

Star Wars studio goes from apprentice to master in Singapore

December 3 2010, by Philip Lim



Lead digital artist of Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) Singapore, Steven Ong, seen here posing with a mock-up of Iron Man's figurine in his Singapore office. The 35-year-old Singaporean inserted special effects into the second movie of the Hollywood franchise, a job which was non-existent in Singapore until five years ago when Lucasfilm Singapore was established.

As an 11-year-old boy, Steven Ong dreamt of being a fighter pilot in the Singapore Air Force and emulating the heroic exploits of Tom Cruise's character in the 1986 action flick "Top Gun."

Twenty-four years on, the bald, bespectacled Singaporean still isn't quite Pete "Maverick" Mitchell but he does soar imaginary skies with Robert Downey Jr. as the star dispatches super villains as the Marvel superhero Iron Man.

As lead digital artist of Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) Singapore -- part of "Star Wars" movie legend George Lucas' empire -- Ong is responsible for inserting special effects into clients' movies like "Iron Man 2".

"This sequence, we actually did quite a lot of the shots," Ong proudly told AFP at his studio, gesturing to a battle scene featuring the hero and his sidekick War Machine fending off enemy droids.

Ong, who studied computer graphics at a Singapore polytechnic, had to move to the United States when he started his career 10 years ago because the special-effects work he craved was not being done by any company at home.

Today, Singapore serves as a production centre for multi million-dollar Hollywood franchises, next-generation video games and animated television series thanks to Lucas, the man behind "Star Wars" and other blockbusters.

Lucasfilm set up a facility in Singapore in 2005 with a staff of almost 40 to produce content for the animated TV series "Star Wars: The Clone Wars".

But like a Jedi warrior, it has grown from apprentice to master in its own right, doing work for non-Lucas productions on top of house titles.

The only Lucasfilm entity outside the US, it now boasts 430 employees, two-thirds of them from Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries, and will move from rented premises to a high-tech building of its own by 2012.

"The initial intention was to develop here only animation, that's why the studio was originally named Lucasfilm Animation Singapore," said

general manager Xavier Nicolas.

"But as we went along, things went pretty well and we decided also to start activities around visual effects to support ILM and later even games, so we opened additional production divisions here."



Lead digital artist of Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) Singapore, Steven Ong, seen here posing for a photo at his Singapore office. 35-year-old Ong inserted special effects into the second movie of 'Iron Man II', a job which was non-existent in Singapore until five years ago when Lucasfilm Singapore was established.

Staff work for four entities: special effects division ILM Singapore, video games developer Lucasarts Singapore, and individual sections for feature films and television animation under Lucasfilm Animation Singapore.

They are currently housed in a studio near Changi Airport which is chock-full of Star Wars memorabilia, including life-size figures of Anakin Skywalker and Yoda at its entrance.

The studio announced last month it will be breaking ground on an eight-

storey purpose-built facility occupying 38,000 square metres (409,000 square feet) next year.

The building will house a data centre, a 100-seat theatre and retail outlets, all testaments to Lucasfilm Singapore's success, Nicolas said.

The studio is also looking to hire more than 100 additional employees next year as part of its expansion plans.

Josh Robinson, lead asset artist for the Clone Wars animated series, said the multi-disciplinary nature of its Singapore-based artists, animators and engineers proved to be an advantage over the more specialised talents of US-based teams.

"Here we're able to have a team of artists that do all texturing, all modelling, and all blend shapes for all characters," he said.

Lucas himself is so confident in the Singapore team that he is planning to produce his next feature film entirely in the studio.

Details are top-secret except for the fact that it will be a totally new property instead of being another "Star Wars" derivative.

"What we're trying to do doesn't look like everything that has been done before," general manager Nicolas said.

Aside from Lucas' personal project, the firm is also working with "Pirates of the Caribbean" director Gore Verbinski on "Rango", a fully-animated film about a chameleon forced to live his dreams of being a swashbuckling hero in a bandit-infested cowboy town.

The film will be released in 2011, with "Pirates" lead Johnny Depp voicing the main character.

Ong, the Singaporean digital artist, said he was currently working on "Pirates 4" after wrapping up work on "Rango", while his colleagues were busy with the third installment of the "Transformers" franchise.

Both films are also due for worldwide release next year.

Ong has no regrets about missing out on a fighter career because of his imperfect eyesight.

"I might not even get to blow things up being a pilot," Ong said. "But I get to with my job now!"

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