Interview with Claudia Katz Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

10-13 minutes

In May 2012 Claudia Katz sat down with MIP to discuss Rough Draft Studios, running a global animation company headquartered in Southern California, and how the animation production process works with scalable labor.

Claudia joined Rough Draft in 1994 to produce *The Maxx*. Since then she has produced numerous projects for film and television including: *Futurama,* the series, *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Full English*, *Happy Families*, *Sit Down, Shut Up*, all four *Futurama* DVD features, *The Simpsons Movie*, *Drawn Together*, *Star Wars: Clone Wars I & II*, *Baby Blues*, *Spy Vs. Spy*, the *Looney Tunes* Theatrical Shorts; *Duck Dodgers in Attack of the Drones* and *The Whizzard of Ow*, the CBS pilot *Vinyl Café* and the Cartoon Network pilot *Nancy Stellar*. She is currently working on *Futurama* Season 7, *Full English*, various pilots, and in-house development. Claudia has received an Annecy Award for her work on *The Maxx*, Emmy and Hugo Awards for *Futurama*, Emmy Awards for *Star Wars: Clone Wars I & II*, and Annie Awards for *Bender's Big Score*, *Beast With A Billion Backs*, and *Into The Wild Green Yonder*.

Global Partners and Competitors

May 2012

How does an animation studio survive in an environment where a lot of content is put online and revenues are unclear?

That’s an interesting question. Ultimately, versatility is survival. You can't just do one thing one way and assume that will always work out for you. We really try to adapt and figure out how to crack different models.

To some extent the web model is still very nascent. I remember the big CD-ROM craze when there was some money in that. Then the bottom dropped out. Then there was the first wave of Internet content. We had numerous meetings and everybody would get very excited, but as the producer in the room I would say, "Okay, so how do you make money?" The potential client, who was also hopeful we would co-finance, would get quiet and say, "Well, we don't know yet." It's hard to jump into something when there’s no vision to monetize it. We’ve now evolved to the YouTube model. There is a basic math there, but it’s still working its way toward profitability for folks like us. It pays approximately a thousand dollars per million views. As a production model, we can't really make that work unless we create something that has a large ancillary market. Or, you look at it as a way to build an audience for another platform, a backdoor to selling a show with an established audience.

Another adaptation is to expand our client base. Right now we

are producing a series for England's Channel 4. Channel 4 has had great success running reruns of *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* and someone at the network finally said, "What if we did our own British animated sitcom?" So, Channel 4 commissioned the Williams brothers, two terrific British writers. Then, instead of looking for an animation studio in England, which, I'm sure, is not that easy, they asked who was doing the best work in animated television. Luckily, they thought of us. The challenge is their model is very different. They tend to do short orders on series, which make their already modest budgets very challenging. To them, the budget represents a very big commitment. To us, it's a challenge—how do we get a prime time-quality show done on a smaller budget? For now, I think we've figured it out, but it may be difficult to sustain. It also helps that we're co-producing the series.

I think it also represents a functional model of globalization. The show is written by British writers, which is crucial as the show has that wonderful British sense of humor and is full of cultural references. The Williams brothers are doing what they do really well. We are doing the animation portion, which is what we do really well. And it's just a very interesting partnership. I hope it does really well. We'd love to do more! It's been a great collaboration.

Are you in global competition with other studios?

I think that is more of an issue for our studio in Korea, which is a separately run business. It competes with India, other studios in Asia and the Philippines. It has made its mark by offering a very high quality of work. I would say our competition is largely

domestic.

Is it beneficial to you to get the feedback as you show your work?

Yes. We are getting that feedback instantaneously. We can come back to the office knowing what we have to work on. Time is money. We can jump back in and start working on stuff instead of waiting to get notes from people. The only downside to the series we are doing with Great Britain is the time difference. Even with the convenience of email, if you don't reach people by mid-morning, you are stuck waiting at least another day to hear back.

Do you find any of those problems when working with your shop in Korea?

