

Portland's Hinge Expands the Boundaries of One-Stop



Functioning at times like a creative boutique, this versatile studio is changing the hybrid paradigm.



Portland gave us "Bo Knows," that classic Nike spot in which two-sport star Bo Jackson plays hockey, tennis, basketball and guitar, with varying degrees of proficiency. And now it's given us "[Snow Knows](#)," a series of animated comedy shorts in which the "Game of Thrones" character Jon Snow encounters all sorts of dangerous demons and enemies, vanquishing all – and usually getting killed in the process.

The former, of course, is the work of Wieden + Kennedy, which lends some inspirational mojo to the latter, the work of crosstown upstart [Hinge Digital](#). Founded in Portland in 2009, this growing one-stop studio got its start as a 3D and CG animation shop with a flair for character design, as their "Snow Knows" series suggests. But tapping the storied local vibe for creative exploration, collaboration and openness, they've expanded beyond their roots to become a full-fledged, integrated creative resource.

EP [Roland Gauthier](#), Director [Alex Tysowsky](#) and VFX Supervisor [Michael Kuehn](#), Hinge's founding partners, have taken an interesting approach to building out their one-stop capabilities. They've done a kind of Vulcan Mind Meld with people who've worked for some of the top production houses in the business, many of whom have floated through the Hinge orbit in one way or another, either as former colleagues, current staffers, regular freelancers, clients, etc. They also draw on their own considerable background and experience in production, as the partners' resumes includes stints at such studios as Sony Pictures Animation, LAIKA and Disney . The result is a feisty and ambitious studio that's continually reinventing and enhancing its own workflow and approach to problem solving.

The biggest change at Hinge, say the partners, is the growth of their live action work as they've morphed into a fully integrated company, one that often carries its one-stop solutions all the way through to music, sound design, even AR/VR development. While some of these capabilities are offered via companies with which Hinge has trusted relationships, much of it is provided by their own in-house roster of talents or their regular roster of collaborators. "We bring all of those pieces together," says Gauthier, "so that clients have a single point of contact to deal with."



Not surprisingly, the nature of their work has evolved too, from mostly local agency

assignments to projects from national agencies and more client-direct work. In the case of the latter, Gauthier adds, “we’re often providing not just production but front-end creative as well. It’s been a huge development for us, and it lets us not only own the creative process early on but gives us more control over the final product. So we’ve really been swimming in much different waters, from a creative standpoint, than when we first launched.”

Driving this, in some respects, has been the growth of its directorial roster, which now boasts a range of talented filmmakers whose work belies the company’s origin as a digital studio working in animation and 3D. And interestingly, Hinge has been itself sought out as a provider of VFX and animation for other production companies, Gauthier adds, citing examples wherein they fill a niche for studios that are becoming one-stop resources for creative through production and post on their own.

The shift is towards seamlessness, Gauthier notes, which was their goal from the outset. To clients, it should appear, well, invisible: they deal with a single EP, a single ECD, etc. “We want to make it simple for them,” he notes. “The last thing they need is for things to take longer, or become more complicated.”

Their model has other benefits as well, Tysowsky says. “It keeps our talent engaged and passionate about the work” when they’re able to move easily between disciplines, crafts and categories. “It’s always been a part of our culture, and it’s something that we nurture, but as we’ve grown in size, we’ve seen it happening around us on its own.” Their lunchtime gatherings, he adds, are a hoot: “It’s like nerds on steroids.”

The easy exchange and camaraderie at the shop shows up in their work, which has gone from largely all-CG content to a much richer and textured portfolio. They’ve shot commercials for agencies and brands that appear to have little to no VFX or 3D work in them at all, for products like [Alka-Seltzer](#) or for local advertisers like [Florida Hospital](#).



The Hinge partnership troika of EP Roland Gauthier, Director Alex Tysowsky and VFX Supervisor Michael Kuehn imbue the studio with a vibe of innovation and collaboration.

Hinge also provides all of the CG needs for the Adult Swim series "Toonami" on Cartoon Network, including everything from long-form pieces of narrative CG animation to content for broadcast promotion and interstitials. "It's been a really great project for us," says Kuehn. "We've taken a long-standing property and brought a new level of visual sophistication to the show, along with introducing new characters and new storylines."

And then there's "Snow Knows," which gets a guffaw or two out of the partners as they talk about it. "It was inspired by our crew's love for 'Game of Thrones,'" says Tysowsky. After they did the first one, the series just grew. Oddly enough it was a hit in France, where the broadcaster Canal + aired it on TV. It's also found a home on the web.

The Hinge offering now relies more on a varied directorial roster than it did in the past, which is something new for the company. Attracting talent has not been a huge problem, as the partners admit that for many filmmakers, especially younger directors, having access to the tools and capabilities of a company like Hinge can be a huge plus.

"We look for talents who are diversified," says Gauthier about their roster, "and who display lots of different styles and approaches to the work. It can range from directors with lots of experience with integrating visual effects to the run-and-gun videographer types."

They admit that, given their 3D legacy (not to mention their name, which can throw some people with its "digital" label), they don't work in a traditional way when it comes to directorial talent. "Everything we do is geared to the scope, the pace and the needs of our clients," says Gauthier. "And if that means bringing in specialized talent, either in production or post, we do that." Adds Tysowsky, "One of the benefits of working with us is that we're a collaborative group that likes to work as a team."



The pool of talent they draw from has widened considerably over the years, the partners say, a reflection of their growing reputation in the creative community and the increasingly broad range of work they're doing. "We're partnering with people right now who've come out of some great creative agencies, both big and small," says Gauthier, "and they have really broad experience in terms of product categories, brands, technologies and techniques." They're also attracting people with backgrounds not just at agencies, he adds, but at tech companies and major marketers.

Again, the Portland connection helps. "This city is a really interesting nexus of technology and creativity right now," says Tysowsky. Not only are there plenty of homegrown talents to work with, he adds, but the area has become a magnet for those from bigger cities in seek of a better work-life balance.

Another advantage of Hinge's being a member of the Portland creative and technology scene is that they're hooked into the explosion of research into VR and AR that's going on there. For example, Kuehn says, they recently demoed their work with a studio that specializes in creating Mixed Reality content for the Microsoft HoloLens "AR" or mixed reality device.

If anything, this development fits perfectly with the Hinge culture of expanding horizontally into new genres, formats and techniques, while broadening its one-stop capabilities and finding new ways to service its clients, both on the agency and the client-direct sides. This outlook has paid off in a variety of ways.

"We're looking at where we can take these forms to the next level of creativity," says Gauthier, "and the next avenue of content creation. And we're doing this at a time when we're finding ourselves bidding against the big players. With seven years under our belts, we've truly solidified as a company and have a body of work that shows where we're

coming from. And since work begets more work, we've been able to use that very successfully to raise the profile of our own brand."