

'Lupin III: The First' Bridges the 2D-3D Gap Between Eastern and Western Animation

Tomokazu Sakamoto and Tatsuya Akagi share their efforts, with support from the franchise's late creator, Monkey Punch, to respectfully depict iconic 2D anime characters in the 3D/CG style more familiar to international audiences.

By [Victoria Davis](#) | Wednesday, December 16, 2020 at 9:48am

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Animation supervisor Tomokazu Sakamoto and rigging supervisor Tatsuya Akagi discuss bringing iconic 2D anime characters to 3D/CG in 'Lupin III: The First,' now available on Digital Download, and on DVD / Blu-ray January 12, from Shout! Factory and GKIDS. Images © Monkey Punch / 2019 LUPIN THE 3rd Film Partners.

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After fifty years of longevity - with two manga series spanning 35 volumes, a five-part six-season 2D anime and over a dozen feature films including the acclaimed Hayao Miyazaki feature directorial debut, *The Castle of Cagliostro - Lupin III* released its first 3D/CG animation installment, *Lupin III: The First* this last October. And much to the relief of animation supervisor Tomokazu Sakamoto and rigging supervisor Tatsuya Akagi, long-time fans of the franchise created by the late Monkey Punch (Kazuhiko Kato) have been enthusiastically embracing the new film's deeper dimensional look.

"I grew up watching *Lupin* on TV, so I was very excited about creating a film based on a well-known character using high visual quality," says Akagi. "I was worried about how the 3D *Lupin* style would be evaluated before the release of the film, but I think the audience is embracing this new style and I feel that it has a lot of potential to become a trend."

Sakamoto adds, "I'm happy to see so many positive comments on the animation style. I think we were able to create a combination of cartoon-like and realistic styles using full animation on human characters like Lupin. I think that was something new people hadn't seen before."

Now, even more fans can appreciate the film's new animation vision with its **Digital HD download**, released today from Shout! Factory and GKIDS, and Steelbook, Blu-Ray, and DVD, **available January 12** in both the original Japanese and a new English dub; Tony Oliver, Doug Erholtz, Michelle Ruff, Richard Epcar, and Lex Lang return to their roles within the franchise, with Laurie C. Hymes, J. David Brimmer, and Paul Guyet joining the English voice cast.

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Showcasing an animation construction that combines 3D/CG with the familiar geometric layout and proportions of traditional 2D anime, *Lupin III: The First* kicks off in Nazi-occupied France, where Nazis hunt down the diary of archaeologist Professor Bresson and an amulet containing the key to the book, thought to be the guide to a treasure called the "Eclipse." Though Bresson is killed, along with most of his family, in a car chase, his infant daughter survives. Nazis steal the amulet but cannot locate the diary. In the 1960s, the diary resurfaces during a memorial exhibition in Bresson's honor and the thieving Lupin is quick to set his sights on the alleged treasure map.

But an aspiring archeology student, Laetitia, is also after the diary and makes a deal with Lupin to team up and prevent the Nazis from obtaining the hidden treasure, which contains enough power to terrorize the world. While Akagi says the CG animation and camera work shines during highway car chases and acrobatic plane action sequences, he adds that the production team didn't place a strong focus on the 3D/CG style. "If we did, it might have made the style of the film more unique, but on the other hand it might have made it feel out of place within the long history of the *Lupin* franchise series," explains Akagi, who, as rigging supervisor, worked with the animators to ensure that character expressions and actions needed for the story did not deviate from the previous

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Lupin series. "I believe that the film is widely accepted by the audience because we see familiarity in the *Lupin* characters in this classic adventure story that can be enjoyed by anyone."

But unlike Akagi, Sakamoto, who worked with fellow animation supervisor Stéphane Mangin on animation style and quality checks, was not as familiar with the story of *Lupin III* or the characters until he began working on the film. But he realized the weight of five decades worth of loyal fandom who had come to expect a certain style with their beloved *Lupin* characters. "When I was a kid, my parents didn't let me watch [*Lupin III*] because it was geared towards adults," remembers Sakamoto. "I grew up watching *Dragon Ball* and *Captain Tsubasa* so the loyal fans would probably get upset if I said I was a big fan of *Lupin*. In truth, I happened to be assigned to this project and, as I engrossed myself into the *Lupin* materials that I had never seen before, I came to love *Lupin* more and more."