Not really. I think the advent of email and the ability to transmit larger files back and forth has solved that problem for the most part. Ten years ago you would come in and find a pile of faxes on the floor to sort through. Now it's just much easier for people to keep up because of the proliferation of email. I check my email before I go to bed. It does make you more plugged in, but I think that's just life. I would much prefer to sort something out through email than get a phone call at midnight. Korea can also transmit fairly large files to us instead of shipping everything via courier. We can't receive a whole show this way—it's too much data, but it's perfect for retakes and last minute fixes.

Does being in Southern California matter?

I think for the work we do it does. When we deliver a cut, we go over to the offices of *Futurama* or *Napoleon Dynamite*, for

example, to screen it. We sit and review everything in person and it makes communication much more efficient. I also think spending time working together builds relationships and a mutual respect for each other's work.

Even in our globally competitive environment it really does matter that you can go across town and have a meeting?

Absolutely.

Production Process and Labor

May 2012

Can you explain the process of animating a series for cable and for network and how those processes are different?

The process is generally the same regardless of whether the series is for network or cable or even a feature. The great variable is budget and our production model is largely determined by the budget. At this point we have a very finely tuned workflow that we can customize for each project. At times I'm still amazed at some of the work we can do at challenging price points.

Animation production is an incredibly labor intensive and collaborative process. These shows go through a lot of departments and are touched by many talented hands. In addition, we do a fair amount of CG animation with shows like *Futurama*. So, once we've screened our storyboard animatic we go through and figure out what shots are traditional, what shots are all CG and what shots may be a combination—which

kicks off that process. Then we continue prepping the episodes in final design, color key, and final timing to ship overseas for Animation through Digital Ink & Paint and Composite.

How long does this process take?

An episode goes overseas for about 14 weeks. They send us back a rough composite and we go back through and continue to finesse the color footage. We probably revise a minimum of 80 percent of the footage before the client ever sees it. We are very OCD here.

How long does each episode take to produce?

The process takes about 31 to 32 weeks from the point we receive the track and start storyboarding and design to when we deliver color. We screen the color for the writers and producers and there is still another revision process to be done after that. However, we are honing and honing as we go so that when we get to the end there is usually just a little punch up.

In all, each episode takes around 7 months, but the production of the episodes is staggered so we can deliver the shows to air episodically.

Do the majority of your labor resources go toward *Futurama*?

We staff each production we work on independently so the crews don't really overlap. However, *Futurama* is an incredibly complex show from a design, storyboarding, and directing standpoint. We'll have episodes where you travel to three different worlds. That variety creates a tremendous amount of

work as opposed to a traditional sitcom where you've got your home and work locations, and you are really getting a lot of mileage out of those. I think it's challenging but really fun for the artists because they aren't just drawing the same things over and over again.

What are animators concerned with in terms of their guild politics or their workplace concerns?

I'm not that familiar with guild politics, but I think workplace concerns are pretty universal. Everybody here works pretty hard and does a really good job. All the results go on the screen. We could not do the work we do without the talented people in this building. I think the main things our employees are worried about are one, that the studio will have a good, long run of work for them, and two, they do a great job. I think those worries are very basic and universal.

How many folks do you have in your shop?

We probably have about 85 people right now.

How many of those 85 people do you define as long-term employees?

We have a core staff of about 25 people.

So, that means that 60 people in your shop can vary depending on workload?

We can fluctuate anywhere from 25 people to 160 people depending how many projects we have in production at once. When we were doing the *The Simpsons Movie*, we were also working on the last season of *Drawn Together* and

the *Futurama* DVD movies. That was our critical mass moment of about 160.

Is this pretty standard for the way that most shops are organized in the animation industry?

Definitely.

Are most shops also nonunion shops?

No. I think we are one of the few nonunion shops out there. However, I should mention we have also done union productions. I think it's important to have a non-union option for artists. Not all artists are supportive of the union. If working at a union studio is important to an artist, they have many other places they can go. I think Pixar and our studio are non-union, but I'm not sure whom else.

Do you think the industry is subject to a lot of uncertainty for the work force? How do you try to create continuity at Rough Draft?

We're very lucky to have had a fairly good stretch of work. Most of our current crew including our directors has been here for at least five years. Recently, we've had very good luck streaming projects together in a way that sustains our staff plus our additional production crew.