

Bringing life to special effects

Central York grad transforms characters from green screen to silver screen

By ERIN McCRACKEN
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Jan 28, 2008 — Brock J. Stearn had a hand in giving Garfield his signature stripes and Superman his heroic abilities.

As a lighting and technical director for Los Angeles visual effects house Rhythm & Hues Studios, Stearn works with a team to bring computer-animated images to life with color, shading, shadow and texture.

“The goal is to make the character look as if we shot it on set,” Stearn said.

“Happy Feet,” “The Golden Compass” and “Constantine” are a few such films he's added to his résumé.

Stearn said he decided he wanted to go into computer animation when he was a sophomore at Central York High School. His family took a trip to Walt Disney World, and Stearn went on a virtual reality “Aladdin” ride the park was testing in Epcot.

“I asked a lot of questions about the ride,” he said. “They told me all the lead animators went to Ringling (College).”

The ride, which eventually became Aladdin's Magic Carpet Ride at DisneyQuest, helped determine Stearn's future.

After graduating high school, Stearn majored in computer animation at Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida. He received his Master of Arts in design and 3-D visualization at Ohio State University.

He was then hired to work at visual effects company Rhythm & Hues in Los Angeles. Stearn said he is like a freelancer on contract. The amount of work varies at most effects houses, and Stearn said he goes to different studios to find work.



'The Golden Compass' is one of the most recent films Brock J. Stearn created visual effects for.

He has been working with Rhythm & Hues - one of the oldest effects houses in Hollywood - for four years. Rhythm & Hues list of work includes "Lord of the Rings" and "Titanic." The studio won an Oscar for its work on 1995's "Babe," according to publicist Scot Byrd.

Stearn said the studio works on the visual effects for some films from start to finish. But in most cases, he just works with a few scenes from a film.

For the film "Superman Returns," Stearn worked on an ocean scene that lasted about six minutes.

"The completely (computer-generated) scene had to be matched to the live action work," he said. Stearn said details matter in his line of work. His team spent 11 months on the "Superman" sequence.

The visual effects come in the post-production stage of the movie, so sometimes there is limited time between when filming wraps and the set release date. This means longer work weeks sometimes, Stearn said.



Visual effects houses, such as Rhythm & Hues Studios, where Brock J. Stearn works, add computer-generated images to action scenes in movies such as 'The Golden Compass.'

"I worked 107 hours in one week," he said about "Superman." Stearn, who normally works 40 hours a week, said the movie was his favorite piece of work so far despite the overtime.

This year looks to be a busy one for visual effects houses, Stearn said. Many motion picture studios pushed to finish filming movies before the Writers Guild of America strike, and now are inundated with post-production work.

Stearn is working on the third "Mummy" movie, aka "The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor," during the next few months.

Seeing his name in film credits is exciting for Stearn, even though it doesn't happen for every film he works on.

"Sometimes, there are just too many people to name," he said.

Even though Stearn lives across the country now, "he keeps ties in York," said Colleen Lehr, Stearn's high school art teacher.

When Stearn attended Central York High School, it didn't have the wide variety of art classes it does now, Lehr said.

"(Stearn) exhausted the arts courses available," she said. "He ended up creating his own (visual arts) curriculum."

Lehr said she was impressed by Stearn's drawing and painting abilities as well as his "determination to succeed."

When Stearn gets a break from the movies, he said, he gives presentations and works with classes at universities across the country.



A scene in 'The Golden Compass' with computer-generated images added.

"I went to the best schools (for visual effects)," Stearn said. "I travel to colleges who aren't there yet. I try to share what I know with people who might not have the same opportunities I did."

He has even returned to his old high school to speak with arts students about their career options, Lehr said.

"We are all very proud of him," she said.

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BRIEF RESUME

Name: Brock J. Stearn

Age: 28

Lives in: Originally from York; now lives in Los Angeles

Career: lighting and technical director at a visual effects studio that does computer animation for major motion pictures

Some films he has worked on: "Garfield," "Meet the Robinsons" and "Ultraviolet"