial works, especially short-form animations. The students don’t yet have the skills or the discipline to complete such jobs. It’s too dangerous for us to put students on such important jobs,” Low pointed out.

“If their work and ideas are good, we would consider using them. In fact, the last group of interns helped develop Myra’s new wardrobe. But we do not let the students do the commercial projects,” stressed Bristow.

“This arrangement certainly gives us the opportunity to identify the ‘creme de la creme’ among the blossoming young talents. We get to pick the good ones!” said a delighted Low.



Facing competition

While there are many animation companies providing animation services, the long-form 3D animation industry is relatively under-developed in Malaysia. POV sees no competition from local companies and sees itself as the only 'serious' long-form 3D animation set-up in Malaysia.

"There has been an imbalance of content around the world. America makes much of the world's content, while Asia has audiences larger than America. What we want to do is to try to start making content that is from Asia for the world. Animation can travel. And we will utilise the opportunity to create a truly universally acceptable product," said Bristow.

Though POV faces head-on competition in the international market, especially from low-cost production countries such as China and India, it is convinced that low cost production is not the key to winning the hearts of the international clients.

"Although these countries are cheaper, what we're finding is that their creative skills are not as good as ours. Our work is more aesthetically pleasing; it pays attention to aesthetics, creativity and presentation. Anybody can do animation but it's the final product that makes the difference," Low stated.

As in the case of animation products, the difference may not be immediately describable. Consumers are able to identify high quality work, but unless they have some technical knowledge, they may not be able to describe it. That is the 'magical ingredient' that POV claims to have over their competitors.

"We also speak better English than the competing countries. This allows us to fully understand the needs and wants of our international clients, and vice versa. If your communication skills don't allow you to get down to the finest details, you won't understand the complexity of the work. Then you've definitely got a problem!" stressed Low.

Bristow shared a classic example of misinterpretation of the script that happened in a Chinese production company that had an American client.

POV's immediate plans are to 'fill-up the pipe' with as much outsourcing works as they can handle, and continue working on their own projects. Ultimately, POV plans to concentrate on creating their own products as it realises that only by having its own creations will it be able to achieve retained value through intellectual property. "But until you're very good at it, you'd better not risk it," cautioned Low.

"We are also currently on the look out for external funding. But it's been



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The script called for the character to 'hold-ass' across the screen, which is the American slang for run away faster. The animation came out as the character actually running across the room while holding his ass!

"It's truly a classic!" he laughed.

Future

The future is very promising in the eyes of Low and Bristow. "We already have a few foreign jobs lined-up. These foreign producers have been having discussions with us for quite some time and their confidence in us is building up. Now we're only waiting for the 'go ahead' from them," said Bristow.

quite difficult as most financial institutions such as banks and venture capitalists find it hard to evaluate media projects. There are high risks involved. For example, when you produce a movie, there's no guarantee that it's box-office material," said Low.

"We are going to breed success in year 2002. This year is going to be our year!" added Low undeterred.

For fellow animators and entrepreneurs wanting to go into the animation business, Bristow and Low offer sound advice, "Be brave, be very good, and be patient".

"And raise money, for animation is not cheap business," concluded Low. ●