CG GARAGE PODCAST #270
ESDRAS VARAGNOLO
SVP OF CREATIVE PRODUCTION, SKYDANCE

Esdras Varagnolo powered up Pixar's pipeline — and now he's bringing his expertise to Skydance. He tells Chris about his incredible, boundary-pushing career.

Pixar's unique fusion of cutting-edge technology with storytelling has changed the face of cinema and given us some memorable movies along the way. A key player behind-the-scenes has been Esdras Varagnolo, who contributed to lighting and compositing on Pixar movies including *Ratatouille*, *Up* and *Cars 2*, as well as shorts "La Luna," "Piper" and "Lou."

Contents

Useful links

Esdras Varagnolo at IMDb >

Skydance Media >

Alex Nijmeh Podcast >

Chris Nichols   You know who I had on the podcast not long ago? I think his episode just came out. Alex Nijmeh.

Esdras V.   Alex! That's awesome. That's funny.

Chris Nichols   He and I were just talking about how our first film that we ever did, the first movie we ever did, we started almost on the same day at Digital Domain on *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Esdras V.   I remember that.

Chris Nichols   I think that's the first time I worked with you. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. I think so, yeah.

Chris Nichols   And you were doing...

Esdras V.   The lighting lead.

Chris Nichols   Lighting lead on the buildings and...

Esdras V.   The city and the New York destruction part, I guess. Lighting through that and working with compositing. And you guys were helping out a lot with, obviously, the set modeling and the frozen version of the city and all that good stuff.

Chris Nichols   Honestly speaking, that show was obviously met with challenges and my audience has heard many stories about those challenges. But I really thought it was through those challenges, we became a pretty tight and fun group to work with, I think.

Esdras V.   Absolutely. I remember, because we basically transitioned to the next couple of shows after that; *I, Robot* and *Stealth*.

Chris Nichols   *I, Robot* and *Stealth*.

Esdras V.   So, it was a good primer.

Chris Nichols   It was a lot of fun, it was a lot of fun. So, one of the things that people like to hear is, and sometimes the opportunity that I get is that, even though I've known people for years and years, I don't actually know their origin stories. On podcasts I get to find out about it, and so a lot of people who may know you will have that opportunity as well. So, what is your origin story, as a young man growing up in Venezuela?

Esdras V.   So, I basically was born and raised in Venezuela. I lived there until I was in my early-20s and studied architecture there.

Chris Nichols   You were an architect, too?

Esdras V.   Yeah. Like every other person in the industry, I guess.

Chris Nichols   That's right.

Esdras V.   And then I relocated to California really, to try and pursue a career in traditional animation, hand drawn animation. I didn't want to do any computer graphics whatsoever, all I wanted to do is just draw and animate traditionally. But when I got here, basically that industry was just dying. It was, I think, 1996 and a couple of flops from Disney had just happened and *Toy Story* had just come out.

Chris Nichols   '93.

Esdras V.   Well, *A Bug's Life* actually because *Toy Story* was '94, but the next one was *A Bug's Life* or something like that. That traditional animation was going away and 3D was taking over, so I switched gears and started looking into pursuing a career in CG and-

Chris Nichols   But you didn't have much exposure to computer graphics at that time.

Esdras V.   No, no, no. None whatsoever. My first gig was at a company called VisionArt, down in Santa Monica.

Chris Nichols   How did you get that gig?

Esdras V.   Well, a friend of mine was a compositor there and she was like, "Hey, we are looking for PAs, basically." And I was like, "Totally, I'm there. I'll go there and I'll do the errands or whatever and then in the meantime, if you have a workstation that I can use to learn this stuff, that could be great." And they were totally cool about that. That place had a lot of peaks and valleys, when we were in full production there was, obviously a full house, full of Indigo stations and all the SGI boxes, at the time. But when I started, they were basically pretty light at the time, and so there were a lot of open stations to sit down and learn.

Chris Nichols   What were they doing mainly? Commercial work or...

Esdras V.   Well, initially they were doing a lot of commercial work and then some TV stuff, like *Deep Space Nine*. A lot of that work came out of there and some of the talking animals films, a lot of spillover work from Rhythm and Hughes, and *Godzilla* was one of the big ones. And then, just traditional compositing work with some effects. But then, that company folded and we went out of business and then, a friend of mine, Aladino Debert.

Chris Nichols   Aladino, yeah.

Esdras V.   Aladino moved over to Digital Domain, he was like, "Hey man, we need help over here."

Chris Nichols   This was around 2000?

Esdras V.   2001.

Chris Nichols   2001.

Esdras V.   So my first day was actually September 11th, 2001.

Chris Nichols   Oh, wow.

