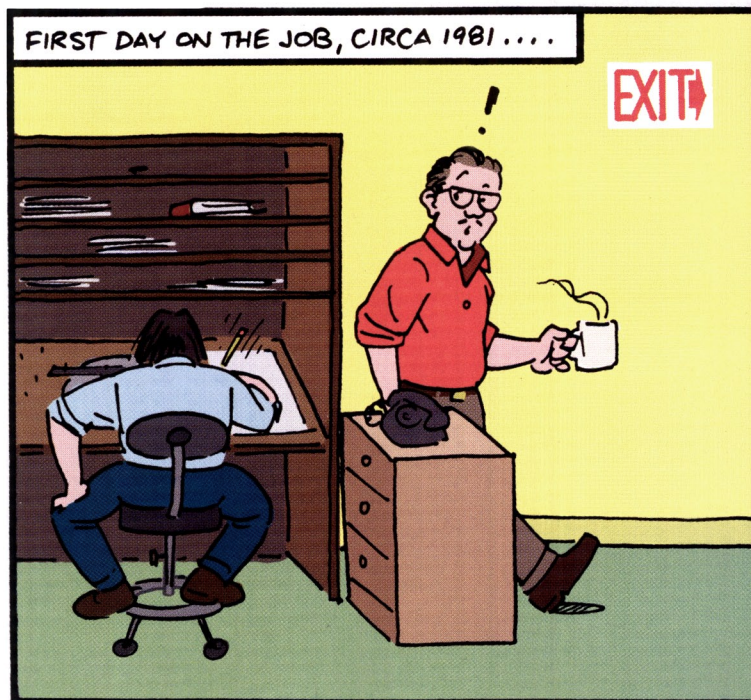


TOON MASTER

If you think animation
Find out how this self-



Sedelmaier was a little kid, he wanted to draw comic books. “I went from: I read comic books, I learned to draw from comic books, I guess I should do comic books,” he says. So he went to New York City in 1978 to fulfill that dream. But the comic-book market was dying, so he segued into animation and made a name working on high-profile

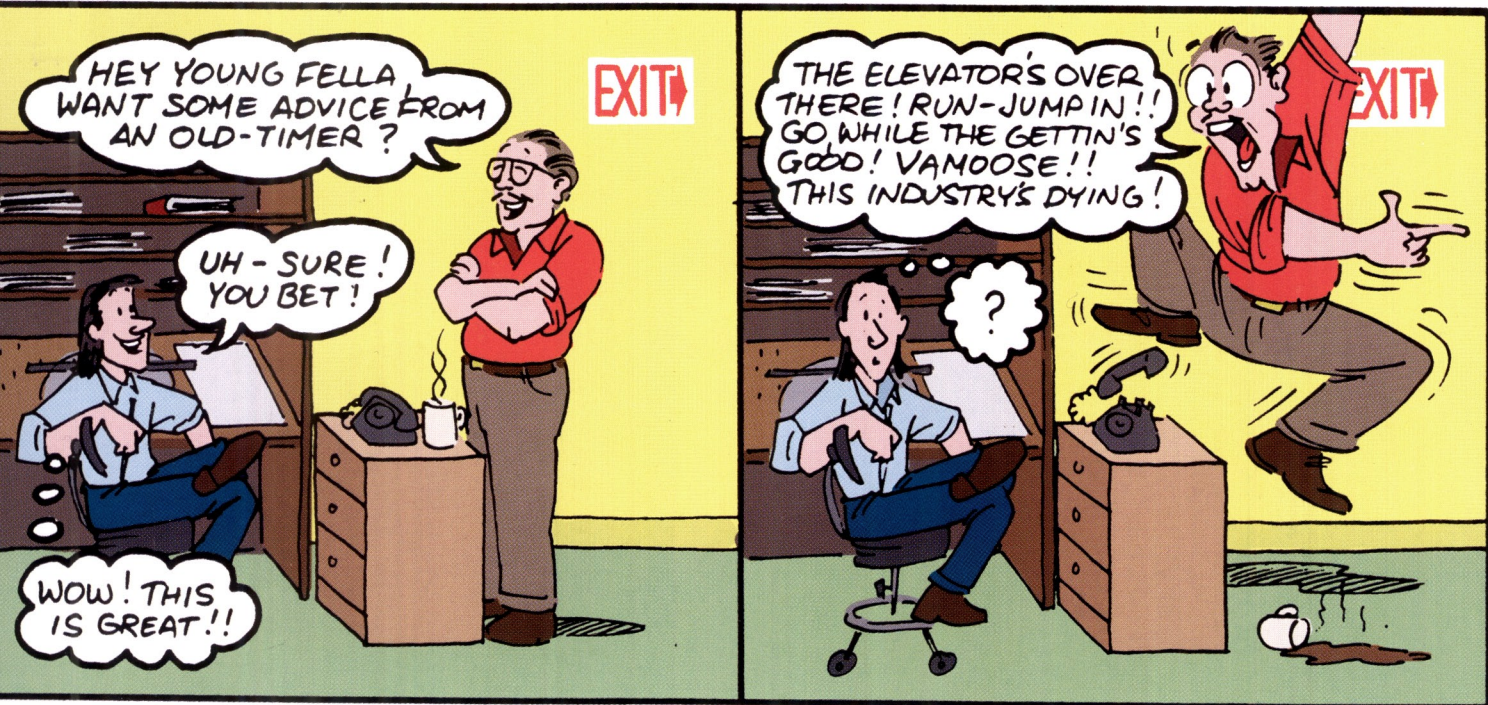
projects such as the original 1993 “Beavis & Butthead” series for MTV and “Saturday Night Live’s TV Funhouse,” featuring “The Ambiguously Gay Duo,” “The X-Presidents” and “Fun with Real Audio.” Finally, in December 1999, Sedelmaier realized his childhood dream: His four-page comic strip of “The Ambiguously Gay Duo” ran in *Playboy*.

