

Interview • The art of independence



Lynette Clee talks to Till Nowak, a one-man army taking his studio, frameboX, on an adventure ride in the CG industry

The art of independence



Company frameboX
Founded 1999
Company website
www.framebox.com

Country Germany
Expertise Concept art, visual effects, product design, illustration, light installation
Software used 3ds Max, V-Ray, After Effects, Photoshop
Client list ZDF German Television, Aardman Animations, HR Giger, Schott Glass, Mercedes-Benz

“Nothing captures me more than movies, and so I see the key to my happiness in making them, to become part of what I love most. I don’t want to separate my work from my private interests”

Till Nowak is a digital artist, designer and filmmaker

Born in Germany, a young Till Nowak grew up in a family of artists surrounded by all kinds of inspirational art, going on to discover 3D software at the impressionable age of just 16. From there it was almost no time at all before he set up his own company, frameboX, which was launched when he was 19 before even graduating from school.

Never one for being tied down and always striving for complete independence, he stays motivated by remaining an efficient, one-man unit, with more project offers than he can possibly accept. This makes negotiating easy for him and puts him in the enviable position of being able to choose exactly what work he takes on week-by-week, leaving the less exciting projects for others in the industry. Having transformed as both artist and studio owner over the last ten years, and equipping his studio step-by-step as projects and budgets have grown in size, he’s taking frameboX on an international adventure

ride, exploring all fields of the CG industry. Of course, this could very well change in the future as his projects continue to get bigger and require more commitment from him; however, in the here and now he is more interested in pushing his creativity than maximising profit, which keeps his passion for CG very much alive and kicking!

3D Artist: Can you tell us about your educational background and how it has helped your career?

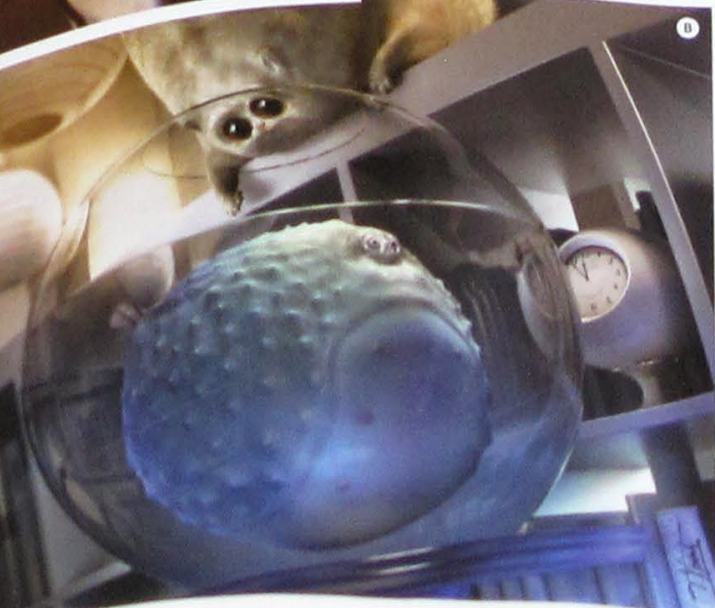
Till Nowak: After founding frameboX I studied media design at the University of Applied Sciences in Mainz. I didn’t really need to go there to learn the software and techniques, but from an artistic input and feedback point of view it was essential. Through studying I learned about the many artistic possibilities with electronic media that I didn’t know about before. Without it, I would probably still be designing websites and brochures, as I was doing before. After graduating I shifted towards cinema,

❶ Blowout at Exit 16A

“This image is as much 2D as it is 3D, based on a render mixed with photos. Created in 2008 for the book *Carnivora* by Leslie Barany.”

❷ Can’t smile without you

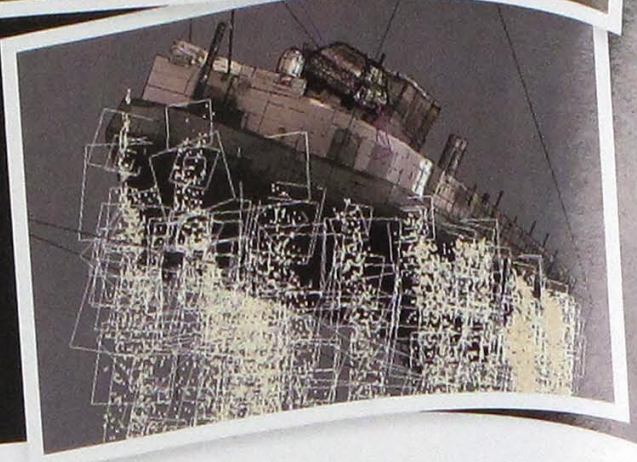
“This image is an example of my recent interest in spheres.” The image features spherical objects throughout the scene.