Adding to expectations, when Sakamoto and Akagi, along with director Takashi Yamazaki, started working on the feature film, *Lupin's Part IV: The Italian Adventure* had just ended its anime season and, upon the film's completion, the anime's *Part 5* started airing.

"So, yes, there was tremendous pressure in making a 3D/CG version after all the legendary 2D anime works," Sakamoto notes. "But Monkey Punch Sensei, who saw the 3D/CG pilot version of *Lupin III* that [Marza Animation] created 10 years ago, told us, 'I'm open to seeing various



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depictions of *Lupin* characters.' His words were a big encouragement. We still wanted to pay respect to the 2D style and the animators who had created them originally."

Though the famous manga artist passed away before *Lupin III: The First's* release, Sakamoto says Monkey Punch was a big support during production, as were past *Lupin* animation studios.

"Monkey Punch Sensei saw our progress remotely, as he was not feeling well during those times, and gave us words of encouragement, telling us he was looking forward to seeing the film completed," remembers Sakamoto. "Telecom Animation Film, a production studio under the same group as Marza, who are the creators of the hand-drawn *Lupin* animation, gave us great advice and support during the production as well."



One of the biggest production challenges the team faced was animating character facial expressions. Animation director Jiro Yamagishi led the development of facial rigs and the "translation," as Sakamoto puts it, from the hand-drawn *Lupin* animations to 3D/CG. With the constraints of 2D differing widely from that of 3D, Sakamoto and Akagi say there was considerable struggle to minimize differences in the way faces were drawn and given movement.

"During the facial rig tests, we faced so many challenges that I was worried whether we would really be able to create an attractive character," remembers Akagi. "In this project, we had to raise the level of rigging and animation to an even higher level than previous films."

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According to Sakamoto, the team's method for turning 2D characters into 3D was "very similar to what Disney and Pixar use," with hand-drawn character expression sheets. "We focused on creating a facial rig that was able to create those expressions," he explains. "Once the rig was created, we made sure the transitions between the different facial expressions were working and if they weren't, we either changed the rig specifications or created detailed rules when animating a character."

"It was a challenge," Akagi adds. "But it was also an opportunity to raise the bar. Thanks to the art team, modelers, animators, and everyone involved in character creation, we were able to solve the challenges we encountered one by one."



Lupin III is one of Japan's earliest examples of a 3D/CG anime adaptation, along with Studio Ghibli's *Aya and the Witch*, and both Akagi and Sakamoto believe *Lupin III: The First* could be a bridge that connects not only 2D and 3D animation, but also opens a global door to Japanese animation stories.

"I am convinced that this work has that ability," says Sakamoto. "The world has been opening its doors to Japanese content for quite some time now, but even if they are good works, unfortunately they don't receive as much promotion as they deserve to reach worldwide audiences and are often buried within many other works. I hope this film can be a reminder to the world to check what's being made in the far East."



And Akagi believes *Lupin III: The First* can be a needed, and welcome catalyst for wider international exposure. "I do believe that the style of this film has gained acceptance around the world and there are still many more wonderful Japanese characters and stories that are waiting to be shared," says Akagi. "*Lupin* is just one of them. We hope to create more works like this in the future."



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.

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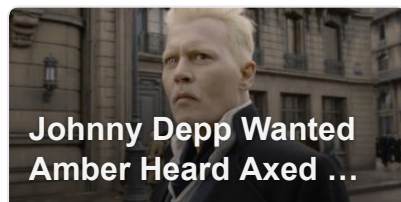
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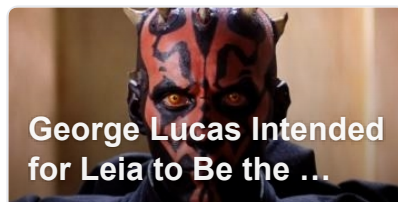
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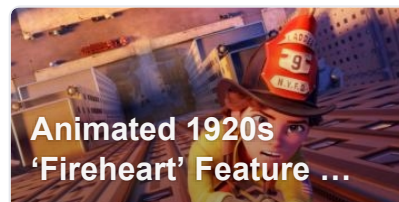
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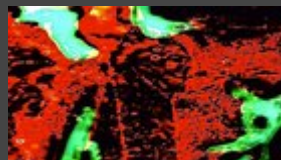
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