



Fan Films

an industry op-ed by Steve Wright

Fan films embrace a startlingly large sub-culture of producers, writers, cinematographers, directors, editors, and visual effects artists that create movie shorts inspired by popular feature films. Many are cheesy and poorly done with handy cams and look like high school skits, but some are very serious and superbly done. These serious fan films offer a tremendous opportunity for aspiring digital artists to finally solve the age-old conundrum - how can I build a job-getting demo reel?

My first brush with a fan film came one day in early April when I got a panicky email through my website from a Kaustav Sinha, a digital matte painter in India. Seems he was working on a Chris Bouchard fan film named "The Hunt for Gollum" and needed some emergency compositing assistance. When I received the digital matte painting and video clips to evaluate I was thunder-struck. This was superb work. Suddenly, I wanted to work on The Hunt for Gollum. Tragically, after understanding the scope of task it became clear that I could not fit it into my schedule. I was truly bummed, but had a new respect for fan films.

Visual effects films are very popular fare with fan films. There are 17 fan films listed for Harry Potter, 28 for Lord of the Rings, 49 for Spiderman, 81 for Star Trek, and an incredible 303 for Star Wars, the most fan filled fantasy film of all time. You can find these and more listed on the home page of www.fanfilms.net where you will find an incredible 1612 fan films listed. It turns out that there are several website and blogs devoted to fan films. Check out Fan Cinema Today at www.fancinematoday.com as well as Fanboy Theatre at www.fanboytheatre.com to begin scratching the surface of this huge subterranean world.

The key to getting worthy shots to work on is to find a worthy project. Anybody would be happy to pay you nothing for your work, so you must choose carefully where you are going to invest your time and talent. Many of these serious fan films have industry-recognized cinematographers, directors, and visual effects supervisors that are in between gigs, want to step up to visual effects films, or just love the genre. Check out the backgrounds of the key participants. While most of the participants do it for love, there is always that tingle of a possibility that someone important will see your work and vault you into the big time. The least it will do is get you some fine elements that you could never get otherwise and make some great shots for your demo reel.

The internet, of course, has been the great enabler of fan films because it makes it possible for literally millions of viewers to see them. So what to do the studios and property owners like DC Comics think about all of this? In the past they tried



to stamp them out as a violation of their copyrights. However, in the last few years their attitudes have softened as they realized that they were getting free promotion for their properties and that it is fruitless to try to stand in the way of a tidal wave. Lucasfilm, DC Comics, Paramount and others have relaxed their stands on this as long as the fan filmmakers are not making money off of the work.

So how to you get hooked up with a quality fan film? First, do your homework. cruise the internet to become familiar with the fan film culture. Start to develop an idea of which direction you would like to go - science fiction (Star Trek), fantasy (Lord of the Rings), gore (Nightmare on Elm Street) then haunt their websites. They occasionally post a "what's next" announcement which will open a window that you can crawl through to submit your request to participate. And if you do, be sure you deliver your shots. Visual effects is a small industry and you don't want to get an early reputation for being a flake.

And what of The Hunt for Gollum? It is now a spectacular 40 minute short film that you can view in HiDef over the internet at this gorgeous website: www.thehuntforgollum.com. Now I am really bummed.