

Bill Westenhofer

Combining Talents and **FINDING SUCCESS**



There was never a grand vision in Bill Westenhofer's mind, a plan that would take him all the way from art student and sometimes-computer buff to Oscar winner, but win an Oscar he did. Westenhofer and his colleagues Michael Fink, Ben Morris, and Trevor Wood were awarded the 2008 Achievement in Visual Effects by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences for his work on the film *The Golden Compass*.

This was not the first time that the entertainment industry has recognized his talent. In 2005, Westenhofer was nominated for an Oscar in the same category for *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and last year the Orange British Academy Television Awards also nominated him for his work on *The Golden Compass*. And his success goes back even further. "My first nomination of any kind was actually

for *Babe II*. I got nominated for the British Academy Award for that job," recalls Westenhofer.

Westenhofer credits his success to being in the right place at the right time, but as he speaks about the path he traveled to the Oscar, it becomes clear that his success is not simply a matter of good fortune. Early on, he combined a talent and lifelong love of art with an interest in computers, and that combination has given him a real advantage in his career. It started in high school when his art teacher suggested that he look into computer graphics as a way to combine the two. He studied computer engineering as an undergraduate at Bucknell University, and then came to GW for his master's program.

"With GW," he explains, "my thought was that I was going to come in, get a computer science master's degree and

whenever I could, I'd do independent studies in computer graphics. But, little did I know, [Professor] James Hahn had the computer graphics group running. It turned out to be a perfect fit. I couldn't have asked for a better program for doing what I wanted to do with a computer science degree."

Westenhofer still values the technical education he received. "The applications of computer graphics are something that I still use every day," he explains. "My career now is a little less technical, it's more the artistic side, but having the engineering background and knowing how the systems work, I'm a lot more effective in suggesting ways of attacking the creative things that I want done. So, I can ask an artist to do something and I know how it's going to work and I know how realistic my request is."

Westenhofer loves the creative side of his job, and that is readily apparent in his conversation. When asked specifically what he loves most, he replies, "There's a moment when you've been working on something for a long time, especially a digital character. You've spent months trying to get the character to look right, and you finally put it in the shot, and there's almost a moment when it clicks over and it goes from something that you've created by hand to something that's almost living. I remember it with Aslan the lion. When that happens, I'll just sit and look at the shot in my office and play it over and over again. It's wonderful."

And as for the Oscar? Westenhofer muses, "It's still absolutely surreal. It's not something I ever expected. I still come home and see it on the mantelpiece and it's kind of shocking."