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PREMIER ISSUE



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UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Arts & Science

Miles Away from Ordinary

Solid foundation helps land Computer Science grad at DreamWorks

By Kirk Sibbald (BA'04)



Photo:
Kirk Sibbald (BA'04)

Mark Matthews knows patience. After all, helping breathe life into a destiny-driven panda named Po takes time.

No less painstaking is getting Barry the bee to take flight. But when it comes to a career with DreamWorks Animation, Matthews knows the finished products are well worth the effort.

Born and raised in Saskatoon, Matthews earned a BSc in Computer Science and BEng in Engineering Physics at the U of S. Since then, the Saskatchewanite has toured Africa, Japan and Europe, even living briefly with a group of monks at the Madonna House in Combemere, Ont. Still, he ranks Hollywood, Calif. as the most foreign experience of his life thus far.

“The stereotypes fail to be met and are greatly exceeded, all at the same time,” says Matthews about life in Hollywood. “It is a great place to live, but people can definitely be more materialistic and there are big differences in terms of attitude. This is by far the biggest culture shock that I’ve experienced because you’re actually living it.”

In 2006, Matthews came to Hollywood and joined DreamWorks Animation’s Research and Development department. He spends most of his time and expertise developing the character rigging process for animated films, a process that gives character the ability to have joints, muscles and facial expressions. Before Po can master kung fu or even sigh, Matthews and his department must give each character the ability to move fluently and vividly.

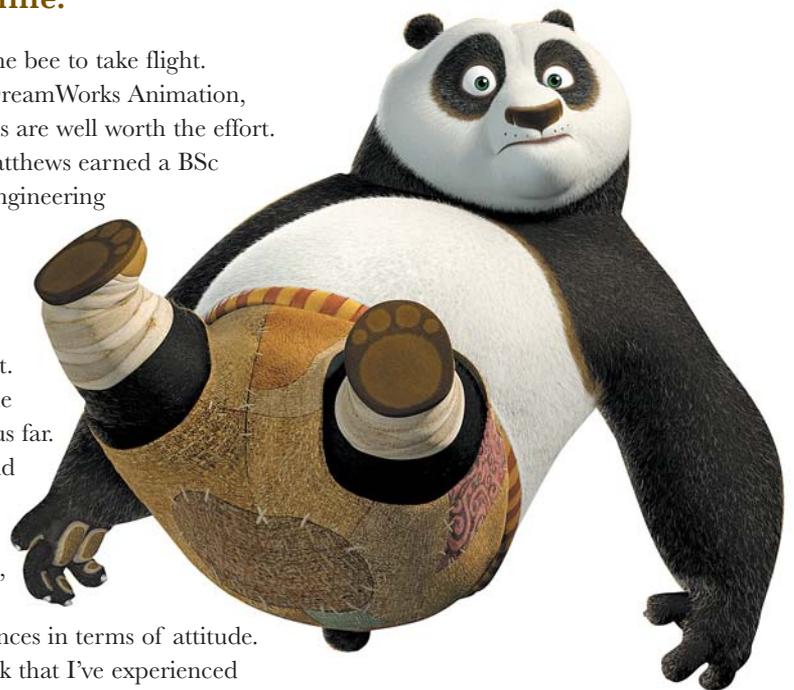


Photo:
DreamWorks Animation LLC



Photo: DreamWorks Animation LLC

In only two short years at DreamWorks, Matthews already has his name in the credits of *Bee Movie*, nominated for a Golden Globe award, and the more recent *Kung Fu Panda*. However, he notes his ascent to Tinsletown was hardly an overnight process.

Following his worldly travels, Matthews completed an MSc in Computer Science from the University of Calgary and began designing satellite telemetry equipment for a company in Alberta's oil industry.

From there he accepted a job with EA Sports, one of the world's largest video game producers, in Burnaby, B.C. Working on best-selling gaming franchises such as John Madden Football 2007 and March Madness Basketball, Matthews was suddenly working alongside the animation industry's elite.

Considering his well-traveled past, however, it should come as little surprise that Matthews was soon on the move once again.

"I interviewed for DreamWorks towards the end of 2006, got the job and started working in Hollywood," Matthews explains matter-of-factly.

In actuality, he admits there was more impetus behind this most recent move than a mere job opening. Working with animated movies, he would have more opportunity to express a surprising second love: art.

While soaking up algorithms and source code in the College of Arts and Science, Matthews also enrolled in a few elective art classes. These courses sparked a passion that he says shaped the person he is and his decision to work at DreamWorks.

"I took three or four art classes (at the U of S) and they were really great, eye-opening experiences....I really became interested in the relationship between science and

art," said Matthews. "The two seem so far apart but they are really interrelated—you can't create new art without advances in technology, and a lot of art is really influenced by the technology used in a particular (era)."

Returning to the U of S this past May, Matthews spoke at Digitized, a career conference for high school students interested in technology. His talk covered the intricate work that goes into producing an animated movie, and offering some not-previously-released images straight from DreamWorks studios.

Now living in the glare of Hollywood, Matthews returns to Saskatoon every three or four months to visit family, catch up with friends and, admittedly, "just to maintain my sanity and keep my roots here."

These courses sparked a passion that he says shaped the person he is and his decision to work at DreamWorks.

As for the education Matthews received in the College of Arts and Science, his rapid career ascent thus far really speaks for itself.

"You talk to people that went to well-known, prestigious American schools—such as NYU (New York University) or CMU (Carnegie Mellon University)—and you think, wow, their programs must be so much better," he said.

"But after talking to them, I found out I did all the same things that they did, and there really isn't much difference at all. Here at the U of S, we're getting just as good of an education and DreamWorks recognizes that." 

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