But is he satisfied? Never. Although his firm J.J. Sedelmaier Productions Inc., founded in 1991, was named one of the top three animation houses in the country only a year later, the graphic artist is always on the prowl for “juicy” opportunities to execute new ideas in inventive ways. His

Ever since

Illustration by J.J. Sedelmaier

only has a place on Saturday morning TV, you haven't met J.J. Sedelmaier. trained animator is pushing the limits of motion design. by Susan E. Davis



enthusiasm for and delight in the business are boundless. One secret of Sedelmaier's success is his design philosophy: creating animation that tells a story in the most appropriate and convincing manner. That means choosing the right graphic approach for each project. Sedelmaier works with each artist, illustrator or client to develop an approach that best expresses the client's message. Thanks to his extensive knowledge of animation history—all self-taught—and his innate gift for storytelling, his work always hits the mark.

But no matter what he creates—whether it's commercials of a young boy choosing death over going to church for the Episcopal New Church Center in Baltimore or old-style Japanimation for Volkswagen's "Speed Racer" campaign—you can't see Sedelmaier in the work. "My sensibility is the seemingly effortless marriage of concept, design and animation used, often in a humorous way, to challenge viewers and escort them into areas they haven't visited before or didn't know even existed," he says. "When you look at the stuff, you're convinced that the artist was the animator, that he did everything himself. That's ideally what I want people to feel."

Sedelmaier's insistence on integrity, authenticity and quality is powered by an insatiable curiosity, acute observation and unbridled ambition. He loves being master of his

