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*This is an adapted English transcript of Future et médias, a series of French podcasts on major changes and emerging trends in the media and entertainment industry.*

*I'm Catherine Mathys.*

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*In Season 2, we're looking into how the screen-based industry has been adapting to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*Today, we're focusing on the animation sector.*

*As you know, the health crisis has had a huge impact on the lion's share of production activities in the screen-based industry, starting with a near-total shutdown of all live-action filming. The impact on animation studios has been much less severe since nearly all their work is done on computer. But they did have to do some pretty fancy footwork in record time in implementing new working methods that would allow them to continue operating with a minimum of interruption.*

*To discuss the personnel and technological challenges involved in animation making the migration to teleworking, I met with Denis Doré, president, CEO, and co-founder of Squeeze Studio Animation and Jean-François Charbonneau, vice-president of technology at Guru Studio.*

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**01:38**

- **Catherine Mathys (CM):** Hello Jean-François Charbonneau!

- **Jean-François Charbonneau (JFC):** Hello Catherine Mathys!

- **CM:** How's it going?

- **JFC:** All goes well, and you?

- **CM:** Can't complain. To be well or not to be, that is question. Especially now. And at the same time, it's very invigorating to see so many businesses adapting quite brilliantly to a situation no one could see coming. But before we go into how Guru adapted so successfully to the COVID world, I'd like you to talk about what generally goes on day-to-day inside an animation studio for those not familiar with its unique ambiance. How was it like before?

- **JFC:** I can certainly talk about that. For the past twenty years Guru Studio has been a meeting place really, where people meet to collaborate on projects because animation is, above all, teamwork. In our case, a team of one hundred highly skilled people working frantically, shoulder to shoulder, to generate an endless stream of images mainly seen on TV.

- **CM:** So, I would imagine people with many different kinds of expertise collaborating many times a day, getting up from their desks to check with their colleagues, sitting down in front of their screen to check if the sequence is right. Is that what you mean?

- **JFC:** You got it. There are various departments each working on their own animation section and everything has to come together through the pipeline. The people don't necessarily meet every day, but on a regular basis, several times a week, to discuss the strategies that must be implemented for the stories we want to tell to become reality.

- **CM:** So, you guys must have been really shaking in your boots when you saw the COVID-19 tsunami coming your way. Especially in a sector of the screen-based industry that depends so heavily on

this physical, face-to-face team collaboration. What was your first reaction when all this started hitting the news?

- **JFC:** Yes, well it is part of the animation DNA to prefer working together in a studio. We've had a teleworking policy for years, but the default preference has always been to work on site to make communication easier, so it's no problem for people to talk and meet as often as they need to. The first indication that there could be problems were in the media pieces about preparations businesses were making for dealing with the possibility that maybe 25% to 30% of their workforce might not be able to return to the workplace. You know, what could be done?

[JJJ]

**05:12**

- **JFC:** What could be done was my first question to IT. If all 125 people could not get into the studio and had to log in remotely to telework, could our system handle that? Unfortunately, our experience with teleworking was limited to just a few people who had been given the opportunity to work that way, but nothing on this scale.

The first order of the day was to make the necessary connectivity changes to our infrastructure so that 390 people could connect to all our resources. The next step was to go team by team, and department by department, to see who could work from home, either with studio equipment that could be quickly set up at their home or by virtual desktop connection to their computer in the studio.

*While not a simple task, the transition to teleworking was easier at Squeeze thanks to the operating system already in place between its Quebec City and Montreal studios.*

**06:42**

- **Denis Doré (DD)** I'd have to say the team is doing pretty well considering the context. At the beginning, like everyone else, we were in a state of shock. Fortunately, we did manage to get our heads together in no time at all. Funny thing is that it's precisely at moments like this that you discover just how resilient the team is and the will everyone in the group has in finding a new state of stability, if you like. I'm grateful it happened very quickly in our case. And once we achieved that state of stability and got things going again, we soon were back to normal in terms of productivity and all that. In terms of morale, too. But, like everyone else, we do want to get back to enjoying at least some aspects of a more normal life, and sooner rather than later.

- **CM:** I don't doubt that for a moment. All the same, from what I gather, you've adapted with impressive speed. You have two studios, one in Quebec City and one in Montreal. Were both studios affected in the same way by the lockdown and social distancing measures?

