

RICK RAVENELL

Landed a position on the *Avatar* visual effects team as a motion graphics artist.

NAME: Rick Ravenell
PROFESSION: Composite Artist > Los Angeles, California
ALUMNUS: Class of 2007
MAJOR: Game Programming



Anyone working in the movie industry—in any role or capacity—would love to have a mega-hit film on their resume. Anyone lucky enough to make that claim would love to have the biggest mega-hit movie, *Avatar*, on his or her resume.

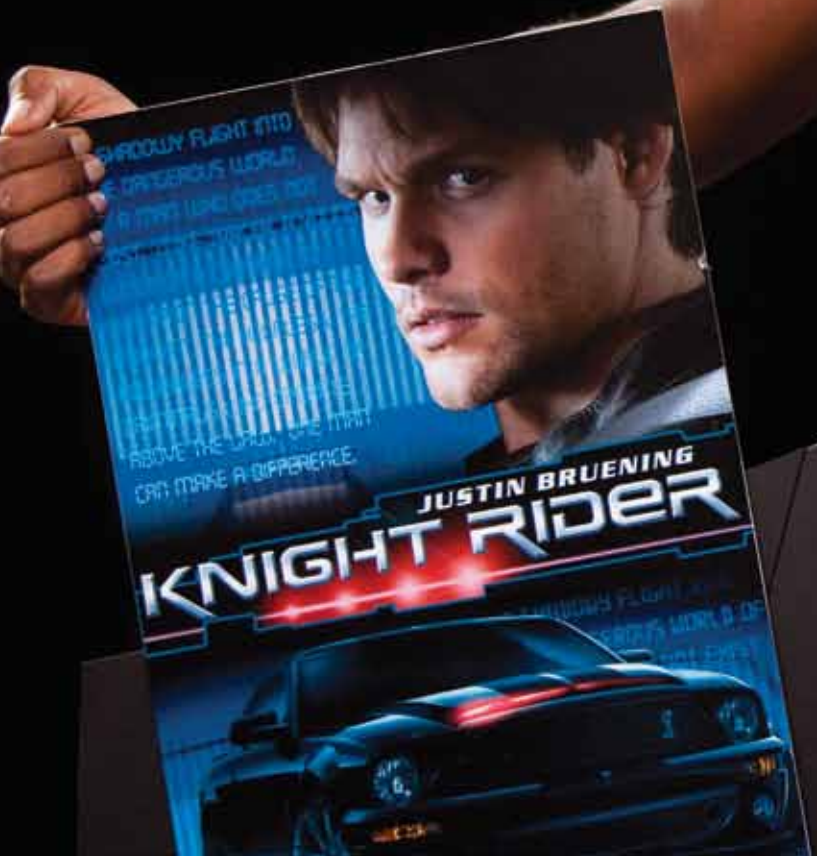
Grossing over \$2.77 billion (that's billion with a “b”) worldwide, *Avatar* smashed box office records and won Academy Awards for Best Cinematography, Best Visual Effects and Best Art Direction. Anyone working in the field of computer graphics would kill to be involved with that, right? The question is: If you were a part of it, what do you do next? The answer is: You go to work!

Rick Ravenell is a freelance compositor and 2007 graduate of UAT. Through the usual mix of hard work, networking with alumni contacts, good timing and a little luck, Rick landed a position on the *Avatar* visual effects team as a motion graphics artist. After many hours of intense, imaginative and creative work, Rick's visual effects appear in numerous scenes throughout the movie.



Catching Up With Rick Ravenell

Life as a Freelance Artist: Budgeting Time is the Key to Success





That's enough of a recap for those of you who didn't read all about Rick's *Avatar* success in the last issue of Geek 411 Magazine. When we caught up with him again, Rick was visiting his old stomping grounds for Tech Forum where he was slotted to give a presentation. Right when he sat down to talk with us though, we couldn't get a word in before his old mentor, Arnaut Ehgner, passed by and gave him a hearty high five and one-armed man hug, just like old buds. They exchanged greetings on the fly, and Arnaut took off down the stairs telling Rick to come over to his house for dinner before he leaves town. It's a tight bond that students form with their mentors at UAT, and this interaction demonstrated that.

No Rest for the Weary

Since finishing work on *Avatar*, Rick's been a very busy man. Despite a seemingly nonstop work schedule, he was able to come back to UAT for Tech Forum and give us a few minutes of his time. Serving as his own agent, Rick works as a Freelance Composite Artist.

A composite artist's job is working with some of the latest hardware and software fusing together elements such as live action footage, 3D animation, stock footage, and other sources into a single picture. The goal may be a photo-realism or an exaggeration of the world. A composite artist

might also take on other tasks such as modeling and rendering a 3D object or element.

Companies such as Encore Hollywood and Sabertooth Interactive provide Rick a steady stream of projects. Encore Hollywood specializes in digital workflows (DiTV) and visual effects for episodic television, MOWs, commercials, music videos and feature films. In addition to *Zombieland*, Encore's feature film, credits include *Casino Royale*, *Evan Almighty*, *Spider-man* and *Talladega Nights*, to name a few. Television credits include FOX's *House*, CBS's *NCIS*, HBO's *Entourage*, and NBC's *My Name is Earl*.

