

CHENG PEI SHAN, 29, associate production manager

She grew up a "geek and a Star Wars fan", thanks to the influence of her older brother. So working at the company which helped create the franchise means a lot to Ms Cheng.

She says that being a woman, she is part of a minority in the world of digital media creation, but the animation diploma-holder from Nanyang Polytechnic says things are changing.

"Ten years ago, there were only a few girls in the courses, but today, you see a drastic increase. It was hard to find a job as an animator after I graduated 10 years ago." She finally got a job at an Australian animation company based here but it folded, so she worked in design at an advertising agency for four years.

Ms Cheng, who is married, calls her job at ILM "the fulfilment of a childhood dream" to be close to the makers of her favourite sci-fi franchise. She left the agency to work at Lucasfilm Animation as a training coordinator in 2005 and rose to become a producer. Iron Man 2, Surrogates (2009) and the Transformers sequel (2009) are among her credits.

As producer, she makes sure visual effects projects and teams run efficiently and meet targets. "Creative people who want to work in this industry can now look no further than our own shores," she says.



TAY CHIN SIONG, 29, lighting technical director

Mr Tay's specialisation is one that baffles people outside the industry. As lighting technical director, he makes sure lights and reflections in a computer-generated scene look realistic and exciting. "The scenes that are passed to us have models and textures, and we add the lights," says the Singaporean, who is single. It sounds simple, but in Iron Man 2, the Japanese garden battle scene, which he worked on, is hugely complex.

He is one part of a detailed assembly process and has a specialisation that is rare in Singapore, where more general skills are called for. The Nanyang Polytechnic alumnus and two-year veteran of ILM Singapore used to work as an artist at a games company.

He was accepted into the Jedi Master's apprenticeship programme and was offered the highly specialised job. He is thrilled to be on the same roster as everyone who worked on Iron Man 2. "It's really cool to see your name in the credits," he says.

Five years on, Lucasfilm Animation Singapore has drawn talent but is it ready to create original content?



John Lui  
film correspondent

You might imagine that the offices of the company that created the special effects magic for the Star Wars franchise and Iron Man 2 would look, well, more magical.

But other than the greater than usual number of movie memorabilia, the place where billionaire playboy Tony Stark was turned into an armoured, flying superhero could pass for any cubicle maze.

But as the company celebrates its work on Iron Man 2, Mr Xavier Nicolas, 55, managing director of Lucasfilm Animation Singapore, is proud of the way the company has evolved into a special effects house on par with its San Francisco head office.

"ILM Singapore is an extension of ILM in California, we have the same technology and are part of the same pipeline."

When Lucasfilm Animation opened in Singapore in 2005, there were high hopes. The then Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo said: "It will help raise our media industry to a new level and give our own creative talents international exposure."

Then came the sister divisions of the San Francisco-based Lucasfilm Ltd: The

# Special affects

visual effects arm Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) and the games arm LucasArts.

Lucasfilm Singapore is a joint venture between Lucasfilm Ltd, the United States-based founding company, and Singapore's Economic Development Board (EDB). Lucasfilm owns 75 per cent share of the company while EDB and Singapore-based electronics firm Creative Technology hold the rest. The investment amount has never been revealed.

Riding on the prestige of the Lucasfilm name to put Singapore on the digital media map has been a marketing coup for the country. But the harder job lies ahead: Making Singapore a place that creates original work, say experts that Life! spoke to.

From just 38 people in 2005, Lucasfilm Singapore's headcount has surged to 380. It occupies 70,000 sq ft across 1 1/2 floors at Changi Business Park. It is the only overseas arm of Lucasfilm Ltd, the

company founded in 1971 by Star Wars creator George Lucas, its 65-year-old chairman. By the end of the year, its headcount is expected to cross 400, half of which is made up of Singaporeans or permanent residents.

Mr Steven Ong, 35, is a Singaporean who returned home after almost seven years in California. ILM Singapore recruited him and he is now the lead digital artist.

"When I first started, there were only a few players in the industry," he says.

About 190 out of 530 visual effects shots in Iron Man 2 were done by ILM Singapore in its largest contribution to date to a major movie. When the company opened in 2005, it could handle only digital matte painting. Today, it produces full sequences. The facility here is a "follow the sun" operation that takes over when the offices in California are closed.

