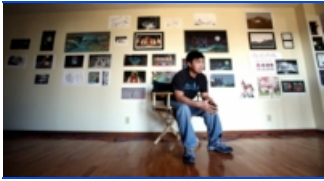


In a Bellevue basement, Skyvu assembles an animation empire

BY BOB FISCHBACH
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

He was working with a master in his profession on the West Coast, helping to create the hit movie "Coraline."



>"In a sense, we're the animation studio that never sleeps," says Benjamin Vu of Skyvu Pictures. The company has offices in Bellevue, Singapore and Dalat, Vietnam.

But Benjamin Vu gave up that job to move back to Omaha to start his own animation studio, Skyvu Pictures.

And while the startup facility in his father's Bellevue basement is humble, Vu's ambitions are not.

Vu, 33, and his brother, Hoa, 35, launched Skyvu in 2007. They are working on what Benjamin hopes will become his own feature-film hit, a futuristic thriller tentatively titled "Battle 3000." Also in the works: an animated television series, "Galaxy Ben," and an electronic, interactive storybook concept called Story Boy.

Vu says learning from some of the best people in animation, both on "Coraline" and at the California Institute of the Arts, gave him the courage to strike out on his own.

He's already the master of a small but far-flung empire. Skyvu has four Bellevue employees, with plans to add two more student interns soon. The company also has offices in Singapore, where Hoa lives and supervises three concept design artists, and in Dalat, Vietnam. Benjamin trained the 10 animators there and hopes to expand that staff to 24 by the end of 2010.

Labor costs and family ties - Dalat is near the family's hometown of Bao Loc - were factors in establishing the Vietnam office.

Coordinating production among studios in three countries poses challenges, but Benjamin and Hoa meet online daily. It also helps that they are fluent in both English and Vietnamese. One advantage: Benjamin can make a creative decision at the end of a workday and arrive the next morning to see the overseas work finished.

"In a sense, we're the animation studio that never sleeps," he joked.

On a recent day in Bellevue, concept designer Michael Kingery was working on a computer, pre-visualizing the look of "Battle 3000," while intern John Sliffe fashioned backgrounds for an ad pitch. Office coordinator An Vu is Benjamin's cousin.

The company just finished making a commercial for United Overseas Bank, one of the largest in Asia. It's working on a project for Saatchi & Saatchi, a global advertising agency based in New York with a division in Singapore.

"It's great that Hoa is in Singapore, because we're able to reach a wide variety of clients and keep a finger on the pulse of what's going on in the rest of the world," Benjamin Vu said. "Lots of interesting things are happening in Singapore. George Lucas has an animation studio there, where 'Clone Wars' was made."

The Vu brothers have gotten financial support from their family and from Nebraska Angels, a private investment group that seeks to promote the state's economy by supporting entrepreneurs and new companies.

Their story is all the more remarkable in light of family history.

Two days before Saigon fell to the communists in 1975, Thai Vu bundled his wife and infant son, Hoa, onto a small fishing boat with about 50 people. The family, which owned a coffee and tea business, had worked for the now-falling government.

Thai lost all his belongings before the family reached land in the Philippines.

They migrated to Guam, then Pennsylvania, where Catholic Charities ran a refugee camp. He found a job making air conditioners in Auburn, N.Y., where Benjamin was born. After being laid off, he relocated the family to Norfolk, Neb., where a family sponsored him in March 1976. In the mid-1980s, they moved to Omaha, where Thai worked for Mutual of Omaha on its heating and air conditioning systems. He now works for Connectivity Solutions.



Benjamin Vu and his brother, Hoa, are working on an electronic, interactive storybook concept called Story Boy.

"I believe his art comes from my family," Thai said of Benjamin. "I'm good at drawing, too. My father (still in Vietnam) is the best in town for writing and art. He is a small-town actor in our village."

Thai still recalls making a prize-winning Halloween costume with Benjamin in Norfolk. "He and I and his brother sat down and figured out how to design it." An ice cream bucket and milk containers became a Transformer outfit.

Benjamin and Hoa graduated from Creighton Prep. Benjamin studied film and video at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., and briefly produced education videos at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln before heading to grad school at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles.

"CalArts is one of the best places to go for learning animation," Benjamin said. His teachers worked on movie hits like "The Iron Giant," "Lemony Snicket," "Rugrats," "Madagascar," "The Little Mermaid" and more.

While in school, he won an internship at LAIKA, a studio in Portland, Ore., where the California Raisins and M&M commercials were shot. Its specialty is stop-motion animation. There he worked with Henry Selick, director of highly praised animated features like "James and the Giant Peach" and "The Nightmare Before Christmas."

Selick put him to work on "Coraline," doing pre-visualization. Benjamin created computer models to help develop the story and the look of the movie's main sets, a Victorian mansion and the magical garden nearby.



A figure from the movie "Coraline" is Benjamin Vu's only souvenir from the film

set.

"He's got a great attitude," said Mike Cachuela of Portland, Ore., a story supervisor and former co-director on the movie. "He's a good combination of team player, with plenty of his own ideas and problem-solving skills. I'd work with him again in a heartbeat. He's really good at the tech side, applying computer imaging to film."

Benjamin left "Coraline" just as principal photography began in late 2006. He and Hoa founded Skyvu in January 2007. Why the Omaha area? Benjamin, who is single, admits a romantic relationship was a motivator. He said he also feels anchored here, free to make something different and realize his own ideas.

He gets excited when he talks about his movie idea. Set 1,000 years in the future, it features two brothers who go on a journey to save the world from imminent disaster.

"It was inspired by the trials and tribulations between my brother and myself as we grew up," he said, including a tough transition from Norfolk to Omaha. And the developing television series has an inventor character much like his father.

"With animation we have an opportunity to go well beyond what we've seen before," Benjamin said. "We want to make films that people remember, that will stand the test of time."

• **Contact the writer:** 444-1269, bob.fischbach@owh.com

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