



Playing at Another Level

Remember Tron? If you're old enough to remember that 1982 film about a computer hacker who ends up inside a computer and becomes a games gladiator, you probably played Pong when it was cool.

The rate of change in computer and gaming technology has slowed somewhat in the last decade but both worlds are still moving quickly. In 2002, Alexandra Raffe and her producing partners created a show about a group of teens who move back and forth between their modern suburb and the world inside a video game. Called *Zixx: Level One* it already looked out of date when the producers began to look at a sequel a year later. When it came time to make *Zixx: Level Three*, in 2006, it was obvious to everyone involved that changes had to be made to keep up with a gaming technology that was rapidly evolving.

"The game engine we first used was the engine from the first James Bond game so there is no comparison at all," says Raffe. "And there is not only a different look to games now but the level of verisimilitude and believability is increasing all the time and I am pleased to see that the creative content of most games is starting to grow to match the look. We have the toys but for awhile there was no creative content or plot. I think we are now at a place where there are good stories and great twists. So we are now seeing gaming moving into being a genuine art form."

Zixx is an intergalactic agent who has crash landed onto Earth, which happens to be home to an evil alien empire. She and her partner Flanngo have to get to the next level of the battle for control of the galaxy. In order to find a way into the Keep, a cyber dimension resembling a video game, they accept the help of two Earthlings. From there they have to move through the three levels of the Keep before the enemy can get there.

For *Zixx: Level Three*, which will air for 13 weeks on YTV beginning in January, Raffe and Vancouver-based Thunderbird Films are partnering with Rainmaker Animation and Vancouver's Digital Alchemy. The series was first developed by Raffe and her Toronto-based Savi Communications and Debbie Nightingale's Nightingale Productions back in 2001. It was created by Jeff Hirschfield. Raffe says that the technology is not the only thing that has changed about the show.

"Jeff took the show to Deb and she didn't know what to do with it so she brought it to me. I loved the script. I took it around to a few broadcasters. Bonnie Segal at YTV liked it and gave us a whole list of things that had to be changed. I don't think she expected us to come back but Jeff and I just went away and did it all. So she put it in development at YTV and we developed it there. We wrote a bible and pilot and second episode in the spring of 2002 and we shot that fall. It was very character-building because it was a very complex thing to weave the stories in and out of the animated world and to make the animated world look like a game. We had originally conceived the show as live

action with visual effects but that (2001) was the year *Harry Potter (and the Sorcerer's Stone)* came out and we knew that ten year olds had a new standard and that it would look cheesy. We felt we couldn't compete with the new level of sophistication so Bonnie said 'why don't you just do it in animation?'"

Segal also told Raffe that she should use a game engine in order to create the world that the live-action children enter into. Raffe then went out and hired George Elliott Animation in Toronto to build one for her. Since no television series had built a game engine for an animated show, it wasn't an easy process, but the show looked better and when it made its debut, in the fall of 2002, YTV's ratings were strong. However, the international sales that Raffe was depending on to finance a second season never happened. She told Segal that she was going to look for money for season two but that YTV should probably let the time slot go.

"Bonnie said that she would keep it open for another two months," says Raffe. "Then she met the people from Thunderbird Films at Banff and I got this phone call from (Thunderbird's) Mike Shepard and he said 'I hear you have this fantastic show.' But I was fed up with it by then. I had done hundreds of budget scenarios but you get to the point where you just think 'kill it.' I sent him a couple of tapes from season one and he got back to me the next day and said 'we love it. Let's do it.' He managed to set the show up at Mainframe (Entertainment) and they bought out the people who owned the international sales rights. Between Mainframe and Thunderbird there was enough money to put together a second season."

Soon after, Mainframe was bought by Rainmaker Animation. Paul Gertz, the executive vice president of Rainmaker says that there are similarities between the evolution of video games and that of animation. Both, he says, could fall victim to the advancement of the technologies that have made them popular.

"I think it's a given that anything that is driven by technology has to be balanced by creative. Animators know that technology leads the creative and that filmmakers and storytellers can get seduced by the tools and forget the story. But the best animation is remembered because of the story. *Toy Story* looked great but it was also an amazing story. So we always need to remember to put the story first even though it is tempting to just let the look of something be a priority. Back in the day everyone was drawing but now animators tend to come from the tech side and learn art and design. That's just a fact. The perfect blend is to hire story tellers and artists who have mastery over the technology."

That blend is something that Gertz says Mainframe had seen in *Zixx* when they got on board for *Level Two*. When it came time to do the third season Rainmaker was overbooked and had to look for animating partners. He agreed with Raffe and Thunderbird that there were several excellent local companies that they could work with in partnership and decided that Digital Alchemy was the best choice.

"We didn't have the capacity but it is our project so we had to find partners. We are fortunate that there is so much talent in Vancouver and we have excellent relationships with the other local companies. I have always felt that great artistry is all about project management which we have been known for and we expected that from our partners and I think that is exactly what has happened in this case."

