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## Rising Stars : New f/x-heavy films are signaling a changing of the visual guard

By ELLEN WOLFF

Dennis Muren, Rob Legato, Eric Brevig and Mike Fink may be household names in the f/x biz, but a new breed of visual effects supervisors are beginning to crop up and create their own following. For example, audiences watching the dinosaurs stampede through *Jurassic Park III*, will be witnessing a changing of the guard. Where multiple Oscar-winning Muren oversaw the digital dinos in the first two *Park* films at Industrial Light & Magic, Jim Mitchell, who rose through ILM's ranks during the 1990s, was deemed worthy to take the reins for the third installment.

"It's a little nerve-racking to follow Dennis, but it's an opportunity to put my own little fingerprint on it," Mitchell says.

Despite supervising *Sleepy Hollow* and earning an Oscar nomination for *Mighty Joe Young*, Mitchell still animates shots himself to stay fluent with computer-graphic tools. But he says his experiences in video post and motion-control photography are also valuable for supervising f/x. "It's important to gain experience with all those different disciplines." Effects stages were also the training ground for Digital Domain's Erik Nash, now supervising DreamWorks' *The Time Machine*. Having been an f/x director of photography on *Titanic* and *Apollo 13*, Nash thinks today's increasingly digital pictures present a constant learning experience. It's been a natural progression, he notes, "because things founded in real photography, like camera movement and lens choice, apply directly to CG."

By contrast, artists who've come of age using digital tools often prepare for supervising by getting additional experience with stage effects. This was the route taken by Roger Guyett, who supervised digital f/x for *Twister* and co-supervised *Saving Private Ryan* before becoming visual effects supervisor on *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*. Guyett observes, "If you don't understand all the techniques, it's hard to make a reasoned judgment and do the best work in the most efficient way." Guyett is supervising ILM's team on *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, where his expertise with CG characters is key.

In this era of virtual movie stars, the most challenging visual effects jobs often require 3-D computer-generated characters to deliver lines within live-action scenes. A prime example is *Stuart Little*, supervised by Sony Imageworks' Jerome Chen. Recently promoted to senior visual effects supervisor for *Stuart Little 2*, Chen calls this type of moviemaking "the hardest hybrid. You have to use every trick to get the pieces integrated." Chen learned all those tricks as he worked his way up from technical director - becoming a CG supervisor on *Contact* and digital f/x supervisor on *Godzilla*. He says his technical training was essential to the supervising he's doing now. "For character-driven effects, you need to have strong knowledge of 3-D."

Like Chen, Imageworks' Carey Villegas is a digital expert, who began as a Flame artist for Digital Domain.

"My background in photography and video lent itself well to compositing," he says.

Villegas has already shared responsibilities with two Oscar-winning supervisors: Ken Ralston on *Cast Away* and Rob Legato on *What Lies Beneath*, and then became sole supervisor on *America's Sweethearts* and *I Spy*. While he's comfortable supervising others, Villegas doesn't intend to lose his touch with the technical tool kit. Like ILM's Mitchell, Villegas is "still very hands-on. I composite shots all the time." Maybe it's the survival instinct of someone who knows how rapidly this high-tech craft is evolving, but Villegas voices a fact known by all the rising stars in visual effects today: "Technology is growing so fast that you've got to do what you can to stay up-to-date."