Esdras V.   Over at Digital Domain. So obviously I couldn't start that day and the sequence I was supposed to start on was one of a meteorite shower destroying buildings, so that got cut. So, it was an interesting time and I got to meet a lot of great people on that show.

Chris Nichols   Which show was that?

Esdras V.   It was *The Time Machine*.

Chris Nichols   *The Time Machine*, that's right.

Esdras V.   I got to work with great people. Again, DD was a great place to come in and definitely learn from a lot of super experienced people, but at the same time it was very open with knowledge and sharing things. There was definitely a feeling of, everyone's trying, it was all about the work, but at the same time, have fun while doing it. It's very intense, long hours, definitely a young man's game at the time. Emphasis in a lot of male...

Chris Nichols   Very male-centric.

Esdras V.   ... energy at the studio.

Chris Nichols   I think when we were in the Digital building at that time, I think there were two women in the entire building that were working there.

Esdras V.   Our group, definitely really, really small presence, which has definitely changed over the years. When I moved over from Digital Domain to Pixar, I actually got to see a much balanced representation on both sides. So, DD was definitely very old school, early CG computer graphics stuff and obviously that company has evolved a lot. But at the time, there were no real schools teaching this stuff. You had to sit down and put a lot of time and effort on your own to keep up with things.

Chris Nichols   But it was still a good environment for learning and a good opportunity for people like you and me to basically grow pretty quickly. They gave you opportunities to jump into lead positions very easily. If they saw potential in you and they saw that you could do something, they gave that to you pretty quickly.

Esdras V.   All the shows were very intense in nature, so you get to test the metal really. You get to see what people are made out of and how they react in very stressful situations. For the most part, everyone kept their cool and were able to make things work and just roll with the punches, in a good way. So, I think that you got to see what certain folks were all about pretty quickly. There were some politics, like any other place, but not as established, like a bigger infrastructure and a 1,200 people shop or something like that. They've been there for a long time, there's a lot of legacy and all that stuff.

Chris Nichols   I know, Sony for example when I was there, was much more of a traditional company, corporation, so you had to step the ladder up to get to where you need to be. It wasn't, throw you in the fire and see if you survive.

Esdras V.   The turnover was high at DD, obviously, and they didn't have a big staff, so they kept a core group of people that they felt, "We could keep those people around and we know, if we get a show, we're going to be able to survive with these folks and then ramp up when the time is right." That's the model they had for a long time and I believe they still have to some extent.

Chris Nichols   To some extent. It was curious though because you got on to *The Time Machine*. But did you go into lighting for *The Time Machine*?

Esdras V.   No, no. Basically, my job for that one show was to work on a 1,000 frame shot.

Chris Nichols   The big time lapse.

Esdras V.   Big time lapse, so it was basically modeling the city, doing a lot of modeling and some shading work and working with Andy actually, Andy Waisler, who was the lead for that shot. And then-

Chris Nichols   Eric Nash, I believe, was the supe on it.

Esdras V.   Eric Nash was the supe. Basically, that was my enter to the show and then, after that was, immediately got picked up to go and work on *Star Trek: Nemesis* and that was all about lighting, modeling, and shading, working with compositing. Sonja Burchard was my mate on that particular show and it was really hard, a lot of work for one person, but again I got a lot of experience. I was working with Gaku Tada.

Chris Nichols   Gaku.

"The Day After Tomorrow" and sham-positing

Esdras V.   And Chris, were you in that show? No, you started on *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Chris Nichols Started on *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Esdras V.   But just right after that one, I guess. But again, it was a great show to be on and a lot of learning. All these shows are always very, very hard. You remember at the end when you're done with it, it's like, "Gosh, I feel like, I could look back at it right now and feel, that was a great time." Even though I remember it being a very, very difficult thing to do, especially as you're growing as an artist and you're thrown into all of this work and responsibility. I guess I didn't drown after that, we kept it up.

Chris Nichols We did. I think there's one thing that I remember specifically that you championed and I don't know if you came up with the idea, but I certainly remember you being a big part of it. Which has now become honestly something that's become very important to some extent or has evolved, was the idea of shader-compositing. You called it sham-positing or shampoo.

Esdras V.   Shampoo.

Chris Nichols And it was pretty cool because the idea here, let's get a little more technical, but the idea is that instead of having the final beauty render and just go with that and say, "Best of luck," to the compositor, what if you could break down everything that was going on in the shading of that object into different components? Re-composite those elements, which is what the render does naturally, but render them separately by re-compositing them, but then see all the layers of the composite and then be able to adjust your shading in the comp itself. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. That was definitely an effort. Chris Harvey-

Chris Nichols Chris Harvey.

Esdras V.   ... and myself were working on that for a long time. Chris Harvey was basically engineering how to tell RenderMan how to break all the elements.

Chris Nichols He still works for Pixar and RenderMan.

