

BGSU ANIMATORS' WORK EARNS PRAISE AT INTERNATIONAL EVENT

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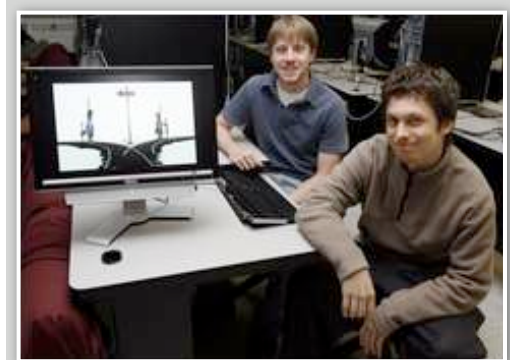
Animation is a hard, serious business.

Don't let the belly dancers fool you. Or the contortionist. Or the inflatable Viking weapons.

Those were just props provided to help inspire, or maybe distract, teams of animators during an international competition last month that was won by a trio from Bowling Green State University.

"There was a party and then we happened to be animating a film during it," said Tomas Jech, a BGSU team member who was born in the Czech Republic but whose family now lives in Pittsburgh.

He, fellow senior Jim Levasseur, and recent graduate W. Jacob Gardner beat out 15 other groups in the first FJORG! Competition, an "iron animator" event that gave squads 32 hours to create the best character-driven animation. They had to use one of two themes and at least one of the provided sound bites.



In the Bowling Green State University animation lab, Tomas Jech, front, and Jim Levasseur display *Switch*, the short film that won them and W. Jacob Gardner the FJORG! competition at an animation convention in San Diego. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

The contest took place in San Diego during SIGGRAPH 2007, a convention that draws 25,000 computer graphic and interactive technology professionals.

The BGSU group, all digital arts majors, worked through hours of loud techno music and a mime who talked - more distractions - to produce a minute-long short called, *Switch*. Based on the theme, "impossible escape," the animation shows two people tied to the railroad on different sides of a split in the tracks. Each pulls the lever to switch an oncoming train to the other person's track until their efforts accidentally derail the train.

"Their story and timing sold the judges immediately," said Patricia Beckmann-Wells, head of training and development for DreamWorks SKG. A Toledo native, she spent part of her college career at BGSU and created the event.

MULTIMEDIA

[See the winning animation short, 'Switch'](#)

FJORG (a title made up to sound Viking-like) was meant to get participants exposure in front of major studios, where recruiters often get bombarded with 100 to 200 demo reels a week. Judges included representatives from industrial heavyweights like Pixar and DreamWorks.

It's exactly the kind of work that Levasseur would like to continue. "I would love to keep making short films," he said. "I like telling my own stories."

The winners had a chance to meet with top Sony animators as well as visit DreamWorks Animation headquarters and dine with top company executives. That was a special thrill for Gardner who unwittingly met his inspiration for getting into the business.

"I said I knew I wanted to be an animator since *Aladdin* was released when I was in the fourth grade," he said.

One of the men then asked if Gardner had been inspired by the genie, which the animator had worked on in that film. Yes, he had been.

"That was pretty cool," said Gardner, who has since accepted an entry-level job with the studio.

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