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emotion motion

Contour shapes a new level of digital performance

are digital actors ready for their closeup? Some in the computer-generatedimagery community believe a tipping point has been reached in terms of both cost and performance for synthetic thesps. The prime mover of the moment is San Francisco-based Mova, which unveiled its Contour reality-capture system earlier this year.

Until now, the high points in computergenerated acting — think the latest iterations of "Star Wars" Yoda, the eponymous 2005 "KingKong" and Gollum of the 2001-03 "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy — have been achieved using motioncapture systems that rely on reflective markers placed on an actor's body and face. Contour takes the technology one step further, painting the actor with a Food and Drug Administration-approved phosphorescent makeup. A powder-based version of the potion is used to mark clothing.

Steve Perlman, CEO and founder of Mova parent organization Rearden Co., notes that as CG characters have become more sophisticated, they've elicited higher levels of empathy from audiences. But even the best of them — while often brilliant — still have moments where something is a bit off.

Perlman calls this "Uncanny Valley," a perceptual zone where a CG face approaches photorealism just enough to be eerie. The Contour system, he says, is designed to capture data so precisely as to overcome this occurrence.

It works like this: The actor is lighted with customized Kino Floflashing fluorescent lights. Twin sets of high-definition cameras simultaneously capture the information — one while the lights are

on, and the other when the lights are off (recording the glow of the makeup). The data sets are then combined to create a high-resolution 3-D digital image. Perlman says that the Contour data is precise enough to eliminate the post-photography "cleanup" phase required with tradi-tional mo-cap — a huge time (and money) saver.

The goal, Perlman adds, is to allow directors and actors to concentrate on performance rather than technology. Removing the markers, which resemble Velcro'd-on ping-pong balls, and allowing the actors to perform in costume will help to make that goal a reality.

Word on the street is that director David Fincher intends to use Contour to capture Brad Pitt aging in reverse in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," Paramount's "The Picture of Dorian Gray"-like feature film that is slated for a 2007 release. Last year, Digital Domain produced some amazing tests (sans Pitt, who hadn't yet been cast) that had even experts guessing: actor or avatar? Only the makeup artist will know for sure.

-Carolyn Giardina