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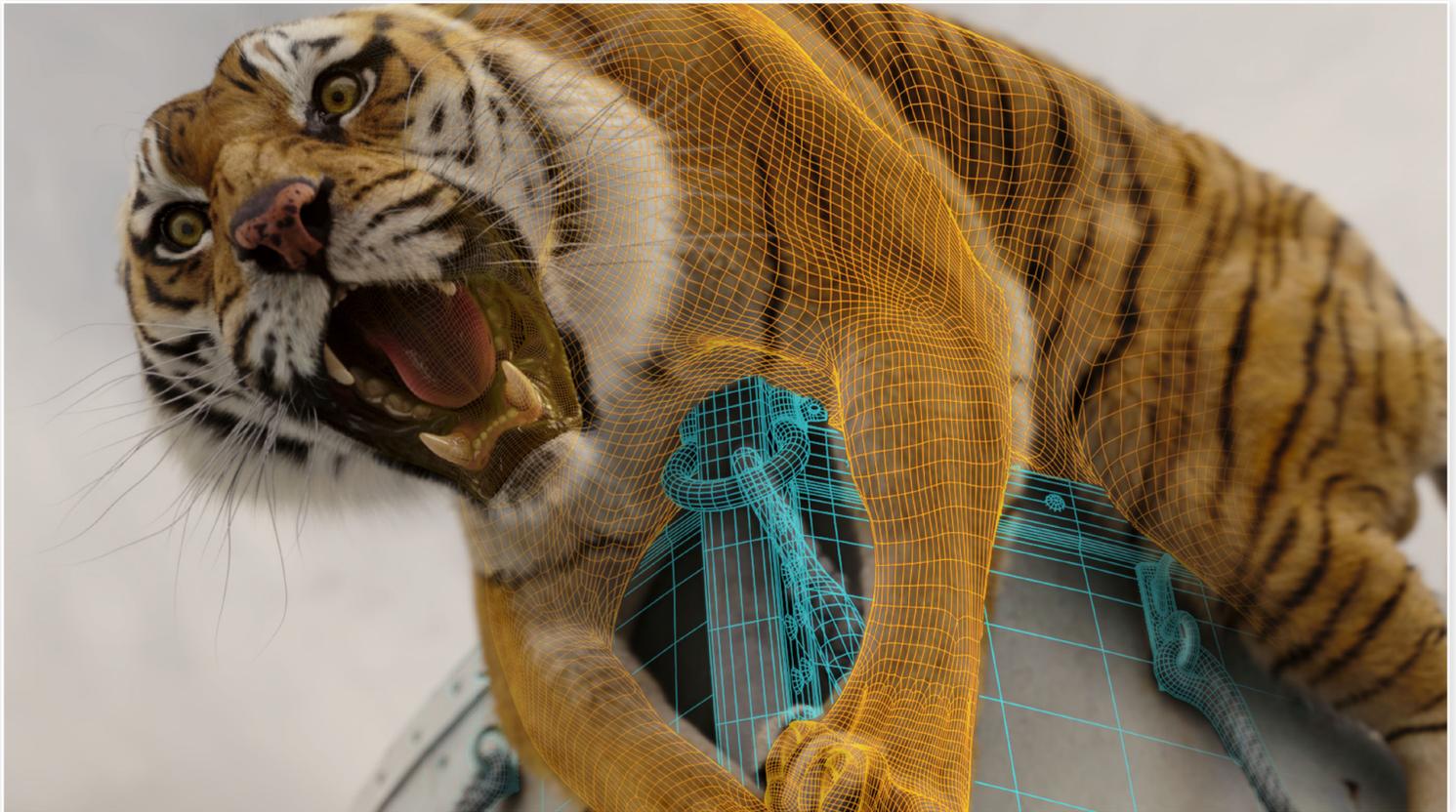
ACADEMY AWARD WINNERS

BILL WESTENHOFER (BUCKNELL 1990) AND KORRE HEGGEM (UNLV 2007) DISCUSS THEIR WORK ON LIFE OF PI AND THE IMPACT IT MADE ON THE VISUAL EFFECTS INDUSTRY.

Oscar Buzz

After winning an Academy Award for Visual Effects, two Lambda Chi brothers discuss their groundbreaking work on *Life of Pi* and the obstacles that the visual effects industry is currently facing.

By Andrew Talevich (Washington State)



A young Indian man sits in a life raft in the middle of a 75-meter by 30-meter pool surrounded by blue walls with a nylon stuffed animal resting on his lap. Add some special effects, and suddenly this man is transformed to the middle of the Pacific Ocean and the stuffed animal is actually a fearsome but mellowed-out tiger.