- **DD:** Oh, yes. Both studios collaborate on all projects. So, there's really no difference. When we have to change anything, we do it in Quebec City and Montreal at the same time. Certainly, most of the time anyway. Like we often say, you can be in two places at the same time when you're in our studio. We're really just one team, and we share the same work infrastructure, artists, and specialists on every project. When COVID hit, we had to mobilize as a single group, something we always do anyway, and from there come up with solutions that were more specific in the context of Quebec City or Montreal depending on the issue. But when you get right down to it, both locations are affected in the same way.

- **CM:** So, teleworking already had a place in the Squeeze Studio environment. If you were always balancing team members between the two locations and calling outside experts in, then I guess you already had measures in place for this type of situation.

- **DD:** Yeah, but let's just say I'm pretty happy that we expanded two years ago to Montreal because it made us work on a first version, if you will, of how to remotely give direction to the team. It's certainly not something we had much experience in during our first six years in business when we were only in Quebec City. We were really together. When we opened in Montreal, we weren't working in a vacuum anymore. And that got us thinking a lot. Okay, we now we have two locations in terms of infrastructure. In terms of security. In terms of communications. And that's when we started, back then, about two years ago, of establishing not only technological solutions, but also working and organizational solutions so that both locations would always be in sync.

So, we started doing this. But the reality is, we hadn't really completed the job. Sure, we were all up to speed and we're working well on projects. But we did come up short on our goal of being completely flexible. We were only halfway there. The pandemic forced us, just like everyone else, to really put the pedal to the metal on projects that had been put on ice. Fortunately, we had come a long way in thinking about how to do this. It helped us in accelerating the changes we needed to start teleworking in a big way. But there really is a difference between teleworking at home and connecting to studio data and working between two locations connected by dedicated high-speed fiber. The two studio locations are so well connected there's not even a nanosecond of lag, while those working at home use a connection from an internet provider, for example, that's out of our network. So, there are still technological challenges as well as performance and safety issues.

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**10:22**

- **DD:** I'm quite proud when I look back on the way we assessed the situation and paid attention to what really counted. We quickly got to the bottom of things, or at least the problems we were specifically facing. I think our instinct told us that this was

something that was going to last and that it really was a big deal. Not something that was going to resolve itself in a few days for sure. A lot of this was purely instinctive but we lost no time in getting a small SWAT team together with a mission to, first of all, get people to safety, and that meant getting everyone working outside of the studio. And, secondly, making sure operations could continue without any interruptions.

Because we we're betting that there would be a recovery, not a complete stop, but more like a slowdown. At that point, what we had done was set up a crisis control unit, one that had a management function at its core. Then we started to have a daily meeting and daily communications with everyone in the studio. And when we had that rhythm working, in terms of communications and intervention, you could see that we had established a high degree of trust and everyone was okay because they were beginning to understand that the process gave us a better vantage point to see what to expect next. All in all, it took just 12 days to say mission accomplished. We had achieved our two objectives. In just 12 days, close to 100 of our employees were busy at home teleworking. We had a few snags here and there, with tech and performance issues, but 100% of our people were no longer working in the studio. And on that exact same day, the premier of Quebec announced the shutdown of all non-essential work and ordered everybody home. We were ready to go at precisely the right moment. We had twenty-four hours left to begin the turnaround. We were mighty happy that we had had the foresight to get such an early start in reconfiguring everything so we could continue our operations with no interruptions at all.

[JJJ]

**12:32**

- **JFC:** Then, all of a sudden, we had to find a way for our people to work at home. Let's just say it was easier for us to do that for 3D. We had more experience in that area and the tech resources were less complex. The virtual connection could be made from just about any computer with online access, as long as the bandwidth was adequate. So far, so good. But for 2D, you need peripherals

for drawing on screen with a pen. And that meant getting equipment into homes.

- **CM:** From what I understand you were still able to get deliverables out on time. You lost little or zero in productivity by being able to get everything in place so quickly.

- **JFC:** We had set a deadline of one week to get the entire transition done.

- **CM:** That's some deadline!

- **JFC:** It might have been a bit tight. When we sensed the wave was coming, even before the province required all non-essential businesses to close shop, we were already getting ready for something like that because we had made the internal decision ourselves to switch over to teleworking first. So, in Ontario, as of March 17, all teams returned home, and we spent the first few days getting things ready for the 3D teams to be up and running, followed by the 2D teams a few days later. We gave ourselves a week to get the whole job done. It took just a bit more than a week, but we did get everyone working from home. In general, everything went very smoothly. Better than we could have imagined, really.