Esdras V.   No, he's done with that. He was up in Seattle working at RenderMan, developing software with them, and then he's now, I believe down here.

Chris Nichols Oh, really?

Esdras V.   In the LA area-

Chris Nichols   Interesting.

Esdras V.   ... working for Dreamworks. He's the senior shading artist over there.

Chris Nichols   I should have him on. He'd be great.

Esdras V.   Yeah, he'd be awesome. I'm a big fan. So, we played around with that idea and delegated all that stuff to the compositor and figured out, because we needed all this flexibility, and at the time there were no uber-shaders. So, that idea of having a physically possible shader that has been balanced and measured in response to proper area lighting and all that stuff — none of that stuff was there. We were just working with a, not even a ray tracer. Right?

Chris Nichols   No, it's a scanline.

Esdras V.   It's a scanline render. It was the poor man's version of that. Right now you can do that, you push a button and all the elements get produced to you when you need them and you're working with a compositor, "I need the spec pass, independent of this." That's bread and butter, right there.

Chris Nichols   Honestly speaking, I'll tell you this because I remember when you and Chris — you're right, Chris was a big part of it as well — you and Chris were doing that and I saw the power of it. I didn't always agree with it because I always wanted a pure shader of some kind. But I saw the power of being able to do that and what that offered in a lot of the situations, and I really came around to enjoying it. It was interesting actually, for V-Ray itself, when I started to communicate that to Vlado and to those guys, this was a long time ago, and that's what led them to be able to do that, the same thing in V-Ray. They started creating what they called render elements, and so all those render elements came from that influence of what we were doing back on *Stealth*, was when we really did it, I think. Actually no, we did it on *I, Robot* but it was a little bit different. On *Stealth*, we really put it out there. Right?

Esdras V.   Really, really pushed it. I definitely took those learnings over to Pixar, because Pixar was all in-camera, all the time, all a full blown render.

Chris Nichols   Right, if the highlight is wrong, we render the whole thing.

Esdras V.   Exactly, exactly. It took me about 10 years to get that established at Pixar.

Chris Nichols   10 years, wow.

Esdras V.   Yeah, well Pixar is an institution and there's a lot of legacy and it's a hard place to change things if they are not aligned with their pipeline. So, we had to make a

little bit of room for that to be a thing and then, with the advent of big compositing, we pushed that to the next level where we were relying so heavily on deep comp and deep color and things like that for effects and lighting. Not relighting, but massaging the image without having to re-render and all of that good stuff, deep IDs versus cryptomattes. So, a lot of tech that came from that original idea, that seminal point. But, it's gotten to a point where it's everywhere, everyone's using it.

Chris Nichols Everyone's using it now. But I remember that idea, it was talking to you and Chris, but I actually even remember before that was Jonathan Egstad, too, when we were doing it for *I, Robot* because we had the birth of that idea a little bit on that show.

Esdras V. That show, definitely. It was more, we're using things that you don't traditionally use as a pass. You're thinking, "Let's render all this abstract data so that we could make use of it in post and see what effects we can get from that." So it's basically, if you think about it, with gray-shading you don't have to do that now, but you still could leverage that power for other things, especially re-rendering.

Chris Nichols You can do a lot now, just, "Don't worry, I'm fine. I can get it done." Which is really an eye opening thing for me, in terms of specifically the power of compositing. It was the time when I started to realize how much more I can do in lighting in Nuke instead of doing it in RenderMan or V-Ray or whatever.

Esdras V. There's a distinct difference between the effects and animation.

Chris Nichols Sure.

Esdras V. Also there is a certain amount of discipline that is required when you're working an animated film, because you really have to keep things super consistent from shot to shot, versus when you work on that shot that is in this sequence and it has a couple of effects in and around the shot. So, there's the discipline of really nailing the lighting.

Chris Nichols In animation.

Esdras V. In-camera, just make it look good and cheat in the comp. So get your bones and your structure and make it feel like what it is and then, the stuff that doesn't work, fix it in post.

Chris Nichols Post-post. Your responsibility really on the effects, like in *Stealth* or *I, Robot* or whatever, you get it in the ballpark. But really what you're supposed to do is, you're supposed to match the plate, so you always have a reference of the plate to match to. But in animation-

Esdras V. There is no plate.

Chris Nichols ... there's no plate. So you are the plate, which is a very different thing. So, let's talk about that because I remember you left DD right around *Stealth* or around that time. Right?

Esdras V. Yeah.

Moving to Pixar

Chris Nichols It was a big step and I remember we were all very excited for you and proud for you to do that because that was a real exciting thing for you to go there. What led you to Pixar? How did that all happen?

