Digital Blasphemy:
An Interview with Ryan Bliss

*Ryan Bliss is the man behind Digital Blasphemy (**www.digitalblasphemy.com**), one of the most popular sites for computer desktop wallpaper on the Web. In this interview Ryan discusses with* Crossroads *how he transitioned from an aspiring writer with an English degree to studying computer science, creating amazing digital art, and building and running the e-commerce Web site that showcases his art.*

What initially got you interested in computer graphics? I've always been interested in science fiction movies and special effects, since I was a child watching *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* back in the '70s. Attempting to create my own artwork was out of reach however, since my lack of manual dexterity kept me from doing anything more than rudimentary drawings. I focused all of my creative energy toward writing instead.

This all changed in 1994 when I received my first personal computer as a graduation present. I had received my English degree from the University of Iowa and my plan was to use the computer to write my first novel. Instead I became engrossed with the computer graphics programs that came bundled with it. I remember it came with Aldus Photostyler and KPT Tools and I used these to create my first planetary scenes.

Using KPT tools led me to try out Bryce 2.0, which was my first exposure to 3-D rendering. The rest, I guess, is history.

How did Digital Blasphemy get started? My use of the computer in the mid-90's, coupled with the dismal job outlook for holders of English degrees, prompted me to go back to school and study computer science. If Iowa had had a computer graphics program in the mid-'90s I might have studied that, but the closest I could get at the time was computer science.

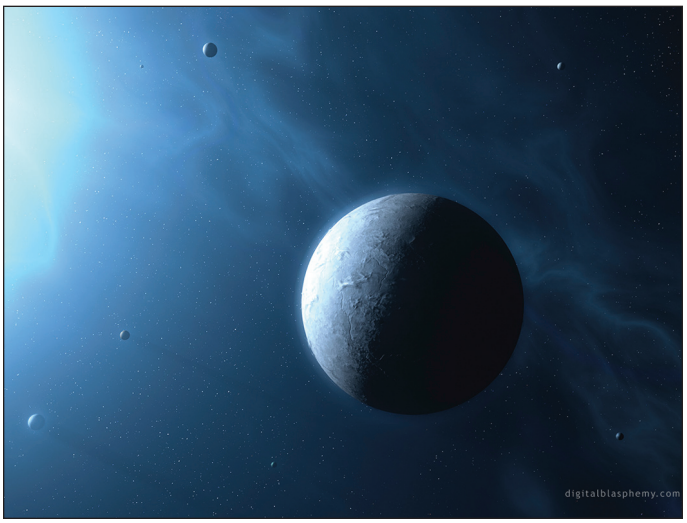
It was quite a shock for a humanities student. I had never fancied myself very proficient with math, and all of a sudden I had to learn a great deal of it. Actually I came to enjoy studying math and science. It was refreshing to deal with absolutes after four years of subjective studies.

In late 1996, near the end of my BS program, I started interviewing for programming jobs around Iowa City. At one early interview, for a job I wanted very much, I was asked if I knew HTML. I had to admit that I didn't (in retrospect I probably could have bluffed this answer). I didn't get the job.

The university wasn't teaching any web programming at that time, only C++ and Assembly, so I took it upon myself to learn HTML. Since I already had a decent collection of renders I thought it would be a good practical exercise to build a web gallery. "Digital Blasphemy" was the name I had been putting on all my work so that became the name of the site. It referred to creating worlds (the work of God) using the computer. The site went live in February 1997.

Where do you draw the inspiration for the images you create? That's a tough one. I draw inspiration from just about everything. I may watch a movie, read a book, play a video game, listen to a song, take a walk, or any other random experience. Each experience gets stored in the brain and becomes a building block for a future project.

Inspirations can come from strange places. Recently I was watching a Cubs game and a commercial came on for a travel Web site. They showed a brief clip of a path leading to a beach and I thought that would make a fine wallpaper. I made my own path leading down to a beach (the wallpaper is called "Island Time"). The finished piece doesn't really look anything like the clip I saw on the commercial, but it was inspired by it.



How does your computer science background and knowledge play a role in creating wallpapers, versus pure artistic talent? I don't do a whole lot of coding anymore, outside of the work I do on my site. I would say the CS background has helped most in being able to find my way easily around just about any piece of software. The math background comes in very handy when creating animations, creating and using procedural shaders, and adjusting settings so that my renders use the CPU and RAM most efficiently.

What does a typical work day for you consist of? My first order of business is dealing with any customer service emails that came in while I was asleep. If I am starting or in the middle of a project, which is about 75% of the time, I will work on it until around lunch time. I usually don't do any work between noon and three, as my brain just doesn't function that well after lunch. I'll work on my project again until around dinner time (5:30) and then sometimes do an hour or so of work after the kids are in bed. I answer emails throughout the day, however.

What software do you use to create your digital art, and has it changed since you first started? My main tools these days are Vue d'Esprit and Lightwave. I started using Bryce and then moved to Vue because Vue allowed you to have vegetation in your scenes which is very important. I started using Lightwave because I wanted to model my own objects such vehicles, buildings, plants, etc.. I used a program called World Builder for a while, but stopped because it was very buggy and it looked like the developers had abandoned it.

How do you keep up with the latest in computer graphics and digital art? What magazines or Web sites do you read? I enjoy reading *3D World* at the magazine stand, but don't like spending nearly $20 per issue. I usually check out **CGTalk.com** and **Flay.com** daily.

What part of your computer science education has been the most useful to you? Learning to code has allowed me to build my own e-commerce Web site and have it be something that I can run by myself with a few utility scripts.

While studying for my BS at Iowa we were required to take two semesters of an outside science course "for science majors." These courses were far more rigorous than what was offered to the BA students. I could have chosen chemistry, biology, physics or a number of others but I chose astronomy. My knowledge of astronomy has lead to some space images which have earned praise from professional astrophysicists. I'm quite proud of that.

Overall I think the biggest benefit I received from my CS education is the balancing of my right and left brain. I'm very glad that I studied both the humanities and science.

What was the most important or useful thing you learned outside the classroom? Since I didn't learn anything about creating art in school I would have to say that my art skills are the most useful thing. There wasn't a lot of CG training going on in Iowa back in the mid-90's so I had to learn it all myself. I couldn't turn to the web either because there just weren't that many computer graphics sites when I was starting out. It was only 10 or 15 years ago but it seems like a different age!

What do you see as the future of digital art? What developments or trends may be on the horizon? It's advancing so fast that sometimes it seems like as soon as you predict something it comes to pass. In the field of computer wallpapers (my specialty) I think that animations may one day take the place of static images.

I am also interested in motion tracking technology, similar to that used in the Wii, which may make true 3-D environments possible "inside your monitor." Your monitor would be like a window into another world.

What advice do you have for computer science majors who are interested in computer graphics and specifically in creating digital art? That's another tough one. It's been over ten years since I was in the University and a great deal has changed since then. The Web was in its infancy and CG was not something taught to CS students. I'm sure these days more CS programs embrace these fields and I would hope that CS majors would seek out these classes if available.

Today's CS major may have it easier than I did starting out. There's so many digital art programs out there today and the field has really matured. I pretty much had to teach myself everything but today's student has a wealth of options for learning CG. You may even be able to minor in CG while majoring in CS, or the other way around.

Computer graphics is a discipline where the right and left brain come together. I've been fortunate to be successful with CG and I owe a great deal of that success to my time spent as a computer science student.

—Cara Cocking