These companies have offered him staff positions but he prefers to freelance, because this approach allows him to pursue other job opportunities while working. A staff position would include a contract with a non-compete clause. Rick values the freedom to work on any type of project, for anyone, at any time.

A self professed workaholic, he works as much as possible. That means days, evenings and weekends. His projects with Encore in Hollywood requires him to work daily from 1pm to 10pm on location where he has his work station set up just so. But before that, he's down in Venice from 8am to 12pm for a half-day stint with Sabretooth.

To read more about Rick's life after *Avatar*, go to www.uat.edu/ravenell





The University of Advancing Technology

ISSUE 8 SUMMER/FALL 2011

Bonus Content

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Rick's Life After Avatar

A self-professed workaholic, he works as much as possible. That means days, evenings and weekends. His projects with Encore in Hollywood requires him to work daily from 1pm to 10pm on location where he has his work station set up just so. But before that, he's down in Venice from 8am to 12pm for a half-day stint with Sabretooth.

"OK, so I have no time in the morning. But I do have time at night if I want to freelance," Rick says. So it seems, if he takes on other projects, he fits them in late at night. While other projects often pay well, they may only last a month or two.

"Sometimes you're brought in at the very end of a project, sometimes you're brought in at the beginning. So I have to budget my time," says Rick. That's one reason why he maintains a close working relationship with Encore, because they provide consistent daily work.

Making Hay While the Sun Shines.

The old adage may sound corny, but it really does hold true in this case. When you're a freelancer in demand like Rick, you "have to get while the getting's good".

Rick says that he mainly budgets his time for work based on "how many hours of sleep per night I need." And he clearly confesses that his goal is "to make as much money as possible."

There's a reason for doing that in the freelance world, though, which Rick was quick to point out: "I know that sounds greedy. But it's not out of greed. It's just that I've been out of work before and I know there will be times again when there is no work. I have friends in this business who have gone months without a job."

It's for those reasons that he rakes in what paychecks he can, so he has a comfortable nest egg ready for rainy days and any stretches between gigs. Projects may last a few days or a few months; sometimes they are cancelled or shelved without much notice. He knows that doing as much work as he can when there is work, will allow him to get through the times when work is slow.

But that's not the only reason Rick works so hard — he also loves the work and helping other people. Companies seek him out frequently and present him with new projects because he was crucial in saving earlier projects from disaster. "When you love what you do like I love what I do, it doesn't feel like work. It feels like hanging out with friends," says Rick.

Having a reputation as a dependable, clutch performer has its benefits. Rick is often able to request specific equipment set-ups to perform his work. His usual requirements are a very powerful MAC, a tablet, and a keyboard. Rick feels the tablet is especially important for detailed precision work and it allows him to be much more productive. "I could do with a mouse what I do with a tablet, but it would take me a lot longer," says Rick.

The primary software Rick uses is After Effects from Adobe, which he learned to use at UAT. It is one of the most widely used software tools in the industry; in fact, he is often hired as an After Effects Compositor. Rick's advice to current students, learn After Effects, know it extremely well, know how to customize it, including the many third party plug ins that are available.

Another key software tool aspiring composite artist should become well versed in is NUKE, by London based developer The Foundry. According to Rick, "This has become a big hit in the industry. Someone who is skilled in using it will always be in high demand."

Life After Avatar?

After having worked on the biggest mega-hit movie of all time, what's Rick's idea of the next dream project? Without hesitation Rick answers, "TRON Legacy".

"The original TRON is an insane milestone for visual effects," he says. "Even though it lost to ET that year when it was released. But I guess you have to hand it to them though because they got everyone to cry over a rubber puppet."

No cutting edge visual effects happening there, according to Rick.

Rick considers the original TRON movie one of the inspirations that lead him to this career. While he wants badly to be part of the new TRON movie, it's already underway and an opportunity hasn't yet presented itself. He has connections in the industry working on the film, however, so there's always a chance. "Connections are everything," Rick emphasizes.

Fortunately, Rick will be able to keep busy with Avatar 2 and 3, as both projects are already signed production deals. Opportunities such as these will continue Rick on the path toward his main dream, which is to be a full time Feature Film Compositor. His desire is to work exclusively on feature films such as Ironman, The Hulk, and Captain America — what Rick calls "the fun stuff." His dream job is a full time staff position working on just "the fun stuff."

Rick Ravenell has accomplished a lot in the short time since he graduated from UAT. He is clearly a talented, hard working, and self motivated young professional. To what does he attribute his success? UAT. The education he received at UAT prepared him well and positioned him for success.

"UAT was a self driven, individualized curriculum that gave me the chance to be proactive about shaping my education," he says.

The environment at UAT, according to Rick, "Didn't feel like academia. It felt more open and collaborative, just like it is in the industry. Students can work closely with professors and other students to customize a degree that fits what they want to do after graduation."

The network of UAT alumni has also been a great resource to Rick. Contacts through UAT alumni helped Rick land his first job working on the television series Night Rider. Another UAT alumni, in fact Rick's roommate at UAT, helped him land the job on Avatar.

Rick's advice to UAT students currently aspiring towards rewarding careers was to "make sure you make friends, be nice to people, and keep track of them. They can all be important future connections in the industry."

With the same strong self-motivation, and in a similar open and collaborative environment, Rick Ravenell is thriving as a freelance composite artist.