Esdras V. For the longest time I've been a fan of the work that company was producing. Every single film that they did was so inspiring to me. From a storytelling standpoint, they were so solid. Look-wise, I felt like, "We could totally do this, it's so easy and this and that." When I got there, I realized, the tech that they had was very, there's a lot of legacy and to make a really beautiful image took a lot of work. And then I came to appreciate the talent that they had at Pixar and how they can make the images they were producing with the software that they had at the time. So to me that was a little bit of a shock, because here is a company that is making the best possible animated films in the industry and here are the tools they're using.

Chris Nichols That hadn't evolved like some of the others.

Esdras V. They hadn't evolved. There was a lot of, "We've done it like this for a long time and it's worked out. We're going to keep it that way." So having third party packages coming in was hard, but little by little, they started adopting a hybrid approach, "We will have Houdini." They used to have Shake and they dropped that and, "We'll just bring in Nuke." Transition from TIF to EXR.

Chris Nichols So, a lot of that.

Esdras V. It took a really long time.

Chris Nichols Interesting.

Esdras V. The TIF thing, the EXR thing was actually during *Brave*.

Chris Nichols Seriously, they didn't use EXR until *Brave*?

Esdras V.   No, it's 2012 or '13 or something like that.

Chris Nichols And you were talking 16-bit TIFs?

Esdras V.   16-bit TIF. So there's a lot of things that changed, but it was hard to introduce a new file format into the pipeline. It's a big, big thing.

Chris Nichols Well, I remember when we introduced EXRs, I believe it was on *I, Robot*. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. We were working with that exponential RGBE format, and then EXR was landing and DD immediately-

Chris Nichols We embraced it.

Esdras V.   Embraced it.

Chris Nichols But the first thing that happened we realized that is, that we put all the layers into the EXR and then we completely broke our file system because our files were way too big. But we were like, "Yeah, it's great." But I remember, it was a big thing, embracing those EXRs back, this was 2003.

Esdras V.   There's a lot of jumping hoops and things like that. It's like, "We only have 16 layers, 16 channels."

Chris Nichols That's right.

Esdras V.   And then, "Let's hijack that channel and call it channel blah, but we're going to put the normals pass in there." Or did a lot of that weird stuff. And then, that went from 16 to 32-

Chris Nichols And 64.

Esdras V.   ... and then 32 to 64-

Chris Nichols Still not enough.

Esdras V.   ... and then 1024, and then unlimited at some point. As much as your file system can handle these days. But, at the time, it was really, really tricky.

Chris Nichols It was tricky but it was cool. It's interesting, so you dealt with a few hurdles at Pixar in terms of trying to update some of the ideas of modernizing some of the tool sets. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. It was definitely a work in progress. The hybrid approach, again I appreciate the discipline that Pixar had, but at the time it was frustrating because, knowing

that there was something out there that could make your work so much easier and somehow you couldn't take advantage of —it's hard to stomach and watch.

Chris Nichols   This is how I felt by the way, on *The Day After Tomorrow*, with ambient inclusion, when I could just do a freaking ray traced one and it would be done in minutes.

Esdras V.   Right. It's just like economy of scale it's hard to shove a new process into an established pipeline in the middle of a show. It really takes a lot of consensus and changing minds and talking about it around the industry. No one guy is going to tell you how to do it, but you have to see it from all different perspectives.

Chris Nichols   Sure.

Esdras V.   So that was the part that took a little bit of time to do at Pixar, but eventually we got there and, right now it's just, it's working like a traditional shop out there.

Chris Nichols   Sure, sure. Absolutely, absolutely. What were some of the things that you focused on, besides obviously tools at Pixar? You did some of the shorts, you did a lot of those things.

Esdras V.   I've been lucky to have worked on so many different shorts: "La Luna," "Piper," "Day and Night," "Lou." I worked on so many of them and they're all so much fun to do because we don't get a lot of time. It's a small crew and you get to do a lot of things that are experimental and, hopefully, if you're doing your job right, you get to bring some of the stuff back into production.

Chris Nichols   Right. Isn't that the point of the shorts at Pixar?

Esdras V.   Initially. Initially it was the point and at some point it became, "We've done this before. We've done that. There's nothing new to learn here."

Chris Nichols   But it was always, "We're going to make a short to test out-

Esdras V.   Subdivision sur-

Chris Nichols   ... subdivision surfaces. That was "Geri's game."

Esdras V.   "Geri's Game" was one of those things. But, for example, "Lou" was the short that we used to really push compositing and used a lot of deep data.

Chris Nichols   Deep data.

Esdras V.   *The Good Dinosaur* was also another show that benefited from that. Actually, there was these 20 minute episodic short or TV series, made for TV, for *Toy Story*. *Toy Story*, not *of Terror*, but the other one, *That Time Forgot*. I worked on that and that short, on that 20 minute episodic thing, I was able to really push and actually bring it to *The Good Dinosaur*.

