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# How Sony Pictures Imageworks Brought the Heroes and Villains of 'Spider-Man' to Life

2:40 PM PDT 7/11/2012 by Carolyn Giardina

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The Culver City-based visual effects house marks its 20th anniversary with its most spectacular effects bonanza yet.

*This story first appeared in the July 20 issue of **The Hollywood Reporter** magazine.*

If it were not for Sony Pictures Imageworks, *Spider-Man* might never have been able to swing through the canyons of New York City with so much acrobatic brio -- and the villains he encounters might not have been so formidable a threat. Imageworks, the studio's Culver City-based visual effects house, is marking its 20th anniversary this year as *The Amazing Spider-Man* swings into theaters. And just as Peter Parker

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"The Amazing Spider-Man"

grows into his superpowers during the course of the movie, Imageworks has been testing its creative powers, which have grown steadily as the \$2.5 billion-grossing franchise has progressed.

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### PHOTOS: 'The Amazing Spider-Man' Premiere: Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone Swing Into Action on the Red Carpet

While *Spider-Man* was brought to life by **Tobey Maguire** in the first three films (**Andrew Garfield** has now taken over the iconic role), a "digital double" of the lead actor had to be created for those scenes when Spidey swings into action. For that, the masked superhero was created entirely inside a computer by Imageworks' team of artists.

"We mo-capped a gymnast," says animation supervisor **Spencer Cook**, who worked on the first three *Spider-Man* movies, of experiments with performance capture for the first film in 2002. "But *Spider-Man* just looked like a gymnast; it didn't look like *Spider-Man*. We moved away from that since a lot of *Spider-Man* shots have larger-than-life action."

And so, with a mix of artistry, technical R&D and experimentation, Imageworks continually has helped reimagine the world of *Spider-Man* and his various opponents -- especially those scene-stealing villains. "There is a theatricality to certain *Spider-Man* characters, particularly the villains," says *Amazing Spider-Man* director **Marc Webb**. "We spent a lot of time thinking about how [the villain] The Lizard would work

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Relatively quickly, Imageworks emerged as a rival to more established effects houses such as Lucasfilm's Industrial Light & Magic and Digital Domain. Five-time Oscar winner **Ken Ralston** (*The Return of the Jedi*, *Forrest Gump*) joined Imageworks as its senior VFX supervisor and creative head in 1995. Ralston, who recently completed *Men in Black 3*, says that while the company's technical tools steadily advance, its success is due to "the expertise and the artistry of our people."

Imageworks' staff ranges from 750 to 1,000 employees, depending on the size of projects in production. Its slate currently includes Disney's *Oz: The Great and Powerful*, which reteams Imageworks with **Sam Raimi**, director of the first three *Spider-Man* films; Sony's animated movie *Cloudy 2: Revenge of the Leftovers*; and that studio's live-action/animated hybrid *The Smurfs 2*.

Along the way, Imageworks has developed a particular expertise in character animation, and that in turn laid the groundwork for sister company Sony Pictures Animation, now 10 years old. As it challenges Pixar and DreamWorks Animation, SPA has turned out such films as *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, Oscar nominee *Surf's Up* and the upcoming *Hotel Transylvania*.

"Sony Pictures Animation was started to utilize some of the incredible skills and talent that were at Imageworks," says **Bob Osher**, president of SPE's digital production division, which includes Imageworks, SPA and web development arm Imageworks Interactive.

"There is a lot of back and forth," says Osher, explaining that when SPA develops movies, it is Imageworks that actually creates the animation. The companies share their Culver City campus, and Imageworks also maintains facilities in Vancouver and Chennai, India.

### STORY: 'Spider-Man' Director Mark Webb Reveals How to Stay Grounded 'When You Have a Nine-Foot Lizard Running Around New York'

Lots of R&D has accounted for the increased sophistication of Imageworks' achievements, including its ability to create more realistic digital doubles -- which, says Ralston, gives the artists greater creative freedom.

Cook cites an example: "Between *Spider-Man 1* and *2*, Sam Raimi realized the more Peter Parker takes his mask off when he is *Spider-Man*, the more the audience can relate to him." Since some of the swinging scenes involved creating Peter's face as well as *Spider-Man's* body digitally, "we had to push the technology further between the first and second films because we wanted to see more of his face."

biologically. A big part of that was how he would talk -- the mouth and the musculature. You are really creating a species from the ground up."

"I love this new character," says Imageworks executive vp production **Debbie Denise**, who joined the company in 1995. "When you see how the skin moves over the muscles, and the textures and the way the light is caught on the skin, we could not have done that a decade ago."

Sony Pictures Entertainment created Imageworks in 1992 as a "digital factory" that could create in-house effects for Sony movies, TV shows and videos, though from the beginning it also took on jobs for other studios' films.

**Jerome Chen**, senior visual effects supervisor on *Amazing Spider-Man*, joined when he heard Sony was starting an effects group. "It was in the top floor of the TriStar building on the Sony lot," he recalls. "They had card tables set up in a conference room, and the computers were in there too. It was freezing because they needed giant air conditioners to cool the computers."

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The new *Spider-Man* runs up against another new, and tricky, hurdle since it is the first Spider-Man movie shot in 3D.

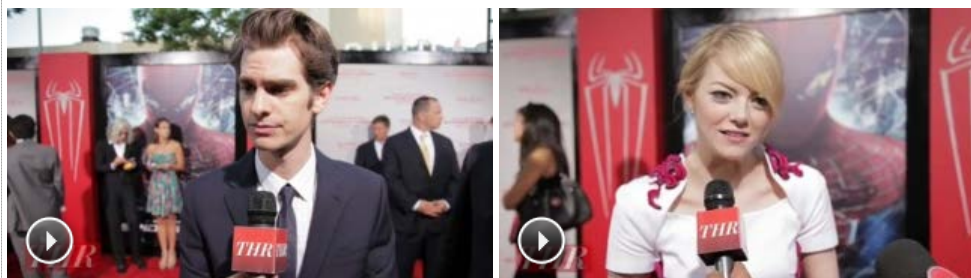
Director of photography **John Schwartzman** lensed the film in native 3D with Red Epic cameras on 3ality Technica rigs (the combination used on **Peter Jackson's** *Hobbit* films). Because Webb "didn't want to be heavy-handed about the 3D," says Imageworks veteran **Rob Engle**, "we would save the 3D moments for when Peter Parker turns into *Spider-Man* and swings through the streets."

Working side by side with VFX supervisor Chen, Webb, whose only previous film was the quirky indie (*500*) *Days of Summer*, got a crash course in making a \$220 million visual effects movie. Determined to keep the film emotionally and physically grounded, says Webb, "I wanted to shoot as much of the stunts in camera as possible -- but, of course, when you are working with a character like *Spider-Man*, you need that spectacle and that sense of thrill."

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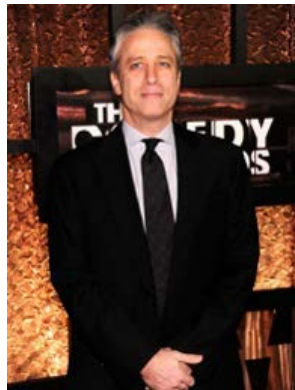
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When THR asked what the driving force was behind his character, Ifans said, "He wants his arm back, he's lost an arm and Peter Parker wants to know what happened to his parents. Dr. Connor wants to become complete again."

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