Creative corner

A look at artists and facilities taking creativity to new levels.

Life of HALON

From blockbuster films to virtual cameras, Autodesk software is always part of the story at HALON Entertainment

The beginning

Just out of the U.S. Air Force and still uncertain what to do with his life, Brad Alexander headed to film school with a deep-seated desire to "work on Star Wars movies." As luck would have it, Alexander was soon introduced to some of the earliest versions of what would become Autodesk® 3ds Max® and Autodesk® Maya® software: "My mind was blown," he says. "I was just floored by what the software could do." Alexander's discovery led him to an anonymous job posting for a 3D animator. Little did he know that the prospective employer was Lucasfilm, or that his first project upon being hired would be *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002). In late 2003, Alexander partnered with his long-time colleague and friend Daniel Gregoire to found HALON Entertainment, a full-service previsualization company committed to "a digital process where technological complexity yields to the creative process."

To say things have been going well for HALON is an understatement. HALON has gone on to work on a long series of commercially successful, critically acclaimed, and award-winning feature films, most recently Ang Lee's *Life of Pi.*

The *Life of Pi* challenge

"In our business, no two projects are ever the same," says Alexander. "Every director holds a different creative vision, and it's our job to help get those ideas out of the director's head and on to the screen as smoothly and accurately as possible. Working with Ang Lee on his vision for such a fantastical story was an absolutely invigorating challenge."

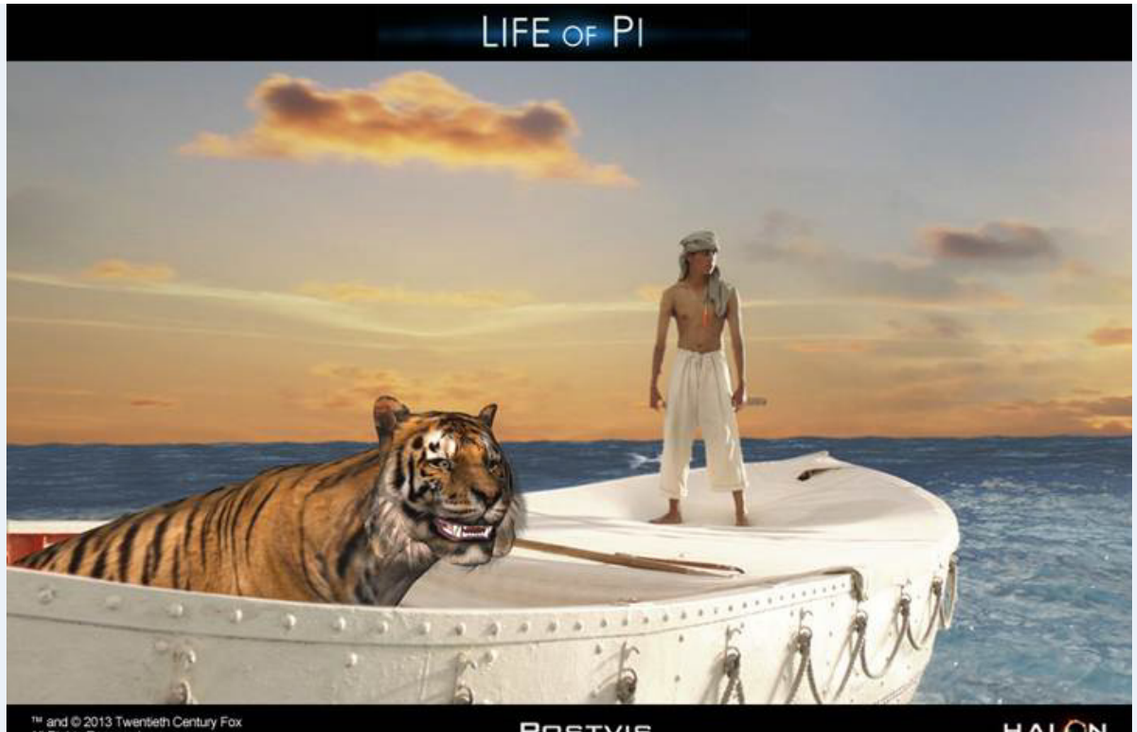
Based on Yann Martel's 2001 fantasy adventure novel, *Life of Pi* tells the often surreal story of a young Indian boy who, through a series of unfortunate events, finds himself adrift in a lifeboat with a spotted hyena, an injured zebra, an orangutan, and a full-grown Bengal tiger. That compelling scenario, realized by the creative mind of Ang Lee and the previsualization talents at HALON, resulted in *Life of Pi* winning the 2013 Academy Award® for visual effects.