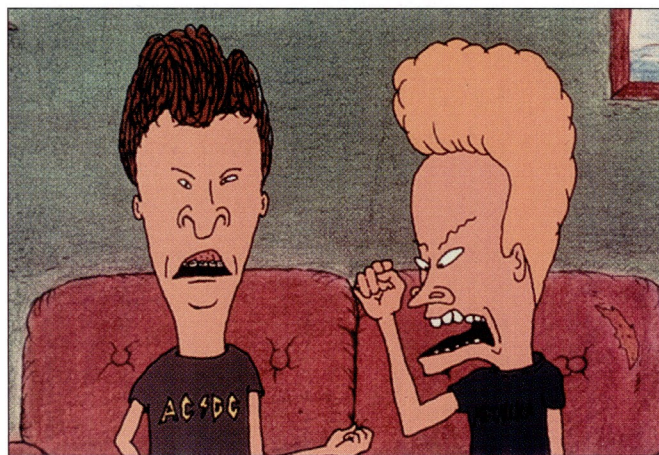
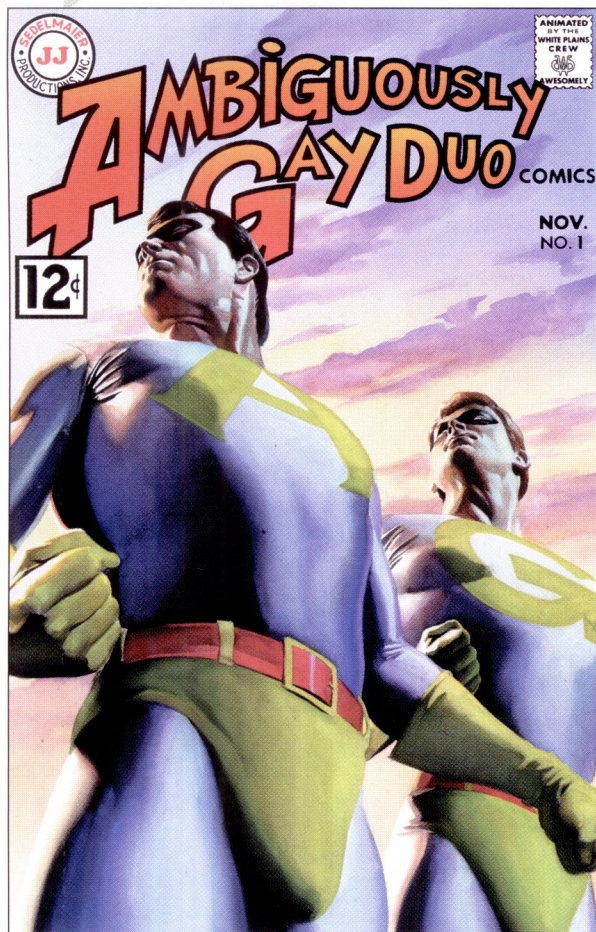
own studio. And as a collector of old comic books, magazines, art books, railroad memorabilia, pop bottles, phones, radios and more, he's inspired by examples of vintage graphic design every time he looks around his office.

MASTERING THE BASICS

But Sedelmaier's success isn't his alone. He inherited artistic genes from his mother, a freelance graphic artist, and from his father, an award-winning director/producer. And both parents nurtured his talents. His dad, Joe Sedelmaier, whose most famous work was the classic Wendy's "Where's the Beef?" ad, always encouraged John Josef III—J.J. for short—to follow his passion.

While attending the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the Chicago native took every drawing course he could find, graduating with a bachelor of science in art in 1978. When he couldn't decide between pursuing comic books in New York City or animation in Los Angeles, his mom called a friend in Brooklyn, NY, who offered to rent him a room for \$100 a month. Although discouraged by the moribund comic-book market, Sedelmaier spiffed up his portfolio. John Anthes, Channel 13-PBS's celebrated art director, recognized a creative spark in Sedelmaier's work and offered him some con-

Later, that same career...



■ **DOING 'SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE' GETS ME IN THE DOOR. PEOPLE WOULD CALL AND ASK IF I'D EVER CONSIDER DOING COMMERCIALS. I TOLD THEM TO GO INTO THE AGENCY LIBRARY AND THEY'D FIND EIGHT REELS OF OUR WORK.** ■

tacts. One was animator Tony Eastman, who gave Sedelmaier his start painting cels (the acetate sheets animators use) as a freelance inbetweener. The position required doing all the drawing "in between" the extreme positions and breakdowns or key action images. To cover expenses, Sedelmaier worked part-time at an antiques store, where he met Patrice, his future wife and business partner. They married in 1981.

That year, Sedelmaier landed his first full-time animation job at Perpetual Motion, known for long-form TV specials like "The Berenstain Bears." "Animation was in trouble then," he notes. "It was suffering the consequences of years of the 'kids-will-never-know-the-difference' syndrome. But if you were good, you could get work. It was perfect for someone like me. I talked with all the old-timers." Specifically, he

met with veteran animator Jan Svachak and begged to work with him exclusively. "Working with Jan was definitely the old-fashioned apprenticeship approach, and it taught me more than anything else could have. It was heaven," he says.

But by 1984, Sedelmaier had become restless. He set his sights on The Ink Tank, the legendary animation house founded by R.O. Blechman. Although the firm advertised for an inbetweener, Sedelmaier insisted on being hired as an assistant animator. Within weeks, he was doing animation, and six months later Blechman promoted him to producer. Sedelmaier attributes his meteoric rise to an outgoing personality. "I think Bob felt a level of relief to have me yapping during client meetings," notes Sedelmaier, who is as animated as his work.