Speeding up "Incredibles 2"

Esdras V.   It was all about deep compositing and how can we use lighting and deep comp to do all post operations that otherwise were really hard. And we definitely leveraged it, leveraged it really, really, really hard on *Incredibles 2. Incredibles 2* was a show that we got to, the way we were working, we lost a year off the schedule.

Chris Nichols   How did you lose the year? Was it just...

Esdras V.   It was a decision we made. Can we get this film done by 2018 instead of 2019? And Brad was game for it, John was game for it, and so they talked to the crew, "We're going to try and do this." And then we pushed back and said, "Well, if we're going to do this, we're going to have to do it this way." And that was the opportunity we had to-

Chris Nichols   To push through.

Esdras V.   ... think this whole thing, we started thinking holistically. We started thinking about, "This sequence, we're not talking about the shot anymore." Traditionally at Pixar, you look at every single shot and everyone has something to say and you get notes on that thing and it's looping endlessly. Everyone will find something wrong with it. So what we did was, "You don't get to stop the shot. We're going to play the entire sequence, cut with editorial's cut. We're going to get that up on wheels, on the screen and we're going to sit here and watch it all together. If you see something, call it out. If you don't see it, we're done. So, we were approving entire sequences at the time.

Esdras V.   We had faces and by the time we got to, lighting was actually started with animation. So we pushed it all the way out to the front of the pipe, even with layout, we started making-

Chris Nichols   Just lighting it.

Esdras V.   Lighting it and working on that and by the time we had the animation blocking, Brad was already seeing-

Chris Nichols   What the lighting is going to be.

Esdras V.   ... what the lighting was going to be. It wasn't finished, obviously, but it was 70%. So we knew how much we needed to animate, all this is going to be really dark over here, we're not going to see much performance, let's not worry too much about it. So, a lot of the notes that we found, we went through our database and

we found what was the highest number of notes that you get when you are in final production of lighting. And they mostly were intersections of geometry and/or animation nodes, basically. That you didn't see-

Chris Nichols   That you didn't see before.

Esdras V.   ... because you didn't have the lighting. So now, by front loading the lighting, you immediately saw those things and we got to fix them before we got to that step. So when we got to that phase, 50 shots, all done in a day.

Chris Nichols   Nice.

Esdras V.   Boom.

Chris Nichols   So basically, you changed your review process.

Esdras V.   Yes, yes. We did change it.

Chris Nichols   Were people happy with that or were they frustrated? Or they were...

Esdras V.   Well, there were mixed opinions. You have different schools of thought over there. What's ended up after that, it's a hybrid version of what Pixar used to be versus this. Because this really upended the world, as it were, at Pixar, so it was a hard change. So right now, I know that *Toy Story 4* grabbed whatever *Incredibles 2* had done and really polished it and made it super efficient. I know that their team ended up, at least in lighting, with weeks of savings. And so, that was really, really good. I believe *Onward*, and *Onward* did not use that same approach, but *Soul* is using a mix of that.

Chris Nichols   Interesting.

Esdras V.   So, very, very interesting approaches. Again, Pixar is great because you get to experiment on your show, but the other shows don't have to follow you if they don't feel like it's the right thing for them. So there's a little bit of that creative freedom, which is good and bad.

Chris Nichols   Well, it's always a good thing, this is also at DD. They're saying, "We learned some good things. Some things we're going to keep moving forward and some things we're not going to move forward." Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah.

Chris Nichols   Because I remember the same thing when I was on *Tron*, they were like, "There's a lot of things that we did on *Tron* that were really good, we're going to keep that and we're going to use that on *Real Steel*." And suddenly *Real Steel* was much more efficient, and so those are things that make sense to look at that. That's the

point of the short. It's lower stakes of risk, and then you can try new things and they're like, "Well, let's do that."

Esdras V.   A little bit of a controlled chaos situation, for sure. When Pixar went to adopt Katana-

Chris Nichols   Oh, wow.

Esdras V.   Katana was one of those things we didn't want to drop into a show. So we grabbed a short and did it with Katana, and it was "The Blue Umbrella." It was really, really hard to get Katana to work within Pixar's pipeline, so a lot of work had to be done before it could actually be somewhat workable for...

Chris Nichols   Production.

Esdras V.   Production for *Finding Dory*, which *Finding Dory* took it and did it. So we spent several years getting Katana embedded into the pipeline. Right now, it's a super efficient tool and works great for what Pixar is trying to do. But it always takes a little bit of time to fold one of these main packages into your pipeline, especially when it's handling an entire backend.

Chris Nichols   Well, that makes sense, for sure. But you are now back in LA, right?

Esdras V.   Yeah.

Chris Nichols   So you're back in LA, so what's going on with you now? There's some new stuff happening in your career?

