The inside track

Fred Ruff, technical director at Bent Image Lab, shares his secrets for success.

Image courtesy of Bent Image Lab

Fred Ruff
3D Supervisor
Bent Image Lab

Fred Ruff got his start in New York working for a digital post production facility and for video game developer Crystal Dynamics. Ruff later joined what was then Autodesk Multimedia group where he eventually became product designer, and then design lead for a team of engineers for Autodesk® 3ds Max® software. Over the years at Autodesk, Ruff honed his expertise in 3ds Max, a factor that proved hugely beneficial throughout his career. Currently he works at Bent Image Lab in Portland, Oregon, where he supervises the 3D graphics department, working on commercials, films, TV shows, and music videos.

How long have you been working in 3D? How did you get hooked?

My interest in 3D started in the early 90s in New York when I studied computer graphics technology in school. I've been doing it for roughly 20 years now. I think one of my first big influences was a video called *The Mind's Eye*, which was 100 percent computer graphics eye candy.

What are some past projects you've worked on?

I've worked on commercials for Coca Cola, Apple Jacks™, Air Wick®, Chips Ahoy!, and Tetra Pak. I've also worked on various film and TV projects including *Grimm* on NBC, and music videos for STRFKR, They Might Be Giants, and Modest Mouse.

What are you working on these days?

I'm the lead technical director and VFX Supervisor for Bent Image Lab's visual effects work on NBC's TV show *Grimm*.

Images courtesy of Bent Image Lab

What's your overall vision and approach to technical directing for CG narratives?

Technical directing is about problem solving. You're always being asked to do something that's very complicated and difficult. Many times, people are asking you to do things that they saw in last week's big Hollywood movie, except you have a much smaller budget and the turnaround isn't years, but weeks. I always try and come up with solutions that are simple and flexible so that the director and client can chime in along the way.

How do you maintain creativity and quality under intense deadlines and budgets?

I usually tell everyone on my team that this is a very tough technical job. You don't spend as much time being an artist as you'd think. Clients pay the bills, art directors and directors make suggestions and get approvals on models and characters. We, as technical directors, execute their visions. As a TD, you only get to be creative about 10 percent of the time. Much of the remaining time is making that creativity come to life with a whirlwind of software and imagery.

The industry grows at an incredible rate—new tools are created within studios on a daily basis, which help to drive new ideas and techniques, and faster workflows. How do you stay on top of that?

It's hard to stay on top, but Twitter is a great source for watching the traffic of information out there. If you spend too much time trying to stay on top, you're not practicing your craft. Practicing the craft is the best way to stay on top, and by that I mean grab a new tool and work it into your workflow. When you run into problems, google it. Someone might have dealt with it already. I also love FXGuide.com and everything they bring to the effects industry. They have some amazing in-depth interviews with

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technical directors and VFX supervisors that really shed some light on how people are breaking new ground in computer graphics.

You're known for your wealth of knowledge in Autodesk 3ds Max software. When did you first begin using 3ds Max?

I was using 3D Studio (DOS) before 3ds Max came out. I was a big fan of Gary Yost, founder of 3ds Max, and his team way back then. When I worked at Crystal Dynamics back in the 90s, I managed to get on beta for 3ds Max. I was lucky enough to later work for Autodesk and work directly with 3ds Max engineers. That led to me becoming the product designer for 3ds Max for a couple of releases. Still to this day, I like to share stories with my team on why things are the way they are.

Autodesk has a beta program in place where users participate in helping to shape the development of software by evaluating iterations of the software before commercial release. You're a part of this beta program for 3ds Max. Without giving anything explicit away, what are your immediate thoughts about the direction of development?

It's an interesting landscape for 3D these days. I'm now one of the older guys in this industry, so I hope that they keep improving the tools that I use every day. We older guys teach the younger kids coming out of school how to *really* use the tools. I just hope they don't shake it up too much so that my years of experience are still useful.

Aside from 3ds Max, what other applications do you keep in your CG toolbox?

Mudbox software is a big one for me. It turns out to be a great painting tool, aside from a great sculpting tool. I love using Krakatoa for 3ds Max for particle rendering, and we have Deadline render farm management system as our network rendering backbone.

What is the most important skill you have learned over the years?

To be able to give and take criticism well without hurting people's feelings. I try to remind all my artists that no is never an answer to a supervisor or director. The only acceptable answer is let me see what I can do.

What cool tip or technique will you share with our readers today?

I prepared a short video showing a quick way to make snow with BlobMesh in 3ds Max.