But Sedelmaier had mixed feelings: “When I became a producer, I was only using a pencil to write down phone numbers, not to draw,” he says. “But then I realized I was getting an overview of the whole business. After another half year, I took over representation of the studio as well. It was basically Bob and me. Both our names were on the ads. We were talking in incomplete sentences. After a while, it became clear that I was gobbling up more responsibility. I knew I had what it took to run my own company. When Patrice and I started talking, we realized that we had to open our own studio.”

MASTERS OF THEIR DOMAINS

The couple found a spacious, affordable studio in the oldest office building in White Plains, NY, only minutes from their Westchester home and a short train ride from Manhattan, and opened the studio in January 1991. (They’ve since expanded and now inhabit the building’s top two floors.) Within two months of setting up shop, the phone began ringing with offers of commercials. Patrice, who is vice president of the firm, handles the business side. “Running our own studio turns out to be a terrific arrangement for us,” she says. “The people who work here benefit from the atmosphere, too.”

The pair hired special-effects rep Andy Arkin of New York City-based Blah, Blah, Blah in 1992, after the studio’s production process was firmly established, and public-relations specialist Len Stein of Visibility Inc. came on board a while later. “Andy has his own reputation that benefits us,” Sedelmaier notes, “and publicity is just as important as the work.”

In 1993, the shop spent five months producing 120 minutes of “Beavis & Butthead,” based on Mike Judge’s artwork for MTV. The show’s success, along with Matt Groening’s popular show “The Simpsons,” helped legitimize cartoons for grownups. It also changed the landscape of animation forever. But the pace of doing the show was too grueling, and Sedelmaier chose not to continue after the first year. “As nice as it is to have steady work, after we go through the problem-solving that’s so juicy, we’re ready to move on.”

What cemented the studio’s reputation for doing edgy, outlandish, satiric work—and firmly established its brand—were the animated segments Sedelmaier created with writer Robert Smigel from 1997–1999 for “Saturday Night Live.” Each featured a visual style uniquely suited to the subject.

“The Ambiguously Gay Duo” was drawn like “Batman and Robin” superhero comics of the 1950s and ’60s, but the script had a ’90s twist—the bad guys are more concerned about the sexuality of superheroes Ace and Gary, who pat each other’s butts and escape danger by entwining their legs, than they are about eluding them. “Fun with Real Audio” paired watered-down line caricatures of famous people in bizarre situations with totally unrelated soundtracks. In one segment, Larry King and Ross Perot look up a woman’s skirt while hiding under a table. In another, Diane Sawyer kicks Mark Fuhrman in the crotch. The result is political caricatures in motion. “The X-Presidents” featured four living former presidents—Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush—as aging

but agile superheroes who help President Clinton defend the realm against the forces of evil. Scenes of the four as a rock band in suits are hysterical.

At the end of every segment, a title card appeared with “J. J. Sedelmaier Productions” prominently displayed. “I was branding myself,” Sedelmaier says. “I’d been doing commercials for years, but that’s really when I gained notoriety. People would call and ask if I’d ever consider doing commercials. I told them to go into the agency library and they’d find eight reels of our work. Suddenly we were very well-known.” But because agencies tend to pigeonhole styles, Sedelmaier found he had to show potential clients the full range of his work. “Doing ‘Saturday Night Live’ gets me in the door and lends credibility to the name. It proves branding is good, but I have to make sure to balance it with other kinds of work,” he says.

In fact, Sedelmaier has been known to turn down work that he feels isn’t appropriate for animation. “I feel a strong responsibility to the craft, to push the potential of animation to the limit, because there aren’t a lot of people doing that,” he says.

