

THE CREATURE SHOP

Puppet masters

A computer-generated Miss Piggy? Not yet, but as Jim Henson's Creature Shop enters the world of cgi, Robert Buckley finds the muppets of the future might be creatures of silicon not latex

Kermit, Miss Piggy and Yoda, household names created by master-puppeteer Jim Henson and his famous Creature Shop, were devised in latex, fabric and wire. But they and their fellow puppets are being augmented and even replaced by computers, thanks to the company's new cg division.

"As cg became a more powerful medium, it was obvious we needed to do some development there," explains Hal Bertram, creative supervisor at the Camden-based Creature Shop. "The best work is often done when you can flick between technologies."

Bertram and his staff of 12 have spent five years developing their own software (informally called Halimage) to do with computers what Henson did with less sophisticated technology - real-time puppetry. The difference is that there are few of the limitations that conventional materials impose - except what looks plausible to an audience.

"This will sound terribly cheesy, like some supermarket ad," Bertram confesses, "but the only look should be good design. And

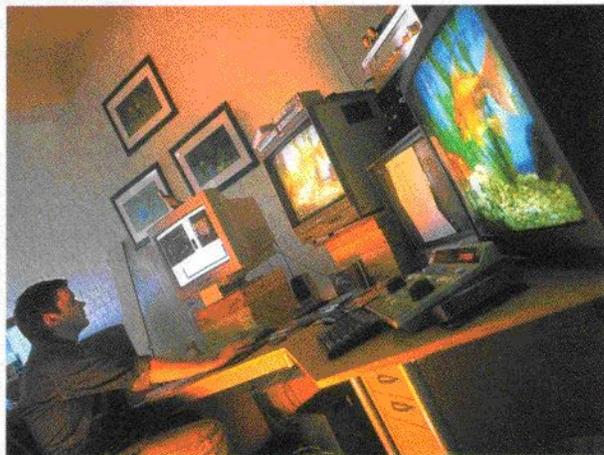
there are certain things you can't do in latex - we're slightly freer in cg in terms of skin."

Despite this freedom, however, the cg team almost always uses a model created by the Shop as a starting-point, laser-scanning it in to achieve a more realistic basis for their work and to reduce the time spent on computers in the initial design stages.

After a few small projects, including the obligatory stint on *Lost in Space*, the cg division is now ready for the big time, with work now in progress on *The Flintstones 2*. Although the division needs a lot of work through its doors each year to keep it running, it still has an almost hobbyist love of creature-design for its own sake.

"What we want is the ability to produce really great creatures on projects where there won't be too many compromises," Bertram admits. As a result, the projects he's seeking are singled out not by targetting certain markets, he jokes, but simply because they have "a high budget."

With the Henson name behind it, the outfit knows that



The Creature Shop is bringing its knowledge of puppetry to the virtual world. Real-time cg creatures (top right) will feature increasingly in future productions

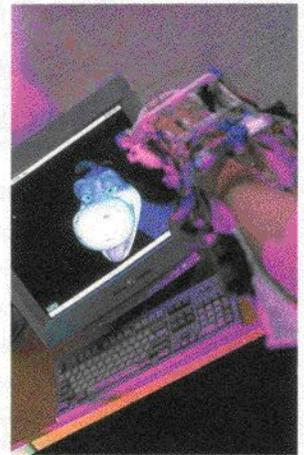
producers will come to it expecting a high calibre of creature at the end of the process, all with minimal pain and nail-chewing. "People who've worked with us before know what we're like, know we can come up with the goods. But it is their creature, so they want it to be absolutely the best thing."

With Bertram and Co worrying about every aspect of creature creation, Cinesite is a valuable resource to the shop, providing telecine facilities. "Telecine seems to cause us endless problems. We're constantly amused by the ones that arise. I'd much rather scan film - at least it comes back to you square, with the right number of pixels and vaguely similar to what you

gave them in the first place." Cinesite, Bertram believes, is the only company that can do sharp output. But if anyone wants to give him free tests to prove otherwise...

The majority of the division's work comes from UK broadcast output. Hallmark is proving a loyal customer - *Arabian Nights*, now in progress, and a follow-up project are both to get the Henson touch. And, unless HQ in America asks the division to up-sticks and join it, that's the way it'll probably stay.

As Bertram puts it, "being in Camden is a little more restrictive than being in Marin county... But now we're able to compete on cg, we'll work with anyone who's got interesting projects."



MARK TYNAN

KIT SPEC

The cg division of Jim Henson's Creature Shop has four Onyxs, eight Octanes and four Indigos as workstations for rendering and design, with an Origin for additional number-crunching. The software used is a combination of an in-house, custom-written package called Halimage for modelling, with some additions from Maya. Soft-image also contributes, with Mental Ray the preferred renderer.

IN BRIEF



Amid the spate of resignations triggered by BBC Resources chief executive Rod Lynch, **David Baldwin-Evans** joins in a new role as head of its consultancy business. Previously senior manager,

commercial marketing, at Sony and before that at Ford, his job is to develop the consultancy business, particularly internationally.



The latest signings at Soho Editors are **Andrew Godwin** and **Darren Marshall**, of MPC and Complete respectively. Marshall (left), whose specialities are Inferno and Flame, has done work for Fanta, Mercedes and Mazda, while Quantel and Discreet specialist Godwin includes the new idents for Channel 4 in his recent portfolio.



Tele-Cine's senior producer **Mark Leaver** is to take over from md Jeff Emerson as head of production - a job which includes taking charge of client liaison. Emerson says the company needs someone to advise clients on the convergence of digital technology, which he regards as vital to the future of the facility.