The movie is *Life of Pi*, and the visual effects (VFX) team—including two Lambda Chi Alpha brothers: Bill Westenhofer (Bucknell 1990) and Korre Heggem (Nevada-Las Vegas 2007)—received an Academy Award for their groundbreaking efforts.

“There is absolutely no ‘make it cool’ button. These movies are worked on by VFX artists putting in sometimes 16 hour days, seven days a week, for months,” Heggem said.

Despite the instrumental role that these artists play in modern Hollywood films, their industry is facing a financial crisis that has cost many artists their jobs and brought financial woes to the top visual effects studios.

Filming the Unfilmable

Life of Pi, based on Yann Martel’s 2001 novel, is about a young man, Pi Patel, who finds himself shipwrecked and stranded on a lifeboat with a tiger named Richard Parker. The book and the film explore Pi’s journey of personal faith, spirituality, and understanding of humanity during his odyssey over the Pacific Ocean.

Prior to filming, many critics dubbed *Life of Pi* unfilmable.



(Left to right) Westenhofer, Heggem, and Erik Jan De Boer, the animation director for Life of Pi.



Westenhofer



“If you put it down on paper, here’s a movie that’s two hours long with just a boy sitting on a lifeboat with a tiger. It doesn’t sound like a box office smash,” Westenhofer said.

From the beginning, director Ang Lee knew he would have to rely on Westenhofer and the visual effects team under his supervision to create a realistic portrayal of a computer-generated Richard Parker. Westenhofer had previous experience with creating computer generated animals in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, Witch, and Wardrobe*; and *the Golden Compass*, which earned him his first Academy Award.

Of the 170 shots of Richard Parker, only 20 of them were of a real tiger while the rest were computer generated. Westenhofer wanted to make the computer generated tiger look and act real, so he and his team studied tigers in Taiwan for three weeks. They also worked with a tiger trainer on set.

They learned everything from the way a tiger’s wrist rolls, to the nonchalant behavior it displays when it’s frightened, to the specific elbow shakes a tiger demonstrates. Westenhofer and his team were able to translate these specific details to make Richard Parker as authentic as possible.

Westenhofer’s second challenge on *Life of Pi* was creating an ocean that would play a central role in the movie. Throughout the film myriad emotions are showcased by the ocean.

“Ang told us that he wanted the ocean to be as much a character as the tiger so we did a lot of studying of different waves and sky combinations to give a different visual effect,” he said.

Heggem worked as a computer generated lighting artist.

His eight man team was tasked with integrating animated characters into the film and making sure they were lit appropriately for each shot in the film.

“*Life of Pi* had day, night, afternoon, golden hour, overcast, underwater, and stormy environments to name a few. Every lighting rig for every sequence and shot was different. As lighting artists, we have to make sure those differences are believably balanced,” he said.

For Heggem, who was also part of the Oscar-winning VFX team that worked on *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the year he spent on *Life of Pi* was truly a unique experience in his relatively young career.

“A perfect amount of people, talent, and gumption came together to make something like this happen,” he said. “I feel so lucky to be part of this film; to put as much work into it; and to put it out for the world to see, and have the world like it. It’s just overwhelming.”

For their groundbreaking work on *Life of Pi*, the VFX team received an Oscar for Best Cinematography. Westenhofer accepted the award for his supervision of the VFX team. The acceptance speech that Westenhofer delivered at the Dolby Theatre during the 85th Academy Awards would ignite controversy and unite the VFX community.

A Cloudy Future

Despite the large sums of revenue that the Hollywood VFX industry has generated for many films, the industry as a whole is currently in a state of flux. Outsourcing, budget cuts, studio closures, and lay-offs have caused a bleak outlook on what once was a booming industry.



Just two weeks before Westenhofer accepted his Oscar, his company, Rhythm and Hues Studio, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and had to lay off 254 employees as a result.

Rhythm and Hues was following an unpleasant trend of the downsizing of other visual effects studios. In September of 2012, Digital Domain Media Group, another visual effects and animation company, also filed for bankruptcy and laid off close to 300 employees.

These layoffs were the result of studio executives choosing to opt out of employing California-based VFX artists and instead turning to several companies overseas that have a competitive edge due to tax breaks and subsidies from their governments.

During Westenhofer's acceptance speech it was not so much what was said, but what wasn't said that would resonate throughout Hollywood. Just as Westenhofer was about to make a point about the significant role that VFX studios play in Hollywood, he was cut off by the orchestra playing the 'Jaws' theme song.

"What I wanted to say in my speech was to remind people that we aren't just technicians, we are artists and if we're not careful with what we're doing, we may start losing some of the artists in this line of work, and lose the artistry that you see in a lot of films today," he said.

