



Brock Stearn: Life as a Lighting Artist

By Trevor Green

The process of finding your calling in life is as unique as what you end up in. For some, like Tiger Woods, it happened the first time he picked up a golf club at six months old. For others, like Brock Stearn, it was a process of discovery. As a teenager, he combined a passion for art and computers, finding a career that nurtured both passions.

Stearn is a lead lighting technical director for Rhythm & Hues Studios, an Academy Award-winning computer visual effects house. His work, seen in movies like *Superman Returns*, *Happy Feet* and *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*, focuses on integrating computer-generated images into movies, fitting the tone and look of the film. He has also worked at CIS Hollywood, Brain Zoo Studios and Digital Domain on movie and video game CGI.



Employed at one of the premier visual effects businesses in the industry, Stearn has put his stamp on several notable films in the past few years. Despite the challenge of keeping up-and beating-the effects in current movies, he likes the camaraderie of working with a group focused on one goal.

"The rewarding experiences largely have to do with the team that you are part of when you work on these films. I've personally grown to love [works] that have a smaller team because I feel you get to know everyone better," he said.

For his Tech Forum presentation, Stearn talked about the various stages of effects production from start to finish, including environments, interactive objects-characters, environmental objects and effects-and the challenges of overseeing numerous pieces. Examples from several movies were shown (particularly *Happy Feet* and *Superman Returns*), with step-by-step vignettes for certain scenes.

Stearn touched on experiences working at big and small studios-weighing the pros and cons-and working with fluctuating expectations and deadlines. He also thoroughly discussed the process of netting a computer effects job.

The diverse steps shown throughout the lecture reflected Stearn's experience in the industry. A modeler, UV layout/texturing artist (representing the horizontal and vertical planes), lighting artist and compositor-as well as a research and developer (R&D)-Stearn has worn many hats in his career. The versatile artist combined his multitasking skills on his

favorite project, *Superman Returns*, doing pre-visualization, R&D and developing a new lighting pipeline used in two more films.

"The film had a lot of very hard work, and I did by far the most amount of overtime on that film, but we had a fantastic team at [Rhythm and Hues] and it was a very fun experience," he said.

Described as an "old-timer" with computer and internet technology-he fondly remembered obtaining his first GUI (graphical user interface) browser to surf the net-Stearn knows his way around hardware. He received his first computer, a 286, at seven years old. He was later trained as a computer technician, working and managing sections of IT departments.

He was also stimulated by art, painting and drawing throughout his youth. He often wondered if he could combine both loves, finding his calling as a teenager during a family vacation to Walt Disney World. Asked to test an early version of an *Aladdin*-based virtual reality ride, Stearn was immersed in the fictional world of Agrabah. Awestruck by the engrossing visuals, he eagerly chatted with Disney employees and learned more.

"It turned out the artwork was done by some Ringling [School of Art and Design] grads, and that is what permanently set me down that path," he reflected.

Stearn attended and graduated from Ringling with a degree in Computer Animation, later earning a Master's in Design and 3D Visualization from Ohio State University. Though he had the technical expertise-"because anyone can learn software and to be professional about everything"-he relied on his art skills and classroom instruction to earn a job in the industry.

Now firmly entrenched in the visual effects field, Stearn is still a student, studying art focusing on light and composition for inspiration. In an ever-changing industry, learning the nuances of your trade is as important as the technical skills involved.

"It's a fantastic thing to study, too, because it seems after you think you've seen it all, the next image you look at blows your mind all over again," he remarked.

Stearn instills his enthusiasm to students wanting to get their break in the animation industry. He stressed practicing on real-life works, going beyond using computer programs: drawing figures and animals for prospering animators; using clay or stones for potential modelers; and moving around lights and lenses for budding lighting and composition artists. Above all else, persistence is essential.

"Never give up. I know how it can get discouraging sometimes but if you stop trying then you aren't going to get that job," he said. "The software is the easiest thing to learn, and if you have a good artistic foundation, it will show no matter what medium you are using."