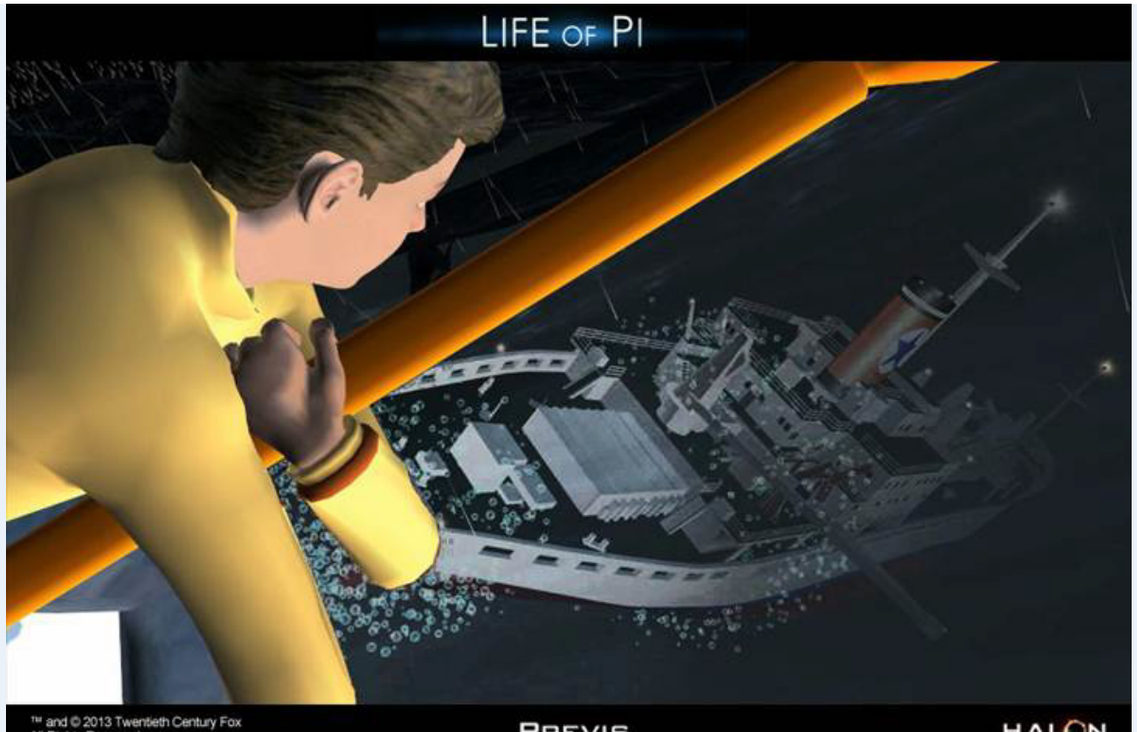
The Maya solution

In addition to the undeniable talents of his team, Alexander is quick to give points to Autodesk Maya—HALON's preferred 3D system for all of the company's history—for both helping to realize Lee's vision and keeping HALON's disparate teams in sync.

Brad Alexander, partner and senior Previsualization/VFX/CG supervisor at HALON.

"Maya is our baseline standard system at HALON," he says. "On *Life of Pi*, we were able to easily package our Maya files and shoot them back and forth over secure VPN. When we sent small reference files back and forth, they would automatically link up with the scene files on either end. That helped a lot."





The HALON team also used Maya to devise a fast and efficient way of handling the evolving vision of the film as production progressed. Based on a succession of "story beats" (one- or two-line sentences describing a scene) generated through his conversations with the director, Alexander was able to determine which models, rigged characters, and environments would be needed for a particular scene file.

