Visual effects are an opportunity for creativity

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN NUGENT*

What are your current and past projects?
Nugent: As a Visual Effects Supervisor I've worked on a lot of very cool projects. My VFX company started out with *The Lord of the Rings* (Ill. 1), *The Return of the King*, *Terminator 3*, and the *Narnia* movies (Ill. 2). Before that, I spent 3 years in New Zealand on the first 2 *Lord of the Rings* films. And before that I was in California working on the first *Matrix* and *What dreams may come*, and several big projects like that. Recently, I spent some time in Germany. I was really happy to be back in the creative chair here and helping the team put together *Mara and the Firebringer* (see also interview with Krappweis in this issue).

This is an impressive number of projects – and those are all heavy film projects.
Nugent: Well, I can tell the other side. (laughs)

A lot of these visual effects of heavy films are what I call "difficult births". Especially if you are experimenting with untested new technology that has problems and flaws. You can get into situations where you have a large amount of people working very long hours and weekends, trying everything in their power to get it to work with time running out. It seemed to be a pattern that I was on: one project after another with this particular recipe. Ultimately I think it is interesting that moviegoers will go to a film and they will really like it, and we do well, and there will be all kinds of praise. But they don't know what it should have been – only we do! And it is just like this: "Oh, but we love that!" – "Okay, great!" But it really should have been something else entirely.

How do you deal with such situations when you had a creative vision in your head but you could not completely realize it?
Nugent: Well, it can be hard. I have learned over the years to kind of divorce myself emotionally from projects because it is really easy to become emotionally involved in the storyline and in the film. And you really have your heart set on this idea, in your head, in your mind, your visualization of how it should be. And then, when it doesn't become anything like what you hoped it could be, it can be heartbreaking. I had to learn to not let that bother me, to not get too emotionally invested in it because it happens all the time. You have this vision in your head, that is the one big thing here (pointing to the left), and

to my dad's tool work area, grabbing power tools and using them for art. I remember putting a paint brush in a power drill and sticking it into the paint, and painting on the canvas with it, going "Wrrr" (imitates power drill sound), just to see what would happen. And then, of course, getting out the power sander and painting with that as well, then deciding that I was going to paint several layers and then sand them down. Well, I was always experimenting.

What is your recipe for staying creative? What would you recommend to graduates who want to join the business?

Nugent: That's a good question, because especially in the early days the people who were doing visual effects were computer engineers, because they were the only people that could figure out the code and what to do. Unfortunately, a lot of these folks who were writing all these codes were not the most artistic people, but they were the only ones who could actually perform the task that needed to be done. So, it depends: I talk to a lot of newcomers who are interested in video games and visual effects, but they are not very artistic although they like it. So, I would say depending on what part of the business you want to be in – if you are good at art, you can draw, you can paint, you understand these kinds of things – I would say "Go for it!" But it is very difficult to teach that if you don't already have it. If you don't have it I'd say "Stay on the code side!" There's probably more money in it, too. (laughs) ■

then, what it ultimately ended up is the small thing there (pointing to the right). But the people love the result – they don't know about the other side.

Is it always like this?

Nugent: The opposite happens as well. When you have limited resources you really need to think hard about the backbone of the story and we can only include what is really most important to tell the story. Sometimes lower budgets actually help facilitate staying on track, staying to the point and sometimes things turn out to be much better then. Sometimes successful franchises get so much money that they lose little bit of sight and become more of a playground because they have resources to just make a sequence where this happens and that happens, and it does not really help the story go forward but they are having fun with it. I think there have been several examples and patterns of that sort happening over and over again.

What is the "core" if you have only a small budget?

Nugent: That is what you absolutely have to have to keep the story going. Sometimes you are hard pressed up against a deadline, it is a Sunday night, you don't have any other resources around you. You have to use what you have. You have to make it work. I remember a shot, for example, where we needed to add rain and there was no rain. And the rain shower element was not usable, there were no CG artists around. Then the digital artist actually took computer film grain and turned it into rain. I asked him how he did it and he showed me, and it made complete sense. It looks perfect. And it is because he was up against the wall with no other resources, and he just said: "Okay, I have to make rain from something …"

Let's talk about visual effects.

Nugent: I always liked to experiment and still I am always experimenting. If I have a camera – whether it is a still camera or a video camera – I am doing strange things with them.
I remember the first time I had a video camera in my hands: I immediately grabbed a rope and tied it to it, and started swinging it around over my head to just see what it would look like – because I had to know! And then I would play with putting things over the lens, all these kinds of things. Taking grape jam, rubbing it on the lens and shooting a video to see what I would get. That is the kind of things I would do. I remember going down

* John Nugent is Visual Effects Supervisor and has his own visual effects company and studio called »Sandbox FX« located in Pittsfield, USA.