Sharan Wood agrees. Wood had produced the animation for *Zixx: Level Two* at Mainframe and was responsible for it for *Zixx: Level Three* at Rain-

maker Animation. She says that while Rainmaker was the lead animator and was responsible for all the animation as well as the lighting and effects for the live action component, the addition of Digital Alchemy to the mix was a benefit to the third season.

"I think they brought a different look to it," she says. "They had an artist (Rob Gandell) who had different ideas and the client (Thunderbird) was extremely happy with it. We used a lot of the same assets that we had used for *Level Two* but told different stories and they came up with some interesting ideas for these characters."

Raffe agrees with Wood that Digital Alchemy, which was founded by Rob Gandell and Chris Browne, brought a new approach to the show. She says that once Digital Alchemy had brought some flare to the look, the sets had become bigger and it was time to move the work back to the larger facilities at Rainmaker, which were available four episodes into production.



"The hallmark of both Rob and Chris is that they want to blow the client's mind. So I think they became more ambitious. They were learning all the time. The monsters and creatures are 100% designed and rigged by DA and all of the set work was created by DA. Rob created a fairly complex modular design and this marvellous space set. Then they did some retooling of it at Rainmaker because the backgrounds weren't working. The problem with the set was everything is moving all the time and what we were then trying to deal with was close-ups and cuts. So when you cut to close up you should be able to see it but there is a lot that is needed. So they took the last 10 episodes up to Rainmaker and Chris directed them working with Sharan."

Gandell says that when he watched the first two seasons of *Zixx*, he came to the conclusion that *Zixx: Level One* had the best approach to the gaming aspects of the show. He says Raffe was also looking to go in that direction when she brought Digital Alchemy into the mix.

"Alex said they were hoping the show would get back to a game style and *Level 2* didn't seem to be much about that so it was important to recapture that aspect. There was a lot of nice stuff in *Level One* and although *Level Two* wasn't bad we all felt that *Level One* had stood out the most. So we kind of focused on that. I basically took some inspiration from the writers but I knew it had to have the 'wow' factor which I thought was missing from season two. I felt that in order to bring that back it would be best to let the artists have some leeway. So my team was looking at the producers' vision to see what they saw and then we looked at games for the effects. Eventually we felt that the best way to approach the show would be to not think of it as a series as much as about designing a game."

One of the more unusual aspects of the series was the fact that there would be no fourth season. The game only had three levels to it. So when Gandell and Browne were brought into it, they knew every episode would bring the series closer to its natural end. Browne says they wanted to use that to their advantage when they were working on the show. And he says

they were also excited about the fact that games had changed since the second season.

"The gaming industry has changed a lot since *Level Two* and we wanted to amp everything up and incorporate some of the new gaming ideas into the animation. There are so many CGI films coming out so we wanted to have the coolness factor enhanced. The other thing we were very aware of was that it was the third and final season. So we wanted to make it as epic as possible. We always felt the idea for the show was very cool because you have kids jumping through portals into a CGI universe. Then they become animated and they are fighting aliens. We loved the potential of visual effects because they shoot laser bolts out of their hands and they have all these gadgets and weapons and the idea came from the writers to have this massive universe the characters could go to with all these pods and things. We wanted to show how massive this universe is and that there is a lot of variety there."

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- Alexandra Raffe

Raffe says that all of the people involved in the show were also conscious of who they were going to be showing the series to. She says that the producers had to take into consideration the shifting demographics of the audience as the series moved its way through the early years of the new Millennium

"There are more than two years between each episode," she says. "So the people who loved season one were past the age at season two. We had to go out and find a new audience for the second season knowing that they would probably be past the right age for the show by season three. That handicapped us in a way in terms of being able to sell it as 39 episodes because the way things evolve in this kind of art form the old stuff is really old. If we had any advantage it was that the animation looks great because we had this wonderful post Victorian punk feel to it which had not been plundered much in the game world. As a result, people could not say 'we have seen this done a million times, and done better.' The look was unusual and I loved the fact that in the show the gears were moving and cranking and the steam was hissing out of everything. I think that in those terms season two was probably the least successful and the least innovative of the three."

Gandell says that he was aware that the show was being targeted to a youth market but didn't want to give up on the older audience. He felt that if *Zixx: Level Three* had an interesting enough look it might be able to keep the audience from the other seasons and add a new one.

"I set out to make it look cool for everyone," he says, "including university students and adults. One thing I liked to play a lot with was light and colour in terms of going to the various universes within the show. I was very fortunate that I was given a lot of visual control by the producers and our partners. I felt that if we could add some innovative visuals it would make it cool for an older audience. I would do some sketches and they would say 'maybe change this' but usually they would say 'that's cool. Can you take it even further? What else do you need to do?' I think it worked out because we had a really good relationship and we (Digital Alchemy) were given a lot of freedom. We were very fortunate." ■