Esdras V.   Yeah. So, I've pivoted a little bit and I'm now still working in animation and trying to, I'm working at this company called Skydance Animation. It's David Ellison's company, he just opened an animation arm and so, we're trying to basically come up with really amazing stories and content that you've never seen before. That's the goal. But ultimately, my position is more one of a global position, where I'm working in LA but I'm also working with our partners in Spain, which happen to be Ilion Animation Studios.

Chris Nichols   Gonzalo.

Esdras V.   Gonzalo Rueda and crew. So, it's been a great opportunity for me and a great learning experience. So, I'm very excited about what the future holds with our two companies. Right now, we have a two picture deal and we have been super busy at it. It's a big, big undertaking to make one of these things and I've forgotten about how hard it is to start from scratch, and how great it is as well. There's no legacy, but at the same time, there are no tools. So, a lot of stuff is being built right now, trying to figure out-

Chris Nichols   It's funny now, I just remembered, you and I went to Spain together. We went to the Mundos Digitales.

Esdras V.   Oh, yeah.

Chris Nichols   And that's where we ran into Gonzalo, over there.

Esdras V.   I think that was before they had started Ilion, or were about to start.

Chris Nichols   About to start it. You and I were both invited by Paul Debevec to do the talk there. You gave a talk on *I, Robot* and I gave a talk on... No, you-

Esdras V.   I did a talk on, I think *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Chris Nichols   *The Day After Tomorrow*. And I gave a talk on *I, Robot*. And also, Dan Lemmon was there and he gave a talk on *The Lord of the Rings* and basically made us look like, oh my god. It was like, "Oh, yeah." But we all worked together, part of the presentation with Paul Debevec and Dan Lemmon and you and I. But we met Gonzalo there, who was a really great guy, really great guy.

Esdras V.   He's always great.

Chris Nichols   Super funny, too.

Esdras V.   Super funny, super smart. So we're working together again, so it's great to see how he is at work and how the crew is over there.

Chris Nichols   Didn't they do, what was that animation about the astronaut that lands on an alien planet?

Esdras V.   *Planet 51*.

Chris Nichols   *Planet 51*.

Esdras V.   That was the one film that they did, quite a few years ago.

Chris Nichols   A long time ago.

Esdras V.   And then, *Wonderpark* was another one that just came out a couple of years ago. When I look at the work, great work.

Chris Nichols   Sure.

Esdras V.   The stories are always a problem everywhere. So, I'm always very appreciative of seeing the work first, for myself, just like, "That was really good. That was excellent." Or, "It was all right." I admire that and I respect the people working

there, it's so great. There's a lot of talent and there's a lot of desire for doing great work. So people are hungry and into it and that's very refreshing. Coming from LA and places like the Bay Area, after you've done your fifth or sixth film, you're a little cynical about the whole thing. And seeing people that are fresh and new and really into their work, it's always revitalizing, for me at least.

New beginnings at Skydance

Chris Nichols   So you mentioned Skydance and that you guys are going to be focusing on story and content that people hadn't seen before. So, what is the content that you guys are looking for in this animation?

Esdras V.   Well, it comes down to just telling really compelling stories and having really good original ideas. That's, to me, the thing that I've seen right now, the focus that I'm witnessing the studio's trying to do. We're currently working on a short that is just, just really, really beautiful. I was so proud to be a part of it. And, our features are also in the same caliber, there's a lot of originality and fresh ideas and a true desire for making something very unique.

Esdras V.   I can not really get into the nitty-gritty of this story, but all I can say is that they are very original with really fresh characters. And we're trying really hard to not be either Pixar or Sony-

Chris Nichols   Or Dreamworks.

Esdras V.   ... or Disney or Dreamworks. We're trying to find our own groove.

Chris Nichols   How has that been? That's been probably interesting to find a-

Esdras V.   It's interesting. We're studying a lot of other films and other studios and their thing and their style. There's a house style for Sony right now, there's a house style for Disney, and there's definitely a house style for Pixar. We're trying to not do that. But we are not falling into the traps of, everyone's doing 2D-looking films, and let's put a toon shader on things and go half 2D, two-and-a-half D and 3D because it worked so well for *Spider-man*.

Esdras V.   We are trying to actually just do quite the opposite. We're like, "Let's take advantage of what the renderer can do and see how much we can push that. Let's build a palace full of glass and refract everything and put all this lighting complexity and detail into things. While it's still making it feel not fully real, but designed and-"

Chris Nichols   Stylized.

Esdras V.   ... stylized, in a good way. So we're also thinking a lot about what our characters are going to be and how they're going to represent our audiences. So, that's another focus and we want to do it right. We don't want to, "We're going to change the color of this shader and now you're an Asian person and this and that." It's more about, really truly representing our audiences in our films, in a way that is respectful and truthful and honest.

