

Lighter Makes Crystals Gleam, Orcas Glisten

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Whale scene from *Happy Feet* which Brock Stearn helped to create.

Brock Stearn Knows How to Make Films Shine

Lighting Technical Director Brock Stearn has an unusual way of comparing credits with fellow artists that come to work with him at highly-regarded animation and effects studio [Rhythm & Hues](#). He likes to go on [rottentomatoes.com](#) and compare the combined freshness averages of all the films they've worked on. *Ultraviolet*, for instance (a movie he worked on), has a 7 percent freshness rating.

"If you want to be a lighter, the best thing to do is to go on set and move lights. See how lighting works in real life, and then you can learn the software to recreate that in digital."

Brock Stearn

"One of the things you have to realize is that some of the best effects are in the worst films," jokes Stearn. While this is sometimes true, Stearn has plenty to be proud of with his work on films like *Happy Feet*, *Superman Returns*, *Constantine*, and *Meet the Robinsons*.

His artistic touches add moments of beauty, excitement and sophistication to movies with arguably mediocre plot lines.

Stearn visited the campus in May to spend some time with instructors and students within the Computer Animation program.

Lighting is Part Art, Part Science

Stearn described the basic process of adding lighting effects to animation: "The character that we're doing is modeled early on, it's rigged, it's animated. "It comes to me and basically it has no color information. It's just gray. And then we have a look development artist who puts the colors on it," he explained.

"It's my responsibility to apply all that work correctly and [add] lights to make it look like

whatever CG object [or character] we are doing looks like it was there on set when they shot the live action.”

Rhythm & Hues was asked to step in and assist Australian animation studio Animal Logic on a few scenes for the movie *Happy Feet* – scenes with challenging lighting requirements.

“We did the sequence where basically the killer whales are trying to eat the penguins and the sequence where Mumbles goes after the fishing ship trying to see where all the fish are going.”

Stearn’s team had to light the ocean, the surrounding snow and ice, the water running off of the killer whales, the water shooting out of their blowholes, and the water that splashed on the penguins and everything else.

Working on *Superman Returns* was also a huge challenge – and, he says, the most enjoyable one of his career.

“We were doing stuff we never did before. Rhythm & Hues is mainly known for [being] a character animation shop, like a *Scooby Doo* movie or something like that,” said Stearn. In contrast, *Superman* was all effects-driven – with water, explosions and lots of action. For this film, they worked on an ocean sequence as well.

Stearn explained: “Lex launches a crystal into the water [and] a new krypton forms – a huge new island... and the crystals come out of the ground, so there’s water, splashes – [and] one of the crystals spears through the boat.”

The team had to develop a convincing ocean – making the ocean look realistic and making it react to changes in light and to objects.

“It was a fun film because we were doing stuff we never did before, we were doing it in software that we hadn’t used for that purpose and we just had a great team,” Stearn added. “It was a small team, it was a great team, and I did more overtime on that show than I’ve done on any other project, but it was just a very fun experience.”

Rhythm & Hues

Although Rhythm & Hues has had one of the most family-friendly work schedules in the business, Stearn said that’s changing somewhat so that the studio can stay competitive with the large, corporate houses. Rhythm & Hues also opened a studio in Mumbai, India to cut costs.

“Originally everyone was fearful, [thinking], ‘Oh great, we’re training our replacements in India!’” Stearn said. “But instead [our] overall costs have dropped, and we’re actually more competitive now, so we have more work at Rhythm & Hues in Los Angeles than we’ve ever had.”

Stearn said it's a win-win situation for everyone. "[The Indian animators] absolutely love living in India, they love their culture, [but] basically this great, wonderful industry just came to their back door." Now with its studio in India, Rhythm & Hues is the largest private visual effects studio in the world. It's also the oldest still in business: the studio just celebrated its 20th birthday this year.

As far as Full Sail's connection to the studio, Rhythm & Hues has hired two grads – Digital Arts alum Shaun Comly who graduated in 1998, and Computer Animation grad Seth Brower, who graduated in October of 2006. Brower participated in the studio's three-week apprenticeship program for composers this year and was hired immediately afterward.

Words of Wisdom

Like most pros that talk to students on campus, Stearn has advice for the student hoping to break in the business. He recommends that choose and stick with a specialty within animation, that they look for internship or apprenticeship opportunities, that they exercise patience while studios examine demo reels, and that they not send the same material more than once.

"If you get rejected, wait nine months, and send a new demo reel," He suggested. "And showcase whatever skill you really excel in."

Overall, he says, "for anything in our field, you have to be an artist first. That's one of the things I try to emphasize when I talk at schools is that the software's easy to learn. Anyone can teach you software, but the way to use it in an artistic manner and take feedback and take that and develop something – that's what you really need to concentrate on."

- *Christine Baker*