- **CM:** And were you pleasantly surprised with the way things turned out? I mean when all the new processes had been put in place. Considering that everything was done in such a hurry. Did you actually think it could have been done so quickly for everyone on the team? And did you find that some of the new ways of doing things weren't that bad after all and that you might continue working that way even when the lockdown was over?

- **JFC:** Yes. It was surprising to see that the quality of our animation work wasn't affected at all.

- **CM:** So, that even after the work passed every step in the approval process, you're saying you were still surprised by the results?

- **JFC:** Yes. The animation quality was still studio grade in every sense.

- **CM:** And that was a big surprise?

- **JFC:** Well it does prove that quality animation work can be done outside the studio and that would certainly surprise some people, and it gave us an opportunity to review some of our ideas about what makes a studio, what makes a studio dynamic, and what makes it a place that can produce a really interesting product.

*"With the gradual phasing out of the lockdown and a return to a new normal, how do animation studios envision the future?"*

**16:56**

- **CM:** The lockdown is now gradually being phased out. Do you already have a plan in place for bringing your people back to the studio?

- **DD:** When we started thinking about that at the beginning, in fact, we felt that any return to normal would be done in an orderly fashion and we wouldn't rush it. Because at that point, once we had established a system that works well enough for the time being, there's no reason to churn up the chaos again to re-stabilize, as it were, and in light of the impact that would have on our teams,

our clients, and all the work we have underway. It's kind of like our leitmotiv. We're saying okay when we do get back to the state things were, we'll do it the right way and we'll take our time. Not just because it's the right thing to do for us, but also because we'll be part of a general gradual return-to-normal effort, something we can do at a slower pace since we're all teleworking anyway. What we're hearing is that there are lots of businesses who've been really suffering and they're the ones who need to get back on the road to normal, so we'll leave them some room on the road. The chaotic nature of the emergency measures in place is hard for people to adjust to. Because we're managing to do what we have through teleworking, we have the opportunity of minimizing the chaos by sticking with steady as she goes.

So, our vision right now is yes, we know we have the go-ahead to get the audiovisual industry going again. On the whole, as part of the animation sector, our recommendation or request is not to do anything too quickly or not to do anything at all in the short term. In the short term we can continue teleworking. Because that's what we're doing right now and it's working. We're going to take our time. We're working on a return-to-normal plan, but it's going to be progressive. It's going to be flexible. It will also take into account how we all help each other, socially, too. Not just as a business, but how can we help each other minimize the chaos and slow down the hectic pace of life. We're entering a zone where it's time to talk about going slowly, and we are not in any rush.

- **CM:** But isn't the plan to return to the physical workplace going mainstream? You don't think you can continue operating on a 100% teleworking basis like you do now, do you?

- **DD:** No, of course not. It's not part of our vision. What's important to us is what's realistic and what is desirable. I think that what is desirable and realistic is really to draw on what we've learned, what we've experienced, in fact, to improve our way of working. Just today we had a meeting that was specifically about

that. Our post-COVID working group. About all we've learned from the experience and what we don't want to forget. About the direction we're moving to. How we can add more flexibility to our current work culture as well as adding our ability for teleworking to the mix. And it is going to be a question about the right mix. Because we think that there is something more involved, as we said earlier, in seeing each other face to face in person, as part of our social fabric. But, also in working as a team in a physical space.

We've certainly learned a lot more than we could have ever before about working remotely because of this experience. I'm pretty sure most people also appreciate the time they save by working from home. Because, seriously, one of the major time factors of working in Quebec City is travel time, and that goes up by a factor of ten in Montreal. It's rush hour coming and going. We're talking two to three hours on average that people are saving every single day. You can be sure they're thrilled with all they can do with that extra time. And it's not only the time saved, but there's a lot less pressure on them and their families in organizing their day so they can get to the workplace. Not to mention getting the kids to school or daycare on time. There's not a second to spare in the rigid daily routine all that used to require. Working at home gives you the freedom to rearrange your schedule to suit everyone's needs, including your own. Suddenly you're able to get everything done with time to spare. Not that this means you can work more hours, but you can work different hours in the day to better accommodate family and other obligations. Once you see how much people appreciate this, once they get a taste of it, you realize it's an asset you want to keep in your business. It's something you want to include as a perk in your job offer. It's definitely something we've given a lot of thought to.