Chris Nichols   Interesting. Well, you guys are a pretty new company. Right?

Esdras V.   Yep. Just about a year and a half.

Chris Nichols   A year and a half.

Esdras V.   So, there are big ambitions and definitely a lot of growing pains that come from a startup. There's new infrastructure, there's a lot of things that we are putting together as we go, but a huge desire to make something great.

Chris Nichols   You guys are going to be based in Los Angeles, as well. Right?

Esdras V.   We currently are, yes, and we plan to remain in Los Angeles for the foreseeable future.

Chris Nichols   You guys going to do production here? Or are you guys going to look at doing production... Well, you said Ilion is going to be co-producing with you guys or something. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. So, ideally we were doing a lot of pre-production work over here in LA and some previz and things like that, but the bulk of the work is going to be done with our partners.

Chris Nichols   Well that's interesting. The world of animation is becoming important now. There is going to be a lot of styles, which is refreshing. I think it's actually a good thing that there was a time, and let's go back to when you first started at Pixar, everyone wanted to be Pixar, and so everyone was imitating Pixar. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. The best example I see is, when everyone's trying to get that highlight on the eye, that little pinprick, little highlight that every other studio is trying to, "Pixar did it and it was so good." What I realized is that Pixar did it because they couldn't actually get true, beautiful reflections on the eyes and there was no path tracer to do that. But if we had our way with it, we'd just let the entire world be reflected in there and let it be natural. It was an abstraction of that concept, that represents that reflection. And everyone did that and that became the law and everyone's always trying to do that. But to me, I think that was just basically a design choice and we shouldn't be stuck with that.

Chris Nichols   But it is, there are a huge amounts of styles and there is room for a lot of styles and a lot of creativity right now.

Esdras V.   I think it's great, it's great for the industry to have such an explosion of content right now. Netflix is one of those places that is pushing it and all of our other competitors out there are trying to find their stake in the ground, this is us. Sony's doing an interesting thing, Disney's got their own thing, Pixar is also trying to. ... It's very diverse, I'm liking that. It's good for the industry, it's good for the people working in the industry and I'm very happy that there's a lot of opportunity for folks to still work in animation and have a way to express their creativity in a way that is not stuck to a particular style.

Chris Nichols   Well, I think that is a good thing. And I know the streaming world right now is basically also embracing a lot of diversity and creativity right now. Because I think, obviously, my view is sometimes the cinematic world or the theatrical releases don't necessarily take risks as much, because they can't afford it. They need to make sure that someone sees it. It's like, "Don't worry, it's a Pixar film or it looks like a Pixar film. It'll be fine, you'll like it." So they don't take risks, but the streaming world's like, "We can try it and see what it looks like." That really opens up the diversity of the creative process.

Esdras V.   And also, there are different economics. This is where things land. This is where some interesting stuff could come out of. Not every single film could afford to be a Pixar film or a Disney film because those budgets are just untouchable for the average studio.

Chris Nichols   Sure.

Esdras V.   So, the fact that Netflix is trying to get into the game, at least for the streaming service, and try and keep the cost down. That means a different model of production and that means outsourcing quite a bit. What does that do to the artists in town versus the rest of the population? We're thinking lighters and compositors and people like that, that pool is shrinking a little bit locally because it's more pre-production stuff. So layout and camera and some biz-dev artists and sculptors and things like that, but final modelers and/or-

Chris Nichols   Lighting, compositing.

Esdras V.   ... animators, lighting, compositing, all the backend. Basically the shots departments are overseas. So, the only games in town to do that work-

Chris Nichols   Is it overseas because of the people that are available? Or because of the cost?

Esdras V.   It's straight up the cost. It's considerably a lot more money. We know it takes an army of people to get these films done at the pace that we need folks here in LA to do that, the cost will be sometimes double or triple. So, the economics drive a

little bit of that desire for doing it out there. But also, what's interesting is that, there has been a little bit of a, it's more democratic out there. Now, people working in other countries are hitting the mark closer and closer because of the tools and it's so much better. And you get stuff to look really nice more quickly and so, the secret sauce they used to have because you had all this in-house development is no longer a thing, for most studios.

Chris Nichols   And also the cost of the software has dropped.

Esdras V.   Incredibly. That also made it so that you could have some great talent coming from all over the world, hitting the mark in a way that you haven't seen before, and so it makes it a little more palatable to, "Let's go and open a shop in France or London." Obviously, London is a big game. London is, they're basically taking a lot of the effects work, and then obviously Canada. But then there are other places in the world that are now catching up to that. Spain is doing some interesting stuff, it's a smaller industry there though. It's not as big as say, some places in China are starting to pop up quite a bit and the same thing with South Africa.

