Creating Their Worlds

Cal Poly students polish off their graphics project in a spring class. (Photos by Brittany App)

Chris Gibson hadn’t thought much about applying his computer science degree to a film career. But a couple of Cal Poly computer graphics courses opened his eyes and, he said, “unraveled some mysteries of movie-making.”

Then he saw “How to Train Your Dragon,” the 2010 hit movie from DreamWorks Animation. And it clicked. “Some of the things I saw on the screen in that movie really inspired me,” said Gibson (B.S., Computer Science, 2011). “I realized I wanted to work on a DreamWorks movie.”

He applied to the company, and two years later dream became reality. Gibson was credited as “technical director” on the November 2012 release “Rise of the Guardians,” a Golden Globe nominee for best animated feature. This year, he notched his second credit with the spring release “The Croods.”

Gibson is one of three Cal Poly Computer Science alums who helped bring “Rise of the Guardians” to the big screen ... said. “I get to touch a lot of the code.”

Gibson works in DreamWorks’ facilities in Redwood City, Calif., as does fellow alum Harrison Mackenzie Chapter. As a software engineer on DWA’s Rendering Team, McKenzie Chapter helps maintain and improve processes by writing new software tools and fixing old ones. The Rendering Team maintains DWJ’s proprietary renderer, a tool that simulates how the light bounces around a scene, allowing the Lighting Department to balance the lights in each shot to create tone, mood and emotional impact.

Professor Zoe Wood (right) looks at a student graphics project. In addition to “Rise of the Guardians,” McKenzie Chapter (B.S., Software Engineering; M.S. Computer Science 2010) has worked on “Kung Fu Panda 2,” “Puss In Boots,” and “Madagascar 3.” He said Cal Poly’s software engineering curriculum taught him that building the software is just one piece of the puzzle. “Understanding what the artists need and then designing processes around that” is how things are repurposed in animation, he said.

In addition to “Voice of the Guardians” McKenzie Chapter (Software Engineering, M.S. Computer Science 2010) has worked on students polish off their graphics project in a spring class. (Photos by Brittany App)