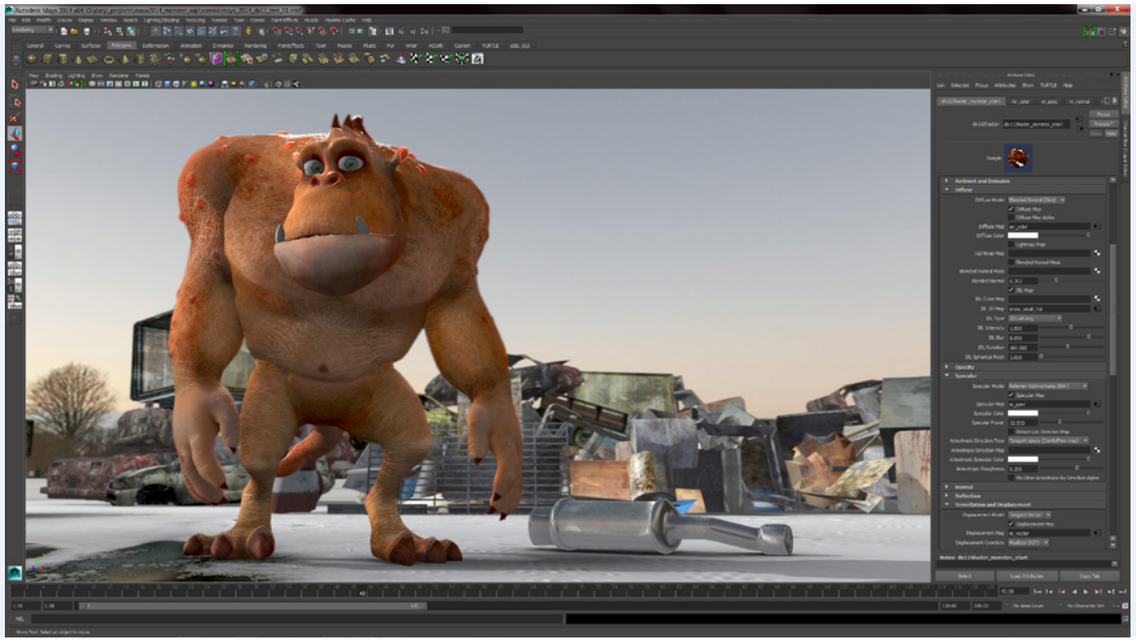
Asked if there was a single Maya feature that was particularly valuable to his team, Alexander barely hesitates:
"Throughout the process, our biggest advantage was doing everything in the Maya Viewport 2.0. Being able to twirl around and pose in realtime and to receive instantaneous feedback is invaluable on a job like *Life of Pi*. Viewport 2.0 really enabled our team to fully visualize exactly what Ang wanted."

> [*On Life of Pi*] our biggest advantage was being able to do everything in Maya Viewport 2.0. We rely heavily on that feature.
>
> Brad Alexander
> Partner and Senior
> Previsualization/VFX/CG Supervisor
> HALON Entertainment

The Subscription advantage

HALON made a decision to invest in Autodesk® Subscription—and have never regretted it.

"I always know that I can use the latest release to try out some fantastic new tool, or jump back to the familiarity of the previous version to get a job in progress finished on time," explains Alexander. "It's a great advantage for the complex work that we do."



Autodesk Maya Viewport 2.0.

For more information about Autodesk Maya software, visit www.autodesk.com/maya

For more information about Autodesk software for Media and Entertainment, visit www.autodesk.com/industry

Young talent thriving with Autodesk 3D animation tools

Michael Meltchenko turns his passion for video game animation into an exciting career based upon 3ds Max expertise.

Starting young

Michael Meltchenko is part of the latest wave of young and talented 3D animators already making their mark in the industry. A 2012 graduate of Centre NAD *(the University of Quebec, Chicoutimi)* in 3D animation and video game design, Meltchenko literally grew up using Autodesk tools, beginning with "fooling around on the software" when he was 14. Today, that "fooling around" has taken him to a new job as 3D Animator and Technical Animator at the Montreal studios of Ubisoft, the French global video game developer and one of the largest independent game publishers in the world.

Michael Meltchenko, 2012 graduate of Centre NAD, now 3D animator and technical animator at Ubisoft Montreal.

Meltchenko's career took root with a childhood fascination with 3D animation—one fueled by countless hours playing video games. This fascination soon led to a desire to learn how to create animation. Fortunately for Meltchenko, he had access to professional-level animation tools from the get-go. "It goes back to when I started to fool around with 3ds Max. I wanted to learn how to do 3D animation and I was lucky to have access to a pro tool like 3ds Max. Then, when I got to Centre NAD, they used a lot of Autodesk software and I had really good teachers to show me how to do things the right way."

