

Blender's history begins in the late 1990s, when Ton created the Blender software. Originally, the software was an in-house resource for his animation studio based in the Netherlands. Investors became interested in the software, so he began marketing the software to the public, offering a free version in addition to a paid version. Sales were disappointing, and his investors gave up on the endeavor in the early 2000s. He made a deal with investors—if he could raise enough money, he could then make the Blender software available under the GNU General Public License.

This was long before Kickstarter and other online crowdfunding sites existed, but Ton ran his own version of a crowdfunding campaign and quickly raised the money he needed. The Blender software became freely available for anyone to use. Simply applying the General Public License to the software, however, was not enough to create a thriving community around it. Francesco told us, "Software of this complexity relies on people and their vision of how people work together. Ton is a fantastic community builder and manager, and he put a lot of work into fostering a community of developers so that the project could live."

Like any successful free and open-source software project, Blender developed quickly because the community could make fixes and improvements. "Software should be free and open to hack," Francesco said. "Otherwise, everyone is doing the same thing in the dark for ten years." Ton set up the Blender Foundation to oversee and steward the software development and maintenance.

After a few years, Ton began looking for new ways to push development of the software. He came up with the idea of creating CC-licensed films using the Blender software. Ton put a call online for all interested and skilled artists. Francesco said the idea was to get the best artists available, put them in a building together with the best developers, and have them work together. They would not only produce high-quality openly licensed content, they would improve the Blender software in the process.

They turned to crowdfunding to subsidize the costs of the project. They had about twenty people working full-time for six to ten months, so the costs were significant. Francesco said that when their crowdfunding campaign succeeded, people were astounded. "The idea that making money was possible by producing CC-licensed material was mind-blowing to people," he said. "They were like, 'I have to see it to believe it.'"

The first film, which was released in 2006, was an experiment. It was so successful that Ton decided to set up the Blender Institute, an entity dedicated to hosting open-movie projects. The Blender Institute's next project was an even bigger success. The film, *Big Buck Bunny*, went viral, and its animated characters were picked up by marketers.

Francesco said that, over time, the Blender Institute projects have gotten bigger and more prominent. That means the filmmaking process has become more complex, combining technical experts and artists who focus on storytelling. Francesco says the process is almost on an industrial scale because of the number of moving parts. This requires a lot of specialized assistance, but the Blender Institute has no problem finding the talent it needs to help on projects. "Blender hardly does any recruiting for film projects because the talent emerges naturally," Francesco said. "So many people want to work with us, and we can't always hire them because of budget constraints."

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Blender has had a lot of success raising money from its community over the years. In many ways, the pitch has gotten easier to make. Not only is crowdfunding simply more familiar to the public, but people know and trust Blender to deliver, and Ton has developed a reputation as an effective community leader and visionary for their work. "There is a whole community who sees and understands the benefit of these projects," Francesco said.

While these benefits of each open-movie project make a compelling pitch for crowd-