SERVING MANY MASTERS

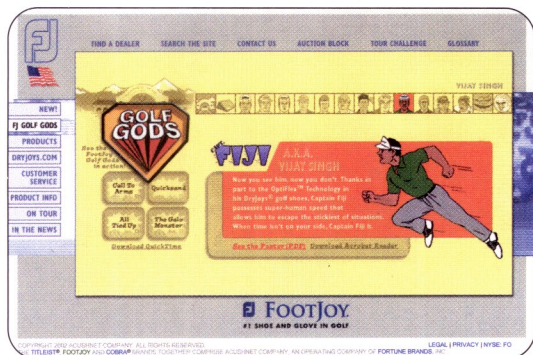
One of the ways Sedelmaier balances the studio’s output is to work with different illustrators. Already he’s created commercials with cartoonist Garry Trudeau and a host of well-known illustrators, including Gary Baseman, George

BUSINESS TIPS

J.J. Sedelmaier and his business partner/wife, Patrice Sedelmaier, approached setting up their own studio with caution, patience and vision. They offer these pointers for designers who are considering going out on their own:

- Learn every aspect of the design process thoroughly before going out on your own.
- Make sure you want all the responsibility involved in running a business.
- If you don’t want to handle the business side, find a partner who does.
- Hire a rep only after your studio is well organized and able to handle a higher volume of work. Hire a publicist when you’re ready to take on even more work.
- Don’t try to do everything yourself. Delegate and supervise with a light touch.
- Give staff responsibility and make them accountable. It will give them ownership of their work.
- Create a warm, collegial atmosphere and an appealing environment in which to work. They make everything better.
- Treat work with the seriousness it’s due, but be sure to have fun while you’re doing it.

■ HIS MOST AMBITIOUS CAMPAIGN TO DATE IS BASED ON FOUR ANIMATED SPOTS OF FOOTJOY'S 'GOLF GODS.' THE WORK INCLUDES PRINT ADS, POSTERS, A TRADING-CARD SERIES, A WEB SITE AND A PROPOSED ACTION-FIGURE LINE. ■■



THE GOLF GODS SAY,

WEAR YOUR FOOTJOYS

WE DO!

WORN BY
2 OUT OF 3
PROS
WORLDWIDE

#1 SHOE IN GOLF

FOOTJOY
#1 SHOE IN GOLF
VISIT US AT WWW.FOOTJOY.COM

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• #1 ON THE PGA TOUR • #1 ON THE EUROPEAN PGA TOUR • #1 ON THE SENIOR PGA TOUR
• #1 ON THE BULKY.COM TOUR • #1 ON THE LPGA TOUR • #1 AT THE U.S. AMATEUR
• #1 AT THE PGA CLUB PRO CHAMPIONSHIP • #1 AT THE NCAA CHAMPIONSHIP

Booth, Peter de Seve, Al Hirschfeld, Tibor Kalman, David Levine, Mike Judge, Barry Blitt, Steve Bjorkman and Bonnie Timmons. His commercials using Timmons' fine-line pastel drawings for Quilted Northern bathroom tissue are as subtle as Baseman's brightly colored, thick-line drawings for Celebrity Cruises are brash.

Clients come to Sedelmaier with at least a concept but more often a script, although he prefers to run with an idea. Choosing an illustrator for a client project is often his way of "putting some kind of stamp on the work." His choice of George Booth, whose *New Yorker* cartoons often feature pot-bellied old men, for a Pacific Bell Yellow Pages ad is a good example. Envisioned as a simple black line drawing on a yellow background, the story showed how nothing worked when a young guy tried to get married without consulting the yellow pages. "But once it was a George Booth character, the guy became 52 and you have a characterization you never would have had without George," says the animator. "That's a case where I was put in charge of the look, and the look influenced the storyboard."

Because the technology involved in creating animation is rapidly changing, Sedelmaier finds he has to educate clients about the business. "With things like Flash and all these new applications that produce graphic images, people hear about cost savings, and they automatically think there's this genie they can let out that will solve all their problems," he says. "A lot of people think that now you do drawing one and drawing

50, and the computer does the rest. There are a lot of misconceptions like that. The only parts of the process that are done by computer are the painting and the compositing. All the drawing is done by hand. Because 99% is done traditionally, it's still a very hands-on, time-consuming, intimate and human process."

After shopping around for the best animation software, Sedelmaier recently selected Crater's Cartoon Television Program. "We still use a video camera for some small things, but now we scan 90% of our drawings into CTP, which allows us to email QuickTime movies to clients," Sedelmaier says. "The system lets us do everything digitally from animatics and pencil tests to modeling and color tests to final ink and paint." In addition, the studio makes extensive use of Adobe Photoshop and Premiere on its Macs.