Creative freedom without limits

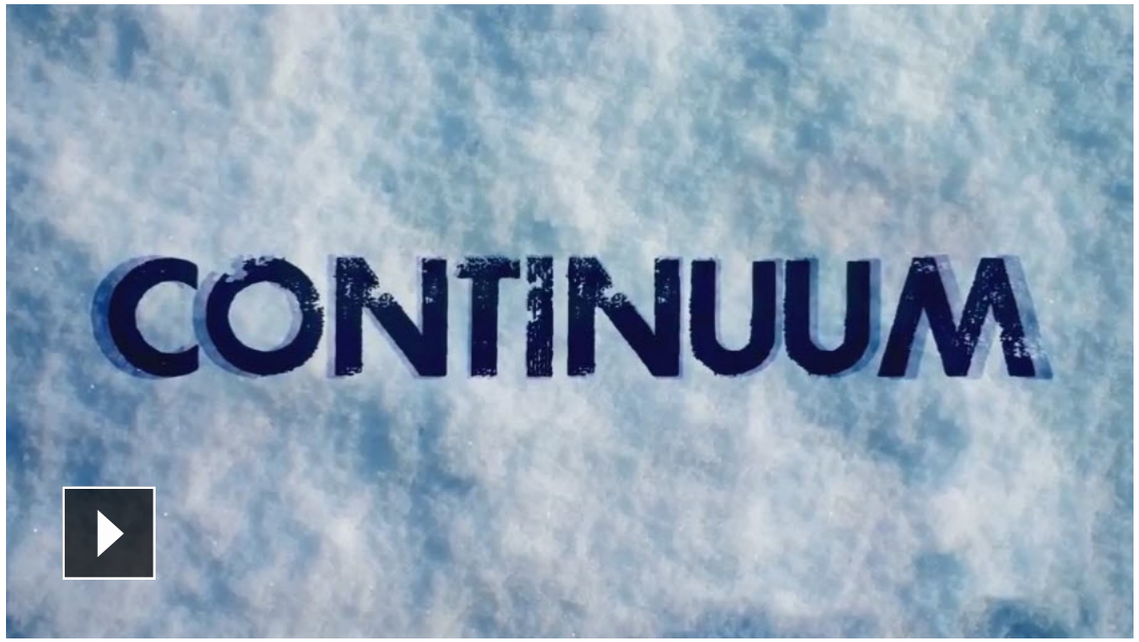
Prior to joining Ubisoft, Meltchenko honed his skills on a number of freelance projects, including a recent video adventure game, *Continuum*, created with Autodesk® 3ds Max® and Autodesk® MotionBuilder® software. In developing that game, Meltchenko was part of a team comprising designers and animators, with no programming support. Fortunately, the power, flexibility, and accessibility of the Autodesk tools used by the team allowed them to freely create without being bogged down in complex animation programming. In fact, with built-in support for Autodesk® FBX® asset exchange technology, 3ds Max and MotionBuilder provided a complete solution out of the box, making the intimidating prospect of creating a game from scratch well within the capabilities of this student team.

This creative freedom ties in nicely with Meltchenko's concept of the "technical side" of animation. He explains: "I look at the technical side of animation as the magic behind the curtain game players aren't aware of. They should only see quality animation of characters and objects in motion, and that's how it should be. I think MotionBuilder especially has the capacity to combine a lot of different animation and make it look to the game player like it is just one simple piece. MotionBuilder handles all the technical stuff so the animator can create and build and not worry about coding and programming."

As is the case for many other professional animators and 3D artists, Autodesk tools supply the means through which Meltchenko can realize his artistic visions, and he sees no limitations to either his creativity or the capabilities of the Autodesk tools on his computer desktop. "I think of Autodesk tools as these super powerful tractors," he notes. "Once you learn how to drive them you can go anywhere, especially off road, and by that I mean creating new styles of animation. I've been lucky to have been brought up on Autodesk products, in particular 3ds Max, which I think is a super powerful tool."

Looking ahead

Now, with an auspicious launch to his career at Ubisoft, Meltchenko is anxious to take his skills to the next level and eventually progress to project management, all the while growing and leveraging his expertise in Autodesk software. "My dream at the beginning was to work in the video game industry and now that dream has come true. I want to move forward and maybe become art director or manage my own project one day. That would be really cool. I like creating things and I like video games. And, you know, when I wake up in the morning the first thing that comes to mind is to create animation and have fun," he says. "Now how lucky is that?"



WATCH THE CONTINUUM TRAILER