



SUCCESS

VISUAL BOOK PRODUCTIONS

CAPTURED

TAKES CUTTING-EDGE DIGITAL

INMOTION

ANIMATION TO A "NEW LEVEL"



>> In 1977, George Lucas and his special effects studio, Industrial Light & Magic, took on the challenge of creating an entire alternate universe, a labor of love that yielded the *Star Wars* film saga. Quite impressive and loads of fun. But, no one (as far as we know) has ever actually seen or visited any alien cosmos, so no one has ever challenged Lucas' vision of it. Now, imagine taking on "The Greatest Story Ever Told," the most studied, debated, scrutinized, argued, translated and controversial work in the history of humanity: the Bible. Consider the task of documenting — using 3-D animation and advanced digital technology — the hundreds of thousands of pieces of information related to the historical accounting of Jesus and the 1st-century Middle East, the stories of the Bible, and all of its attendant facts. Now, imagine that your company is a start-up and that this is its first project. **Visual Book Productions** did it — not using Hollywood's heavy-hitters, but their own state-of-the-art production facility in Orlando.

ADVANCING DIGITAL TECH IN CENTRAL FLORIDA

Companies such as Industrial Light & Magic and Pixar have become almost as well known as the films that have employed their digital animation — *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, *Cocoon*. The companies' ubiquitous reputations might lead people outside the high tech industry to believe that northern California is the only place producing cutting-edge, 3-D computer animation. Not so. New York, Los Angeles, London, Sydney and Tokyo all have

substantial animation industries. But they also have hefty price tags.

Central Florida, however, offers high tech companies substantially lower overhead without sacrificing the technical support infrastructure needed to maintain highly specialized processes. In addition, the region is easily accessible, provides a sound talent pool and is an attractive relocation environment for companies that need to recruit talent with expert skills in niche functions. With all these advantages, Orlando is the right choice for a broad array of technology-based entities. In particular, fledgling companies — such as Visual Book when it arrived in 1999 — benefit from Central Florida's entrepreneurial business environment.

"We incorporated in the United States in 1999 and were working from the basement of my home in Park Ridge, New Jersey," explains Nelson Saba, CEO of Visual Book. "We had some seed money from a group of investors, but we were searching for additional venture capital to build out our organization — people and assets — to the level needed to produce a quality product. To interest those second-tier investors, we knew that we needed to keep our operating costs low, which would increase our margins and make the company more attractive."

By Brian Courtney



PHOTO COURTESY OF VISUAL BOOK PRODUCTIONS

"We looked at the major metropolitan centers and several smaller markets, including Raleigh and Tampa, but felt that Orlando offered the best combination for us: low fixed costs, available technical support and a high quality of life for our employees."

These same qualities have enticed companies such as AAA, Darden Restaurants and Tupperware International to locate their world headquarters here, establishing Central Florida among the nation's top metropolitan areas in industry and commerce.

"Orange County provided tax incentives that were very attractive. We also found that some other locations levied substantial municipal and state taxes. Not so here. Some goods and services are not taxed at all. Others are assessed at comparably low rates."

Saba also cites lower cost commercial space as a deciding factor. The equation has worked similarly for other industry leaders, such as Lockheed Martin, Siemens Westinghouse and Agere Systems. The result: Orlando's technology sector employment has doubled since 1980. Today, approximately 79 percent of the region's total manufacturing growth stems from high tech.

GAINING MOMENTUM

Saba's choice proved prophetic. In September 2002, with new money and a marketing and distribution agreement with Tyndale House Publishers, the country's third largest Christian Literature producers, Visual Book launched iLumina, the first digitally animated, interactive biblical reference software. The product sold 160,000 units in its first five months.

"Any mainstream consumer software that sells 20,000 copies in one year is considered successful," says Max Croft, the company's general manager. "For Christian-market products, 'good' is 20,000 units in five years. Based on these benchmarks, we've really hit on something with this product."