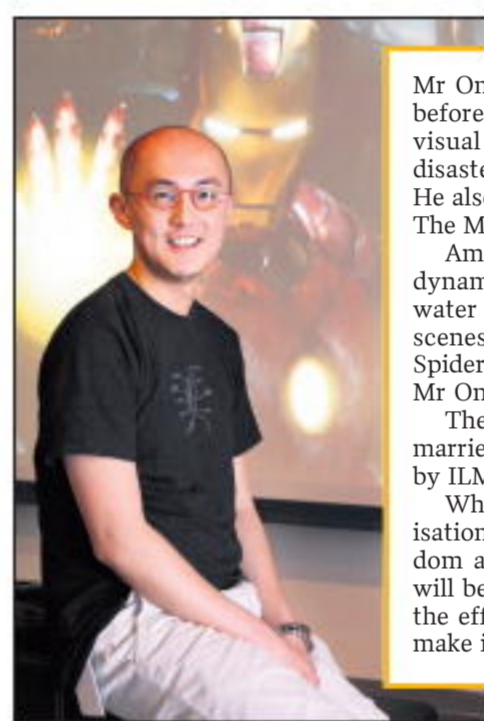
Last month, the normally media-shy organisation gave journalists a tour of its facilities in Changi Business Park.

The company is aware it is a poster child for foreign private sector and government cooperation. As such, it is ready to defend itself against criticism, mostly by smaller local players who feel they are not getting enough attention from the Government. One charge is that it is a sweatshop that exploits low wages in Asia.

Mr Nicolas says what attracted the company was Singapore's stability, the people's fluency in English, government support and the legal and communications infrastructure.

The company makes sure it has lots of contact with the wider world of artists and designers because it helps with its greatest problem: Finding the right people. It has a voracious appetite for talent.

Today, Lucasfilm Animation is ready to start work on a full-length feature, with most of the animation to be done in Singapore, says Mr Nicolas.



STEVEN ONG, 35, lead digital artist

Mr Ong had only worked freelance in Singapore before leaving for the United States to work with visual effects giant Digital Domain on the disaster epic The Day After Tomorrow (2004). He also worked on blockbusters such as Night At The Museum 2 (2009) and Spider-Man 3 (2007).

Among other things, he specialised in particle dynamics, which controls the movement of water and sand in effects sequences. The fight scenes between Sandman and Spider-Man in Spider-Man 3 featured sand splashes courtesy of Mr Ong.

The Ngee Ann Polytechnic graduate, who is married, came back here after being approached by ILM and has worked on Iron Man 2.

While there is a more intense degree of specialisation, it does not mean that there is less freedom and creativity for an artist, he says. "You will be given a shot and get a rough guidance on the effects, but it is up to you to execute it and make it look good," he says.

The details are under wraps. The company runs a programme that combines training and talent-spotting. Called the Jedi Master's Programme (in tribute to its Star Wars heritage), the paid, six-month, full-time course is popular.

Last year, more than 1,000 people applied for the programme. Of the 56 apprentices the firm took in, it hired just 39.

Another production company, the United Kingdom-based Double Negative Visual Effects, opened a branch here last year. Now 55 strong and growing, the company's founder and managing director Alex Hope told Life! that "Singapore offered a unique combination of rich creative talent, plus an education system focused on enhancing the skills of people coming into the industry".

The British firm shared visual effects credits with ILM on Iron Man 2 and is also seen as both a standard-bearer for the Government's imported-talent policy and a competitor for skilled labour here.

With ILM's status, some have feared that its presence here, along with the likes of Double Negative, could lead to a hiring war, with small local companies being the casualties.

Mr Freddie Yeo, 40, general manager of animation and visual effects company Infinite Frameworks, admits that the contest for staff is a "sensitive topic when the big boys come here".

"When your people aspire to work at Lucasfilm, you can't stop them," he says. He is happy to note that, as far as he knows, Lucasfilm does not appear to poach. His firm has not suffered a talent drain because some people prefer to work with a smaller local company, he says.

Animation and visual effects jobs at larger outfits such as Lucasfilm are typically broken down into assembly-line specialisations, a style that may not suit those who prefer to do a bit of every-

thing, he says. And because local firms such as Infinite Frameworks handle limited-scope projects, such as visual effects for a documentary series or commercials, they attract people who like smaller, shorter digital effects jobs rather than ILM Singapore's feature films, which can take many months to complete.

The presence of Lucasfilm here, however, has elevated standards, sharpened student interest in digital production and kept talent in Singapore when it could have migrated to California, he says.

Mr Marc Jonet, 46, is manager for the diploma in digital visual effects course in Ngee Ann Polytechnic. He met effects companies to find out what was lacking in the graduates they were seeing and was told of a common problem.

"People turn up who don't know how to draw, and if they know how to draw, they don't know what to draw," he says. Companies need people with both artistic skills and who can create fresh ideas, but they are unable to find enough of them here, he says.