Interview • The art of independence



“Most of my projects are completely managed online, and some of my clients I don't even meet at all for work reasons”



+ experimental and fine art – I discovered that there was a much more exciting side to media than the business one.

3DA: *What is it about animation and filmmaking that captivates you and caused your shift in direction?*

TN: As a consumer of all kinds of art, nothing captures me more than movies, and so I see the key to my happiness in making them, to become part of what I love most. I don't want to separate my work from my private interests. In order to become happy, my passion, motivation and skills have to come together in my job.

3DA: *What services does frameboX offer and what expertise do you need to have in order to keep the studio afloat?*

TN: I offer design illustrations and concept art, mainly for environments, products and vehicles, 3D visualization for documentaries, visual effects, music videos and light installations.

My studio basically consists of ten computers with lots of software licences, a big screen, a telephone, and all sorts of things that have come together over the years. I operate everything, but I also share my office space with a couple of good friends who work independently as designers.

When I founded frameboX in 1999 together with a good friend of mine, Tobias

Hofer, who left the company in 2001, we offered the typical kind of small graphics freelance work like web and print design – not much 3D. The important difference between frameboX and regular freelancers then was that right from the beginning we only ever worked from our studio with our own equipment, presenting ourselves as a company from the start. This made it possible for us to work on several projects at once, using the gaps in between – usually while waiting for feedback – to manage other work. By investing our hard-earned money back into equipment, the company grew by itself.

Over the last few years I've changed my time management from working on 50 to 80 small jobs to working on only 2 or 3 bigger projects per year. This has reduced my phone calls from 30 to 1 per day, which makes me much happier as I can dedicate more time to things.

3DA: *Can you name some of your main clients and tell us what projects you're currently working on?*

TN: Over the last months I've created a lot of concept art and design for Aardman Animations. In October I performed a large-scale light installation on a castle for the Monumedia Festival in Naples, and earlier this year I created a music video for the German pop group Ben*Jammin, which was

presented at SIGGRAPH 2009 in New Orleans. Since 2007 I've been working with HR Giger on concept animations that were exhibited in a recent Giger exhibition in Germany and Finland, and I also created a record cover for the recent album of the German band Tokio Hotel.

Right now I'm working at Aardman Animations in Bristol, England as an environment designer on a new full CG feature film, which is actually working outside my own studio for the first time in ten years.

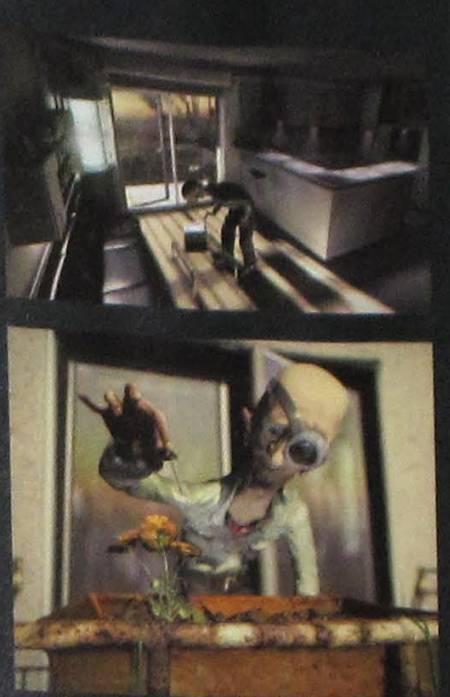
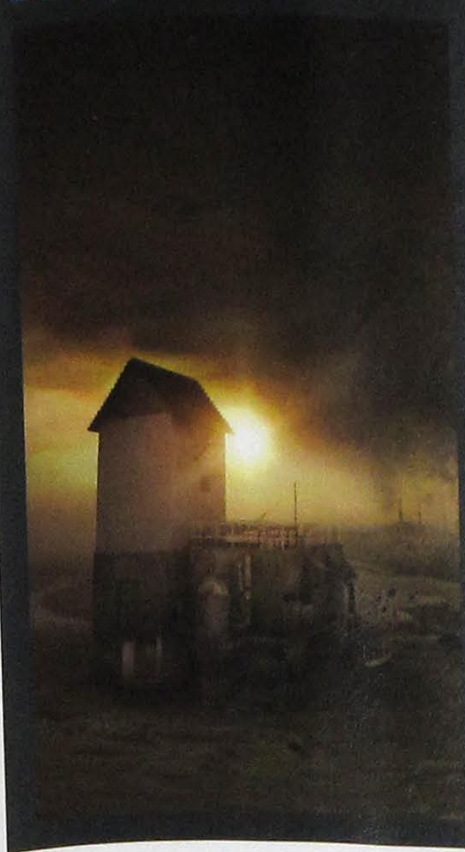
3DA: *How does your location in Germany benefit your studio and make you a great choice for clients looking to hire you?*