One of the main problems with the business model between major film studios and VFX companies is that VFX companies are contracted on a fixed bid. This means that the film studio will give the VFX companies a specific amount of money to create certain shots in the film. If the VFX company goes over budget, they must fund the additional costs themselves.

And it's often difficult to estimate the cost of certain shots. For example, Heggem said that when he first

started working on *Life of Pi*, developing the lighting on a computer-generated zebra for just one frame took 35 hours. Heggem had to create shaders, which are networks of computer code that tell how a material behaves when it has light and color applied. Because a zebra has a high fur count, Heggem had to pay close attention to detail or else the zebra would look fake.

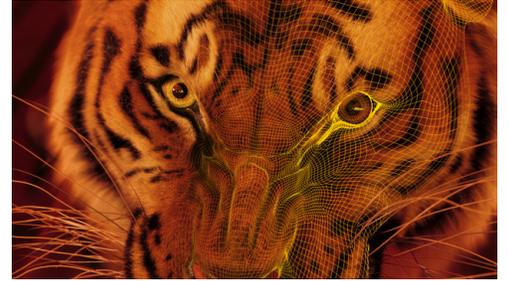
As the visual effects industry embarks on projects that push the boundaries of imagination and entertainment through their craft it is not unusual for these companies to spend upwards of \$100 million on a single film. Because of these rising costs, the VFX companies have very low margins of revenue.

According to Westenhofer, 47 of the top 50 movies that have grossed the highest amounts of revenue have large visual effects budgets. Westenhofer considers it a "sad irony" that VFX artists are working hard on these films, yet not enjoying the lion's share of the profits.

There have been a number of solutions discussed by California-based VFX artists as to how to save their industry. The first option would be to form a trade association. A trade association would enable the VFX industry to lobby the government to help curb the tide of outsourcing. The second option would be to unionize, which would set a standardized compensation system for VFX artists and possibly give them more power in their negotiations with film studios.

A union may also open the gate for VFX companies to receive residuals, or a portion of the revenue that movie studios collect after a movie is released.

"We need to have lot of bravery and do something, because if we do nothing our jobs will continue to go away, we'll continue to beat ourselves into the ground until we have to leave and do something else, and this will become a dying art," Heggem said.



Whether the best solution lies in forming unions or trade associations, or lobbying the state government, Westenhofer believes the fate of the California-based VFX industry lies in the decisions of a select few.

“What it comes down to is that there’s going to have to be decisions by the people who are making the films and funding the films about the work they want to keep in California,” he said.

Working Through It

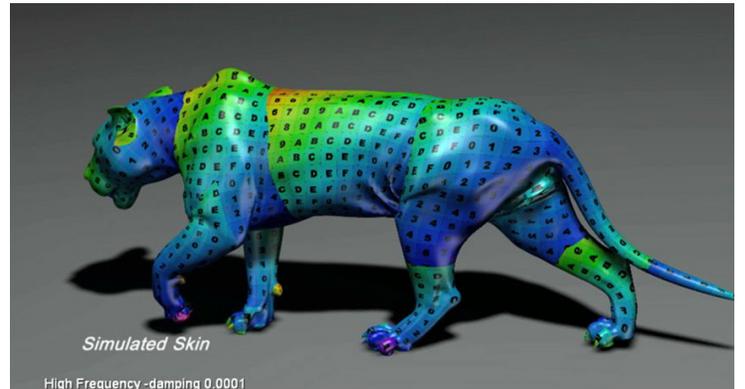
In light of the financial uncertainty that the VFX industry is facing, Heggem has expanded his career opportunities by working in a similar field, the gaming industry. He is a founding partner of a new start-up company called Slide Rule, Inc., which is developing video games that use augmented reality.

“The effects world is in such disarray that we figure other people aren’t looking out for our future, so we have to look out for our own,” he said.

Heggem is still involved with the film side of the VFX industry. He recently finished working on a commercial for a cruise ship. He has been heavily involved in networking with other VFX artists to find a solution to the current crisis the industry faces. His hope is that the actions taken now by his colleagues can create a sustainable business model.

“My hope is that (the California-based VFX community) keeps that spark of innovation, artistry, and add in there a little bit of self-preservation,” he said.

Westenhofer is also still involved with the VFX industry. He treasures his experience from *Life of Pi*. He hopes that his team’s work on *Life of Pi* will continue to be admired and will create a lasting legacy for the California-based VFX



industry.

“*Life of Pi* was definitely one of the most rewarding projects I’ve ever worked on. If anything, it showed that the VFX industry can contribute in a very significant way to the development of a film,” he said

“I hope that we are recognized for that fact in the future.”