

FEATURE

FACE-OFF!

Though animatronics technology hasn't drastically changed, public expectations of it has, as **Helen Fletcher** finds out

WHETHER they come in the form of a Disney character taking part in a production at Disney World, act as a tour guide around a museum, or make up an entertaining show in a shopping mall at Christmas, animatronics are still very much a part of our lives. They remain a popular way of entertaining and informing audiences worldwide.

With regard to the technology behind animatronics, not much has changed in recent years and there are mixed views within the industry as to whether or not the sector is slowing down, in terms of sales. Most of the producers of animatronics have been around for decades and, according to John Wood, chairman and chief executive officer of Sally Corporation, the business remains a custom fabrication art form that requires a wide variety of special skills and talents.

"The art form of animatronics is a very flexible form," said Wood. "Realistic figures remain popular when depicting real life people in authentic settings, whereas animatronic characters or objects that can move and talk are popular in their particular settings as well."

For Matthias Clostermann of Clostermann Design, the sector is slowing down in terms of sales, because of this very reason. "In general animatronics have seen a decline," he said. "I see this not so

much due to a lack of attractiveness to the public, but due to the high standard of maintenance required for a proper animatronic attraction.

"Animatronics are about creating a great character in great scenery and this is another reason why they are harder to sell," continued Clostermann. "Their quality depends on the artist that creates them and that is something very scary for any client or investor; it cannot be nailed to a technical spec sheet."

The one thing that has developed in the world of animatronics is the way in which they are used and what the general public expects from them. Disney's latest venture - Wall-E, based on the recently released film of the same title, is an example of how the animatronic world has developed. A real-world audio-animatronic, it will roam around Disney's California Adventure and interact with park visitors. The remote controlled, 3ft-tall robot, built by Walt Disney Imagineering, has already been spotted on the streets of Los Angeles and at a Philadelphia science centre and apparently rolls on his tread feet, moves his arms and hands, tilts his head, blinks his eyes and responds to questions in his own ET-like language.

Interaction is by far the most

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recent and widespread development within the sector. According to Christian Angenvoort of TAA Industries, based in Spain, animatronics are indeed getting more complex and more realistic both in movements and looks, which is, in turn, allowing for new opportunities.

Rodney Heiligmann of Life Formations, based in the US, added to this and told *InterPark* how, over the last 10 years, there has been some really exciting growth in the control and interactive technologies, which has allowed much more advanced animatronics to be developed.

"They are now much more accessible to the audience, and much more aware of the audience and the environment around them," said Heiligmann. "Audiences can interact with an animatronic and illicit a response by moving around, waving, using a touchscreen, voice commands, or even by a lack of interaction."

Heiligmann went on to say that >>