## **21:15**

- **CM:** So, in terms of work organization, there are lessons learned during the lockdown that will continue to have an impact after COVID. Does that go for projects, too? For the work itself? Are there new ways of doing things that will stay in place? Are there

any new methods you've adopted that you'll continue using? How do you see things unfolding in the future?

- **DD:** As far as partnerships are concerned, I hope the security issue will open the door to greater flexibility. Because typically, in our field of animation, with the big Hollywood licensors, there is a culture that is super sensitive on the subject. For a number of years now, I would say it's almost a culture of paranoia when it comes to data breaches.

- **CM:** And with good reason.

- **DD:** Of course, I understand. The stakes are really high. There are some big names. And there are big stars connected to them. And some big, big bucks, too, millions and millions of dollars behind these projects. Believe me, I do understand. On the other hand, we also know that there are security standards, encryption standards, the proven technical means in 2020 to make working outside our integrated systems secure. I admit that nothing is ever totally foolproof, in any case, even within our own studios. Having been forced by necessity, everyone's had to confront reality and relax some of our rules a bit, especially for our partners abroad, among others, to make it possible to find solutions today that work. And when we did and saw that things were still okay, and maybe it's not as dramatic as we thought, then maybe we can open up the conversation a little more.

What it does, clearly for the film, television, and animation industry, is that it allows us to have more flexibility in our offer because one of the major roadblocks we face is when the client says that according to our contract they can't even legally authorize anyone to work from home. It was even a primary roadblock for us with our own people working at home, but we made the decision that we could remove the roadblock securely and give them that flexibility. It can be done, yes. Then, secondly, we work with the

best talent we can find in the world, and while we have a ton of it in Quebec, overall, there's not enough. So, we often give work to incredible artists we've discovered whether they're in Germany, in South America, or somewhere else in Canada. Trouble is we'd have difficulties again connecting these people to our projects because of security issues. By working on that, and then also working on technological solutions that we had in place, we were able to accelerate the process of onboarding talent from all over the world. And that's good for everyone because we're no longer living in a time where we can afford the luxury of doing everything right here in a vacuum. I believe we need to be able to reach out around the world to connect with communities of talented artists and technical experts.

A crisis like this is often the best time to reinvent yourself, to coin a popular phrase, to really give yourself the opportunity to suddenly change things and do the things you should have done long ago. It certainly was an opportunity for us. My focus is on always looking for ways to be better as a team, to be better as an organization. Then, there are lots of things we could, I think, speed up as well, that in other cases we might have had difficulty doing or have hesitated to do even as the head of our own company. So, I think that for many businesses now is a great opportunity for accelerating the change process. Then socially, societally speaking, even economically speaking, as you can see, a crisis can speed up a lot of things that we should have been doing and that we've been talking about doing for a long while. Digitization, online shopping, and all that. Being more open to market forces to make our businesses stronger, more diversified.

- **CM:** So, can I put you down as an optimist for the future?

- **DD:** That I am for sure.

- **CM:** Always!

- **DD:** I'm an optimist, plain and simple. Yes, and always. I'm a true-blue optimist about life in general. The world is taking a beating in 2020. We were among the first. The key is to come up with a workable plan that makes sense. It's our job to do that, to set new goals for the end of the year. We're organizing the best we can. As I was saying, we're in hiring mode because we want to play a part in the recovery in the best way we can, not by stopping but by forging ahead. Not by going slow on the new hires but by sticking to our growth plan so we're ready to really step on the gas to meet new demand at yearend and when the New Year, 2021, begins.

- **CM:** Those are the hopeful words we love to hear. Thank you very much Denis Doré for your inspiring outlook. Like you, we can't wait to see what happens next, especially when the relaunch is in full swing, as you say, in 2021.

- **DD:** The pleasure's all mine. Thank you.

*And that's about it for this episode of Futur et médias, a podcast series presented by the Canada Media Fund.*

*A big thank-you to our guests, Denis Doré, president, CEO, and co-founder of Squeeze Studio Animation and Jean-François Charbonneau, vice-president of technology at Guru Studio.*

*For production notes and a transcript of this episode, please visit the CMF Trends website.*

*Finally, if you've enjoyed this episode, please take a moment to rate the series on Apple Podcasts.*

*I'm Catherine Mathys. See you again soon.*