At the time of this writing, iLumina had sold more than 300,000 copies in 52 countries. Both Croft and Saba attribute this success to the product's simple usability and unique accessibility to its content. The iLumina Gold program provides more than 100,000 pieces of information, which includes 9,000 articles, 800-plus photos, 200-plus maps and animated charts, an interactive animated biblical atlas, 37 digitally animated stories taken from the Bible word-for-word, two-plus hours of video tours and referenced translations from two versions of the Bible.

"This is cinematic-quality digital animation on par with anything that has come out of Hollywood," says Croft. "In

fact, some of the artists involved in this project come from that industry. And, the user interface is as familiar as any video game or mainstream PC software, so consumers are comfortable navigating through the various components."

According to Saba, this level of sophistication wouldn't have been possible without having their own digital motion-capture studio, a benefit made financially possible by their reduced expenditures in other operational areas.

The facility, one of just two in the extended Central Florida region, employs a specialized camera array that interprets the movements of a human garbed in a reflective suit, converting it into the computer equivalent of a stick figure. Artists using high-powered software then add bones, muscles, skin and features to the stick figures to create the "living" characters that inhabit the animated stories. The company's rendering farm, a bank of automated computer servers, then builds scenes from layer upon layer of drawings.

"Our servers run twenty-four/seven," says Croft. "If they go down, our production grinds to a halt.



"But, because Disney established its animation studios here more than a decade ago, there is a support system in place. We can get instant on-site service from companies like Hewlett-Packard and Silicon Graphics if we need it. Their centers here are never without technicians and parts to serve us. That's not necessarily the case in the other cities we investigated. And, if we have a problem, we can't afford to be down for days waiting on service."

Orlando's significant film production sector also allowed Visual Book to maximize their technology investments. The company added a new revenue stream by using their facility to produce television commercials and programs, computer animation and golf video games for local and out-of-state businesses.

GETTING PERSONAL

Even with all these technological and financial advantages, perhaps the biggest factor in Saba's choosing Orlando was human.

"Technology is meaningless without people," says Saba. "We needed a location that would make it easy for us to build our staff and to provide a high standard of living for them once they joined our organization. Orlando has met both of these criteria."

The region's strong ties to the entertainment industry meant that there was already a pool of skilled high tech labor. And with animation and digital

technology curricula at the University of Central Florida and Full Sail Real World Education Center, the area's schools are continually producing new talent.

With no state income tax and an average cost of living below the national average, Central Florida has made recruiting, for permanent and temporary employees, easy for Visual Book.

"The weather is, of course, a huge draw for people, but more important is the reasonable cost of housing and transportation," says Saba. "This is also a very livable city, moderately sized, but one that provides culture and sophistication that you might only expect in the big urban areas."

Saba believes that the area's tourism base is largely responsible for creating Orlando's appealing social, dining and cultural scenes.

Croft, a transplant from Los Angeles, agrees.

"The Disney brand has also helped brand Orlando in the American psyche. The two are almost inseparable, and almost everyone has some positive association with Disney's characters and its movies. That's rubbed off on this city's image."

Croft credits that image with Visual Book's nearly effortless recruitment of freelance help, the majority of its current staffing drive.

"We frequently enlist talent from the entertainment industry in Hollywood and the gaming industry in northern California and Vancouver. But even people who live in these great places are willing to come to Orlando for assignments."

Visual Book is also satisfied with Orlando's service-sector talent.

"We've located top-notch lawyers and accountants, real estate agents, all the support people that it takes to run a successful business. Those are important people — extensions of your staff, really — who are sometimes overlooked when you're considering where to move your operations," says Saba.

In the warehouse space that Visual Book has converted into a blue-screen studio, an actor goes through strictly choreographed motions in front of three cameras. The footage will be digitized and fed into a computer. An artist will create a composite, overlaying the actor's image, now looking like a pharaoh, onto a background showing ancient Egypt. As Nelson Saba continues to tell "The Greatest Story Ever Told," he is happy to have chosen Central Florida as his company's corporate home. For Visual Book, Orlando has proven to be like manna from Heaven. x