TN: I didn't choose Germany because of its business opportunities; I was just born there. But it's a good country to live and work in because our infrastructure works well and everything is safe, in a way. But honestly, with the way I work it probably doesn't matter much where I am – as long as I have my equipment and a fast internet connection!

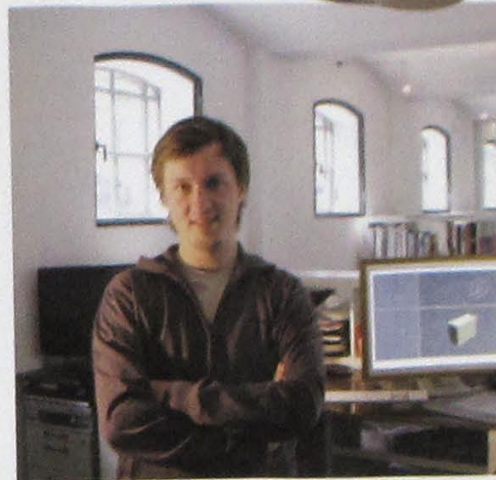
Most of my projects are completely managed online, and some of my clients I don't even meet at all for work reasons. In this weird electronic world, locations and distances are not that important any more, which of course makes it even more necessary to step away from the screens

Key Project 1

Delivery



This nine-minute surreal short film opened the doors to filmmaking for me. It was presented at SIGGRAPH 2006 and has won more than 35 awards all over the world, including the AFI FEST Hollywood and the Animation Festival in Annecy.



and office at times to stay in touch with the real world outside.

3DA: What hardware and software do you find yourself using most often now, and why are they essential to your production pipeline?

TN: The base for everything I do is 3ds Max. I use it for sketching out and pitching ideas from the early beginnings of a project through to the detailed final modelling and rendering. I will also often use it to plan light installations on real buildings – as well as to plan where to put furniture in my new flat when I move! Max has become as essential and universal for me as a piece of paper and a pencil would be. And the more essential it is, the more difficult it becomes to try and learn other packages, such as Maya or XSI for example. Max is just the software I started with early on; I've learned to control it.

I also use V-Ray, After Effects, Photoshop and SynthEyes, as well as some other small tools and plug-ins here and there.

3DA: Could you give us an insight into your typical production pipeline for a short CGI film?

TN: My workflow is a bit unusual because I'm very often improvising and not worrying too much about how things are 'usually done'.

I start by designing directly in 3D, without sketches on paper, because I can express my ideas better and faster this way than I can with a pencil. This is just because I'm not trained to draw, although I do admire those who can! I then build my scenes as a universally working set for all camera angles, rather than breaking it up into different scene files for close, wide or other shots, as film productions usually do. This means I animate a whole scene and then search for the camera angles instead of other way around – I am more 'live-action' oriented in my way of thinking. I then render image sequences, usually with an extra z-depth pass and several matte passes to mask objects, and polish it altogether in After Effects. I often render much more material than I will finally need, which

gives me freedom in editing and leaves the whole rhythm of the piece open until the end. Big animation productions would have to lock the editing down using an animatic beforehand, since that's the only way to manage the capacities of a big team.

3DA: How about for a still image, what is your workflow then?

TN: For a still image I usually start by modelling the key idea or key object within the first few hours, and then build the scene around it during the following days. As with animation, I jump over several production steps and include materials and lighting in my scene from the very beginning. I just don't like to model a whole scene first in grey shading, do the materials next and the lighting last; I want to see it all at once. There is one step at the end that is the final reward, making it all worthwhile: the 2D post-polishing in Photoshop. Whatever render might come out after two weeks of 3D fine-tuning will be boosted to double the quality by just two or three hours in Photoshop when working on top of it; defining lighting accents, enhancing the mood, colour, depth, atmosphere, lens distortion and so on.

3DA: You can't tell us too much about the current project you're involved in at Aardman unfortunately, but how about the

C "Humanoid is an album cover created for Tokio Hotel." With the band being an international number one hit seller, this image has been great exposure for Nowak's 3D still work.

