

# Producing a Real-World Student Group Project

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## Abstract

Many Digital Media/Animation departments include student group projects as an important component of their curriculums. Gnomon School of Visual Effects has worked hard to make our group projects real-world projects. The latest of these was creating the visual effects for the Roger Corman feature film *Demonlayer*. These real-world projects offer our students unusual opportunities and challenges.

This session will feature presentations by the Visual Effects Supervisor, Visual Effects Producer, CG Supervisor and students involved in the project. Topics to be covered will include the history of *Demonlayer*, the pluses and problems, working with professionals, setting realistic expectations and suggestions for finding projects.

## 1 Purpose and Premise

The purpose of this presentation is to show the value to schools of including real-world projects in their digital media and animation curriculums. The premise is that projects that are produced for an outside "client" give students much more useful experience than group projects that are developed by students.

The school representative will describe the genesis of the project, the expectations of the production. She will also talk about the support the school received from outside companies. The Visual Effects Supervisor and the CG Supervisor will discuss their expectations, the selection of students, establishing the production pipeline, and the approval process. The student representative will present her perspective as an artist, production team member and student.

Discussion will cover the ways in which this project falls in between a truly academic undertaking and a truly commercial undertaking, academic vs. professional incentives, education vs. performance, and industry vs. scholastic education. We will talk about the benefits, first from the perspective of students involved in *Demonlayer*, and then from the perspective of Gnomon School.

## 2 The Panelists

**Pam Hogarth**, [moderator] Director of Industry Relations at Gnomon School of Visual Effects, has been in the world of computer graphics for over 19 years. In that time she has done marketing, public and industry relations, and training for a wide range of companies and educational institutions. She has taught at The American Film Institute, Otis College of Art and Design, and Digital Media Institute (where she was Director) and has lectured on computer graphics, digital careers and visual effects at various international conferences here and abroad. Pam has twice been elected to the Board of Directors of the Visual Effects Society. She is Co-Chair of the VES Education Committee and a co-founder and steering committee member of the Alliance of Digital Effects Production Trainers (ADEPT). For the past two year she has served on the SIGGRAPH Computer Animation Festival committee. She holds a BS in Fine Art from Springfield College

and an MEd in Vocational Counseling from Kent State University.

"In the 15 years I've been in high-end cg education, I've been involved with numerous student projects. The most valuable projects, by far, have been those that were real-world projects done for outside clients. Because of my background in education and production, I believe that I can offer a unique perspective on the education value, the benefits to the school and the problems inherent in such projects."

**Gil Zimmerman**, Assistant Supervisor, Layout Department, DreamWorks SKG. Gil was one of the first artists brought on board by DreamWorks to build the team for the layout department for *Sharkslayer* because of his extensive experience at Walt Disney Feature Animation. Gil was originally hired at Disney to fill the unprecedented role of liaison between the traditional and digital animators on *Tarzan*. Due to his deep understanding of 3D and how it translated into feature animation, he was quickly promoted to Lead Modeler. Upon completion of *Tarzan*, Disney signed him for the layout department of *Treasure Planet*. Before Disney, Gil was an instructor at Digital Media Institute in Hollywood, where he developed curriculum and taught classes in Alias|Wavefront, Side Effects and Softimage 3D software. He came to the world of 3D computer graphics from a successful career as a professional classical trombone player and teacher. He holds a BFA in Music from USC.

"I was very excited to work on the *Demonlayer* project at Gnomon. I looked forward to working with students. And I really wanted to work with them in a project that was as much like a real production as possible. It was a learning experience for all of us. As a production professional and an educator I feel I have a good insight into the workings of real-world projects. I look forward to sharing my experiences."

**Craig Sylvester** grew up in the 3 most populous cities in the world, Los Angeles, Beijing, and Cairo. After a lifetime of studying art, indulging a fascination with computers full-time since the age of 15 and with CGFX since 18, he decided that the only thing left for him was to breathe special effects for film like a fish does water.

He received a CGFX degree from the Savannah College of Art & Design in 2000, enjoyed a fantastic effects house internship, learned a lot about teamwork and the FX process from script-to-screen on the *Demonlayer* project, and continues to pursue effects projects from his desk in North Hollywood.

"Originally as the sole FX artist on the *Demonlayer* project, I ended up assuming the position of CG Supervisor for a 25 artist Gnomon team. The completely volunteer basis of the project meant I had to be present and involved at all times so I could transfer work to artists as they were available. I worked daily with the team leads and artists to clear any obstructions, be they hardware, software, or wetware."

"My early involvement and the relatively small scale of the project allowed me to see the production from early scripts to the director in the AVID bay, from FX breakdowns to tweaking particle systems, from compositing at 4am to the premiere screening and afterparty. I'm still learning what it all meant."

**Kat Curry** is student and lab tech at Gnomon School of Visual Effects, with a specialization in Character Set Up and Particles and Dynamics. Before entering the program at Gnomon, Kat was a CG Programmer at Boston University, working in scientific visualization. She had previously held numerous positions as a programmer and interface designer at small companies.

“The *Demonlayer* project was my first real production. I think we all went into it with little idea of how much work it would be and how much we would learn. I can’t tell you how far working on that project went in preparing me for working professionally. I believe that my perspective as a student worker-bee will be valuable to the instructors who attend this session.”

***Pam Hogarth***, (Moderator)

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