Kung Fu and the Art of Computing
HP's DreamColor Display at DreamWorks

I departed in total secrecy. Even bought a pair of oversized sunglasses at the airport, and looked down a lot. I didn't know the substance of the story I was covering. They hadn't told me, yet.

HP had invited the press to preview their latest innovation. But, they wouldn't disclose what it was until we signed a waiver. The story I was covering was under embargo, and wouldn't be disclosed until I reached my destination.

 At Burbank airport a chauffeur took my luggage opened a black limo's door and I was face to face with a fully stocked bar. As we glided through moderate traffic I leaned back, popped open a shaken not stirred Diet Coke and sipped the fizz off the can's top as we pulled into DreamWorks Animation SKG's Glendale studio.

HP and DreamWorks had invited twenty or so press hounds from around the country to preview HP's new DreamColor display, and take a studio tour to learn how HP's computing power helps DreamWorks' produce the highest quality animated feature films in the industry. As a special treat we were to meet Jeffrey Katzenburg, DreamWorks Animation CEO, followed by a preview of their latest block buster animated feature film, Kung Fu Panda.

I was at the heart of a very competitive enterprise and told that cameras would be restricted to shooting the beautiful campus exteriors, but not the secret inner workings of the studio. But, before I could explore the grounds and snap those pictures we were escorted to two isolated rooms. There HP and DreamWorks had set up DreamColor display demo stations manned by creative CG wizards who showed us how they use HP's new monitors with third party software like Autodesk's Maya and their own creative software during the animation production process.

I learned that DreamWorks had a problem that's faced in this and other industries. It is absolutely critical that each of their hundreds of artists and animators work using color calibrated monitors that are all precisely in color sync. Until now, DreamWorks had been using cathode ray based monitors that cost approximately $25,000 each and that needed to be calibrated at least once each week. DreamWorks reached out for a better solution, and HP marshaled its talented engineers to develop the DreamColor display in less than a year.

Costs Less – Stays True

The DreamColor display is not only seven times less expensive (costing less than $3,500 each), than the cathode ray monitors, but it doesn't need to be color calibrated for at least 1,000 hours. This backlit LCD display has a resolution of 1920 x 1200 pixels and features over one billion colors. One feature set that I took special note of are its six built in and selectable color calibration modes: sRGB, Rec. 709, Rec. 601, Adobe® RGB, DCI-P3 emulation, and full gamut. There's also one user programmable mode, and DreamWorks took advantage of this to emulate

their unique color look and feel across the entire studio.

Campus Schmampus

After hunkering down in small dimly lit demo rooms with my compatriots for two hours I was ready to see the light, stretch my legs and explore. I visited an on-campus Starbucks for a life giving espresso and then, with camera in hand and snapping happily away I strolled the peaceful gardens absorbed in Roman inspired Italian architecture. Sunken gardens with gently flowing streams crisscrossed the campus pooling at a small lake in the complex's center. I sat at an outdoor café at the water's edge and examined the upscale organic menu pretending that I worked here too. But, alas, it was only another DreamWorks illusion. Tomorrow I'd be heading back to my small windowless office, but for the moment I was immersed in an exotic paradise. What a place to work! It certainly got my creative juices flowing.

The Next Day

 As I settled into a plush seat in DreamWorks's well appointed theater Jeffrey Katzenburg, CEO and Director of DreamWorks Animation SKG, began his talk. He told us that after working on Kung Fu Panda for five years DreamWorks had once again raised the bar with extraordinary textures, details and rich environment. Continuing the rate of innovation is their underlying working mantra, and their mission is to continually deliver new high bars.

When asked how they arrived at creating a Panda who's also a Kung Fu pro, Jeffrey told us that they looked at animals that brought enjoyment and inspiration to people, trying to find an animal that no one else had tackled before in animation. They spent weeks doing research, on the web, the library, and had stacks of reports and books haphazardly arranged across a giant conference table. Breaking the silence someone said "How about, Kung Fu Panda!" The whole room was quiet for a moment … then everyone smiled and they realized that this was the 'ah hah' moment that launched the project.

Jeffrey went on to tell us about their seven year technology partnership with Hewlett-Packard and the "amazing way HP delivers tools to our artists. We couldn't do it without them." HP not only provides the desktop workstations and server farm computers for DreamWorks, but also links their Glendale and Redwood City California operations together with its HALO video conferencing solution. I sat across a conference table from DreamWorks folks in Northern California and after just a few minutes forgot that this was all being done with high definition TV. I really felt that those folks in Redwood City were sitting right across from me.

Then the lights dimmed, and a kung fu panda leapt onto the screen. Jeffrey was right. This film had raised the bar, not only with extremely detailed graphics, but with an exciting story line, lots of fun action, and a voice over crew of superb acting talent. I was entertained, and then surprised when given my very own stuffed Kung Fu Panda doll.

Leaving the studio was a bitter sweet experience. On one hand, I'd love to work in the rarified DreamWorks setting, but on the other my clandestine visit was complete and I was heading home. I boarded the plane, took off my sunglasses, gently placed the stuffed Kung Fu Panda in the overhead bin and looked forward to surprising Tanya, my first and only grandchild.

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