Chris Nichols   Interesting.

Esdras V.   So, it's-

Chris Nichols   Australia.

Esdras V.   Australia, obviously.

Chris Nichols   I think it's interesting as well, also in terms of the globalization of things. Another thing that's happened on the technology side has been the advent of cloud and cloud storage and everything else. So sharing resources has become way easier than it used to be. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. That's something that we are hoping to leverage more, a cloud based company versus a something that's a little bit more brick-and-mortar and we have our-

Chris Nichols   Render farm and air conditioning.

Esdras V.   ... render farm and air conditioning, in the basement. So, that's changing and that's actually opening up a lot more opportunities to work.

Chris Nichols   Absolutely, absolutely. The only real challenge, the one that I see all the time, is time zones. Can't help the Earth from being round.

Esdras V.   This is true. We're living it right now and it's communication, to me, is still the biggest problem, the biggest hurdle. And being super clear about what you're trying to do is one of the things that takes a lot of time to get right, so there's a lot

of back and forth that you have to do before you figure it out. We're in the throws of that, for sure.

Chris Nichols   Well, I know, I deal with it. I work with Bulgaria all the time and there's 10 hours difference between the two, so we pretty much only have a three to four hour window to communicate — unless I get up super early in the morning.

Esdras V.   I'm one of those early risers these days.

Chris Nichols   My day starts when I pick up my phone, when I wake up it's like, "You got 27 emails you have to deal with right now." So yeah, that's a challenge there. But it is really nice, the infrastructure of the world in terms of cloud computing. I had a two hour conversation with someone and it felt like they were in the next room, and they were across the globe, so that's an awesome thing.

Esdras V.   All the services are getting up there and we use quite a few of them. They are considerably cheaper than they used to be, too. You're not spending $250,000.00 on a VTC room. It's now, there's the Zooms of the world, Teams or Google, and there's all kinds of things in choices out there that make it a little bit more accessible as well.

Chris Nichols   Well, this is very interesting. So, you said you guys are working on a short. I know you can't tell me what it is or anything. You guys are working on some features, can't tell me what it is or anything, which is all normal. But, can you give me a hint as to when we possibly may see something? A range of time?

Esdras V.   So we're basically aiming to have our first feature landing in 2022. And we still haven't decided if it's going to be in the beginning of the year or summer, whatever, we're still trying to figure it out. But that's the target, '22, and with that we're potentially wanting to have that short open up with the film.

Chris Nichols   You guys are aiming for a theatrical experience?

Esdras V.   Yeah, a theatrical release. It's a traditional release, it will have four legs of deliverables.

Chris Nichols   Well, that's cool. Your role is mainly about being the liaison to your outsource partner?

Esdras V.   Yeah. I'm working with the head of the studio, I'm working with all of the directors in-house and I work with our technology groups and I spent a little bit of time in directing with the production designers, the look and feel of things. We still haven't gotten into full lighting production, but that's my bread and butter. That's the stuff that is so familiar to me, that I will be helping direct. But, that being said, we have so many projects going on at the same time that I'm trying to build a group that will help us manage all of the needs throughout the entire studio. So, I will be working here, working with that group and then doing bouts of time in

Spain, when the time to finish the show becomes a reality. So the last push, basically.

Chris Nichols   Wow. Well, that sounds like it's going to be something to talk about again in a couple years.

Esdras V.   Hopefully, yeah.

Chris Nichols   That's cool, that's cool. I think we ran into each other at SIGGRAPH. I think so, right?

Esdras V.   Yep.

Chris Nichols   So, I was really glad to find out you were in town again and that we should talk and I was like, "That's great." Because you were a very, very important person to me at Digital Domain because I learned a lot from you.

Esdras V.   Thanks.

Chris Nichols   You were always very kind to me because I came from a different perspective about things, and so you listened to some of my ideas, but then you told me, "That's a good idea, but this is how we're doing it this way and this is why." And so, I learned a lot about that thing. And I learned, like I said, sham-positing was something that I remember very specifically learning about and why that was important. Because some guy who did arch-viz for a long time was like, "Why would you do that?" So it was a really big learning experience in terms of feature film lighting, what that means, how to do that, and it was a lot of fun.

Esdras V.   Thank you.

Chris Nichols   It was a lot of fun. Well, cool man. It's just been just almost an hour, that went pretty quick. Right?

Esdras V.   Yeah. That was fun.

Chris Nichols   It was fun. Well, it's really cool. Hopefully, if you have some time, maybe we can grab some dinner after this and catch up some more.

Esdras V.   Absolutely.

Chris Nichols   Because I'm sure we have a lot of more stories to exchange.

Esdras V.   Totally.

Chris Nichols   Well thank you, Esdras, so much.

Esdras V.   Thank you.