It is a problem to do with both the emphasis on sciences over the arts and the examination result-oriented culture created by the education system, says Mr Jonet, who has taught here for 11 years.

However, he believes that to say "made by Singaporeans", as in content made and owned by locals, is somehow better than just "made in Singapore", shows a lack of understanding of how the industry works.

High costs and the need for universal cultural appeal have made cross-border productions and the use of international production facilities the new reality for Asia, Europe and Hollywood, he says.

Mr Jean-Marc Gauthier, director of the animation and digital arts MFA programme at New York University Tisch School of the Arts Asia, adds that the presence of back-end operations such as ILM Singapore and Double Negative will, one day, create a front-end of content creators. "They create an ecosystem and attract artists and students and these people will create the original content."

He sees a correlation between China's burgeoning production facility and the growth in the number of film and animation students from China in his school.

Mr Sung Lin Gun, 38, is founder and chief executive of Peach Blossom Media, a local animation studio. While digital artists have benefitted from the contest for their talents, as a business owner, he is still waiting to see the trickle-down benefits of the presence of big foreign players.

"It is great that we lured these big companies in with big bucks. And Singapore got some good publicity out of it, five years ago. The next part, which is the most critical part, is the promise of a knock-on effect, the transfer of know-how to local studios," he says.

"We have to see how to make that happen."

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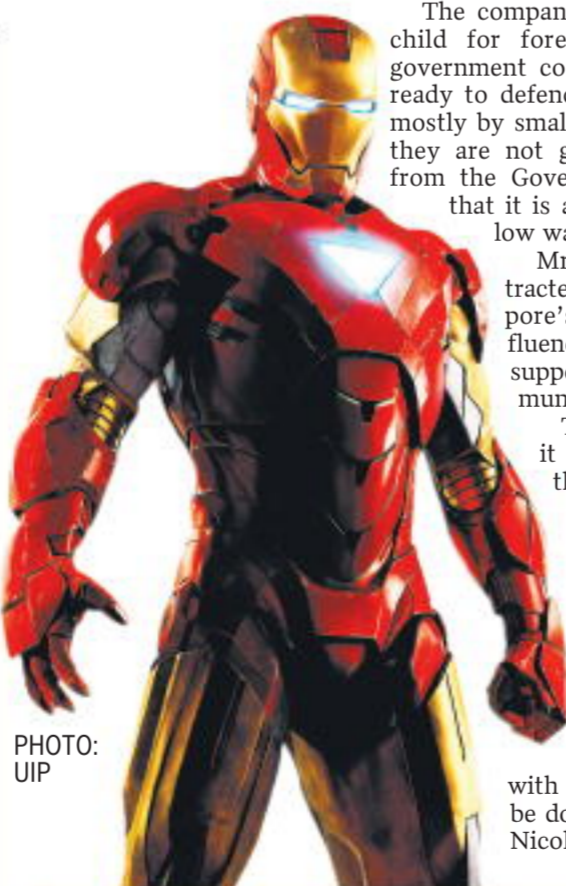


PHOTO: UIP

## Want a job?

How do you get noticed by the recruiters at Lucasfilm Singapore, the company which many consider to be the pinnacle of the production industry? After all, its Industrial Light & Magic arm has won 15 Oscars for visual effects and whipped up the ground-breaking computer-generated reptiles in Jurassic Park (1993) and the liquid-metal killer T-1000 robot in Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991). If you do not have years of experience, apply for its Jedi Masters programme, which trains participants, though that programme is also extremely competitive. Here are some tips from Lucasfilm Singapore:

- Research the Lucasfilm Singapore jobs website and edit your application package to fit the job. Never send a one-size-fits-all package.
- Keep your CV short and sweet, under two pages. Edit your showreel down to two minutes at most. Send in your best work, not everything you have ever

done. In the two minutes, showcase your versatility in styles, moods and characters.

- For artists, the right reel is key. Cut a reel that showcases specific skills required for the job. If you are qualified for two jobs, cut two versions of the reel. Do not worry if your work lacks every component, such as lighting or textures, as long as it has the component relevant to the job.

- School-assigned work is not enough for a demo reel. Send in work you have done on your personal time.

- Do not leave gaps in your demo reel for skills specified in the job description. Fill up the gaps with personal work, if necessary.

- The company likes reels in a DVD-movie format or streamed from a website. Odd files on CDs are frowned on since they might need special software to play. Include a shot breakdown that tells viewers what they are seeing.

- If your showreel has been rejected, there is no point resubmitting the same work. Resend only if you have newer, better work after an interval of at least six months.