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STEPPING UP



Napoleon's John Sanchez has been working on a short film that he wrote and directed; he expects to finish by the end of the year. He used Softimage|XSI for hair and Toon Shading for the character.

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

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

But for some, it's not a minefield at all. Some students pick a nearby school, work at an internship or two and land a job they like without much problem. Their transition was about what they expected. A couple of young pros share their stories below:

John Zilka
Gasket Studios (www.gasket.tv)
Minneapolis

Gasket Studios creative director Greg Shultz's simple assessment of John Zilka is he's "an up and coming Maya rock star."

So much for faint praise, eh? Zilka, a designer/ animator, joined the company early this year as an intern and moved into a full-time position in June, immediately after his graduation from The Art Institutes International Minnesota.

Already possessed with what Shultz called "a soft-spoken nature and a great sense of humor" (a fine trait to exhibit in the post industry), he notes what a winning combination those qualities make when coupled with Zilka's technical and creative abilities.

Zilka could hardly wait to demonstrate his design chops professionally, having been heavily influenced during his early years by the work of those who came before him — notably the folks at Pixar. "I started thinking about this type of career when I was a sophomore in high school in Redwood Falls, Minnesota, which is when several movies that were created in a completely animated environment, like Toy Story, hit the big screen," he says.

What piqued his interest wasn't so much the storyline. "It was the technical side of the movie that caught my eye."

While Zilka was introduced to Gasket during his internship, the early exposure to the professional environment didn't count toward the fulfillment of his credit requirements for college. "What got me connected there was a classmate, Nate Dorn, who was already interning there," he explains. "They had another spot open, so they brought me in last February. Fortunately, when we graduated June 15, they hired both of us. We started three days later."

The duo first worked together on a music video for producer Rusty Rogers, "who came to school to produce a music video made for his rendition of the tune '10 Little Monkeys.' My role was to design characters and backgrounds, as well as set up characters for animation," he says, noting that up to seven students worked on the project at once.

Zilka embarked on his career path employing Autodesk's 3D Studio Max, "but during the class I bought a Maya 6 Foundation [also from Autodesk] book on my own and quickly came to prefer it. It's more powerful and offers the user more options, such as particle dynamics and the painting weights."

He discusses how Maya enhanced his creativity on one of his senior projects — a short story about a guy who falls asleep in his bed before waking up to find that his cat had become a giant and he needs to run for his life. "I used Maya to accentuate the cat's fur and clothing of the man, for instance," says Zilka. He also employed Maya on a piece for Microsoft that called for a crow to fly over an ocean and some ships, then land on a buoy. "I rigged and animated the bird," he

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~~describes, "then we created the water in Maya, later compositing the buoy and ships, which were all done in After Effects, into the piece."~~

~~All told, Zilka has used the combination of his education, contacts and talent to make a smooth transition from academia to the work world. "Gasket made my transition really easy, so I got used to the people and the workload before I came to work full time," he says. "The other students at my school didn't do internships for the most part, but I would definitely recommend it to anyone."~~

John Sanchez
The Napoleon Group (www.napny.com)
New York

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," he 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, he 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," he 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."

He 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 his 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, they were able to wait until this past February to come on board and offer his skills in 3D graphics and compositing with After Effects. So far, he's worked on test spots for Three Musketeers candy bars. For a wave of chocolate he had to learn Next Limit's Real Flow, which 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 is something people have to do continually in this business," he 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," he said. "Everything in my past led me to where I am now."

Kyle Gray
Spy Post
(www.spypost.com)
San Francisco

~~Kyle Gray has a bit of "seniority" on Zilka, having joined Spy Post as an assistant editor/After Effects artist last February — though he didn't graduate from San Francisco's Academy of Art until May.~~

~~The majority of his workload at Spy Post involves compositing on music videos, commercials and features. His previous experience, which he gained at a small production company early in his college career, also includes editing commercials. The Denver native, who is now just 22 years of age, also has an early career that parallels that of Zilka from an experience standpoint, as his interest in post work was sparked during high school. He was 16 when he started cutting skateboard videos "in the X Games mode" and started his own LLC; at 17 he produced skating videos, then cut and distributed product in the western United States. "That's when I decided I wanted to proceed into films, music videos," says~~

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