D "This music video, Spring, was created for the German pop group, Ben Jammin using 3ds Max native particle systems to create water and debris during the jump scenes."

E "In some of my images you can see my passion for bold, spherical shapes, for example in this concept car design. I love to play with the simple yet perfect curves of a circle."

F "Me and some good friends share our office space while having completely independent businesses ... This kind of working environment is the best and most relaxed I have seen so far."

Key Project 2 Salad – CG Image

Salad was created with 3ds Max and Mental Ray, printed on canvas, brushed with a special, thick varnish and presented in a heavy wooden frame at SIGGRAPH 2007 in Boston. It's a tribute to HR Giger and Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who created portraits of vegetables and other objects in the 16th Century. HR Giger is the Swiss artist responsible for the original *Alien* design, and Giger himself invited me to visit and work with him after he saw this image. We became friends and have worked together since on some animation concepts.

Another offspring of this friendship has been the image, *Blowout at Exit 16A*, which was created for the book project *Carnivora*, curated by Leslie Barany, who is Giger's agent.

“I've been working with HR Giger on concept animations that were exhibited in a recent Giger exhibition in Germany and Finland”

+ *VFX and direction you did on the music video Spring?*

TN: *Spring* is a music video filmed with a shaky, documentary-like handheld camera, extended with match moving visual effects. The visual effects gain their impact from the rough and seemingly unplanned footage – and the shots were indeed not planned! The rough story and the locations were defined, but on purpose no preparations or exact definitions existed for the scenes; I just had to be careful to keep the actors out of the line of sight between the camera and any potential VFX object. Later I selected the most promising scenes and spent two months building the 14 VFX shots. I used camera mapping and match moving to transform existing objects from the actual locations into 3D objects and throw them through space.

3DA: *What is the most difficult part of a project like that, and how do you go about solving problems when they arise?*

TN: The challenges inherent in any project are probably communication and different creative opinions. In this case the record label and the band loved the video, but wanted to see more direct performance in it. The original version of the video had a pure, realistic documentary style without

any performance, so all the scenes showing the band singing were shot three months later during an extra session and then included later. Generally, when technical problems occur, I enjoy it much like a sport to find workarounds and solve problems with unofficial methods. I don't usually look for plug-ins or extra tools for problem solving, so long as I can see an opportunity to resolve it with any kind of trick or cheat!

3DA: *As well as your studio work you also produce independent artwork, which clearly contains a touch of your humour. What inspires you to make these?*

TN: I start with such artwork when I have an original idea that I haven't seen anywhere else, and I'm usually so curious to see what it would look like that I create it for myself. Because this requires some free time, they don't happen too often; I do maybe one such still image per year.

Inspiration comes from so many different sources that it's impossible to list them, and often I don't even remember what originally triggered an idea. They tend to come from a combination of thoughts that I've had in mind for years, sometimes since a child, that suddenly come back to me as an idea for a CG still.

3DA: *What has been your most accomplished work to date?*

TN: In 2005 I created my short film, *Delivery*, within six months, created as my graduation work after studying.

I didn't expect much and entered it to just three small film festivals. It won awards at all three of them, so I sent it to 50 more... and then to another 50 after that. It brought me three years of travelling from one festival to another receiving more than 35 awards, including one in Hollywood at the AFI Film Festival 2006, one at the Annecy Festival, as well as a nomination at the European Film Awards – not to mention endless new contacts and job offers. This little project really changed my life. In total, the film has been screened at more than 200 film festivals.

3DA: *What are your plans right now and what can we expect to see from framebox in the future?*

TN: My big plan is to make a new short film, which I have been struggling with for a few years because I've allowed myself to be interrupted by attractive project offers. I also recently received an offer to create a permanent light installation on a building that will be physical, rather than digital. So I'll see what comes, and hope to explore more fields of visual creativity.



G "The Shaved Bumblebee - no words needed!"



I



J



K



H *Souvenirs* is an experimental video produced in 2007 by Till Nowak and his brother Nik Nowak, with the help of two friends, Ivan RoblesMendoza and Tobias Hofer.

I "Morning is a training piece from 2003, the year I spent [working on] photorealism. The bubbles on the water are a simple bump map and a white bubble texture on a raytracing material."

J "Dishes is an ironic portrait of our society flooded with electronic media, which I am a part of myself and honestly enjoy it probably more than I criticise it."

K In March 2008, Till Nowak created various aircraft interior designs for SCHOTT AG to be used as a demo environment for SCHOTT's glass and lighting solutions.