Although Sedelmaier rarely works at a drawing board anymore, he makes sure a design approach is on track before he backs away from a project. "I've got to afford the artists here a healthy level of input and control, but I've also got to maintain what I determine is the studio's sensibility," he says.

Commercials typically take 10-16 weeks to produce. Based on the experience of doing "Beavis & Butthead," the studio can also handle long-form projects with extended schedules. The percentage of commercials vs. entertainment work varies widely depending on what's on the boards; when Sedelmaier animated "Beavis & Butthead," it comprised 90% of the studio's workload.

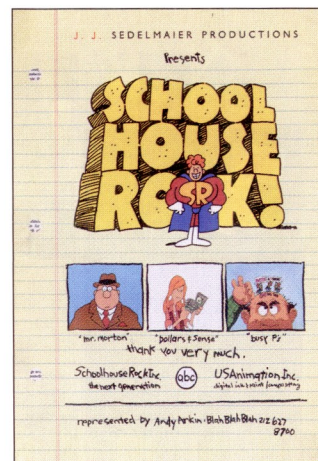
Sedelmaier takes pleasure in running his firm like an old-time animation studio. It employs 10 staffers, but has had as many as 20. "Working on commercials is like forming little acting troupes," he says. "Those who may animate on one project may design or direct on another. You may be an extra on one or play the lead on the next. That's why everyone's got to work together. You've got to have personalities in the studio that all mesh." And the studio is physically laid out so that production takes place in a huge, open area with light streaming in from windows on two sides and through glass block on the other two.

CREATING A MASTER PLAN

The one area of the business where Sedelmaier is still very much hands-on is designing work for print, mostly as collateral for commercials, but occasionally as illustrations in *Playboy* and *Texas Monthly*. Sedelmaier has designed flipbooks for Silicon Graphics, posters for Volkswagen and T-shirts for Converse. His most ambitious cross-media marketing campaign to date is based on four animated spots of Footjoy's "Golf Gods"—pro golfers posing as absurd, over-the-top superheroes in the style of "The X-Presidents." The print work includes full-page, four-color print ads for golf magazines, posters, a trading-card series and a Web site. Arnold Worldwide, Footjoy's advertising agency, also proposed an action-figure line.

Sedelmaier enjoys print design, which now constitutes 10%-15% of the firm's work, because it offers more flexibility. "You can construct a whole page with all the variables and subtleties of type, color and composition," he says. "I deal with all of them in film, but for some reason, that one-shot, lingering image is such a luxury. I learn from doing print, and it influences the animation because it can stay in front of the viewer for a really long time in comparison with animation."

The third dimension is also getting Sedelmaier's attention. He's constructing a series of architectural scale models for a train station-restoration project outside Chicago. The animator has been an avid railroad buff since he was a kid. He love to ride trains, and he collects vintage railroad posters used to promote Chicago's North Shore Line in the 1920s.



Always looking for "juicy" projects, Sedelmaier keeps his ideas fresh by tackling a diverse mix of projects, from crafting an ad for a bank (LEFT) to creating promotions for the children's program "School House Rock!" (RIGHT).

Sedelmaier keeps searching for opportunities to do new things. Currently, he's developing the catatonic superhero "Captain Linger" for the Cartoon Network, as well as pursuing other projects for CN and West Coast studios. He's been working with the cartoonist M.K. Brown to develop her comic strip idea, "The Fly Bros.," for animation. He'd like to find projects so he could work with illustrators Michael and Laura Allred and Chris Ware. And he and Smigel are discussing ways to develop "The Ambiguously Gay Duo" into a longer format. "The field's wide open as never before due to technology," Sedelmaier notes. "Now you can even do small stuff at home on a laptop."

Advertising expert Mike Rogers, president and creative director of the Wolf Group New York, best summed up Sedelmaier's contribution to animation for *The New York Times* in July 2001, when he said, "[J.J.] has a sense of what is entertaining, what is captivating, what will transfix an audience. There are very few people who can do that." **HOW**

HOW's New York City editor Susan E. Davis has written about graphic design for 16 years. (212)989-6756; sednyc@earthlink.net



Having conquered both print and Web work, Sedelmaier is now exploring 3D. An avid railroad buff, he's constructing a series of architectural scale models for a Chicago-based train station-restoration project.

SOURCEBOX

J.J. Sedelmaier, J.J. Sedelmaier Productions Inc., White Plains, NY (914)949-7979