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Education - Stepping Up



(John Zilka) One of his recent jobs entailed CG work for this Microsoft commercial.

The transition from student to professional can be a challenge, a potential debris-filled minefield of questions and problems. How many employment applications does one have to send before hitting pay dirt? Where are the jobs?

And then, there's that burning question: "What exactly do you want to do?"

But for some, it's not a minefield at all. There are those students who pick a nearby school, work at an internship or two, and then land a job they like without much problem. Their transition was about what they had expected. Here, a few young pros share their stories.

John Zilka

Gasket Studios (~~www.gasket.tv~~), Minneapolis

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John Sanchez snagged a prized internship with MTV, eventually turning that into a freelance position before his reel landed him his current job at The Napoleon Group.

The road taken by John Sanchez to his current station as an animator and motion graphics artist at The Napoleon Group in New York City was less direct than those of Zilka and Gray. In fact, his doubts about the financial incentives available in creative fields led him in a different direction initially. “As a kid, I used to draw a lot,” says Sanchez, “but I didn’t think I could make any money at it.” So he acquired a bachelor’s degree in finance from St. John’s University and worked for such firms as Smith Barney and Chase Bank.

“But it wasn’t for me,” Sanchez says, and he ended up following his heart after all, though it took a while to see exactly where it was heading. After stints as a talent manager and as an actor—plus the reality check of 9/11—it was back to school, this time at NYU for a master’s degree in digital imaging and design at the Center for Advanced Digital Application.

Then, like Zilka and Gray, Sanchez felt ready to apply his developing skills in the field. “I was trying to get an internship my second semester and sent my resume to MTV. It was a surprise when they called me an hour later,” he says. “It turned out that the guy doing the hiring knew some of my professors at NYU.”

The network needed someone with Softimage skills to provide background graphics for the spring 2006 edition of MTV Up Front, the vehicle for executives to unveil new fall shows to advertisers. And it was pretty big stuff: Jamie Foxx performed, and Jessica Alba emceed.

“It went well,” Sanchez says. “I ended up using Maya on the Mac due to a lack of available PCs. It turned into a freelance job that paid \$300 a day, so that buoyed my spirits and made me feel that I was where I needed to be. But it was only for that show.”



The upstart learned Maya at NYU, but taught himself Softimage when he was working on his thesis—it was about rigging and included projects concerning animation and character modeling, which he encompassed in a short animation.

It was that summer when The Napoleon Group saw Sanchez's reel online and called to set up an interview. An offer eventually came, but not until October, "when I was in the midst of finishing my thesis and I was in 'the zone.'" Fortunately, the facility was able to wait until this past February for him to come aboard. Since then, Sanchez has offered his skills in 3D graphics and compositing using After Effects. So far, he's worked on test spots for Three Musketeers candy bars (entailing a wave of chocolate, requiring him to learn Next Limit's RealFlow). That came in handy for another spot, for Oil of Olay, which featured splashing water.

“3D is my specialty, but they needed someone who knows After Effects, so I learned it. Learning something new—people have to continually do that in this business,” Sanchez says.

Sanchez has a somewhat philosophical overview of his career to date: “I don’t know if it was what I expected, but I can tell you now I feel at home. Everything in my past led me to where I am now.”

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