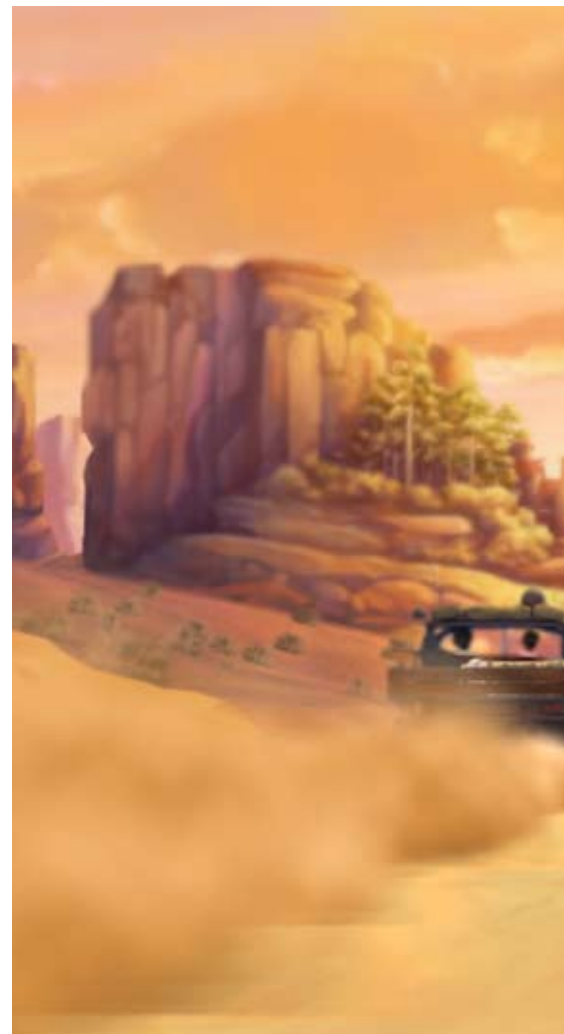


# Southwestern Passage

Majestic Arizona landscapes, Native American mythology and a cool selection of exotic animals are some of the appealing ingredients in the upcoming CG-animated indie, *The Legend of Secret Pass*.



The film's humor isn't just slapstick, it comes from the animal characters and the way they're experiencing the adventure along with our hero."

Jones is referring to Manu's Southwest-specific animal pals—Ira the desert tortoise (Shelley Berman); Chuckster, the streetwise chuckwalla (a perfectly cast Joe Pantoliano); Bartholomew, the orphan chameleon (Billy Jones) and Qui Qui, the cute desert quail (Kim Mai Guest). That's right, kids, these aren't your average funny CG-animated animal sidekicks!

In addition to being largely influenced by native American myths, the movie reflects the vast landscapes of the American Southwest. As assistant director Woody Yocum points out, "Our art director Darren

Carney wanted the movie's landscape to have a painterly look. He brought a wonderful 2D sensibility to this CG-animated world. I think what we learned from the

**A**lmost three years ago, David Lords, the man who made Arizona's Laughlin Ranch into one of the major ecologically sustainable reserves in the country and author Erik D. Stoop approached producer James Costello to spearhead an animated movie set in the scenic region which uses native myths and animals. Joining forces with veteran producers Chris Henderson (*Return to Never Land*, *Clifford's Really Big Movie*) and director Steve Trenbirth (*Jungle Book 2*), and

(voiced by Graham Greene)—a wise Shaman—in discovering his destiny as a "Guardian" and helping him battle a dark force known as Calabar (voice of Michael Chiklis) who is returning to Spirit Mountain.

"We wanted to create a world that had its own rules and mythologies—a new, unexplored place where you can get lost," says Costello. "Our target audience is a bit older than the usual children's animated movies—from the very beginning, we wanted to make a movie, not a cartoon; something that parents can enjoy as well, and a storyline that retells the ancient Thunderbird myth."

In the feature, the interactions between humans and animals are natural and organic—just as they are in ancient Indian folklore. In addition, the movie has a nice

multi-generational aspect, where Manu, his teenage cousin, her mom and the wise grandfather figure all work together to unlock the ancient mysteries and battle evil.

"We certainly didn't want to duplicate what other studios are doing," adds Costello. "Pixar makes great films. They have that niche covered. You could say that our goal was to make an animated *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-type adventure.



Billy Jones and his team at L.A.'s 310 Studios and Montreal-based Alan Best and his vfx shop Digital Dimension, the resourceful team is only a few months away from seeing the fruition of its dreams.

Last month, key members of the production team graciously invited *Animation Magazine* to see portions of their good-looking feature *The Legend of Secret Pass* at the swank quarters of 310 Studios in Glendale, Calif.

The CG-animated epic centers on a young boy named Manu (voiced by Frankie Muniz) who is aided by his grandfather



**Uncharted Territory:** The upcoming CG-animated indie feature, *The Legend of Secret Pass*, offers beautifully rendered Arizona landscapes and various animal characters which are indigenous to the region.



Billy Jones



Chris Henderson



James Costello



Steve Trenbirth  
(director)

experience was that it's possible to approach CG technology with a wider range of techniques. In a way, this painterly quality brings a whole new dramatic element to *Secret Pass*."

To bring the story to life, the producers went to Billy Jones and Craig Russo, who had worked on the three *BIONICLE* feature films, released by LEGO/Miramax. With their background in visual effects and both pre and post-production in animation, they were the perfect candidates to create the *Secret Pass* world with their cost-efficient CG pipeline, based on Soffimage | XSI software solutions. Jones and Russo work closely with Alan Best and his team at Montreal's Digital Dimension house to deliver the detailed animation of the production.

"When we started out, our models for the animation quality were the *Ice Age* movies," says Henderson. "But as we moved further ahead in development, we realized that we were surpassing that first bar. One thing about producing a smaller independently produced movie is that

you have to move quickly. You have to keep the production flowing. Billy and Craig anticipated so many of the challenges from the beginning by building the pipelines that were going to be necessary further down the line."

Henderson, a veteran of several top-notch 2D-animated features and TV series, says the experience has been quite invaluable. "It basically proved to me that it was possible to deliver a movie like this using a virtual studio. It was the first time I saw a CG-animated world come to life from beginning to end."

For Benoit Girard, the movie's exec producer and CEO of Digital Dimension, what makes the film stand out is its special look. "We carefully combined traditional painting and artistic techniques seen in conventional films with the latest CGI techniques," says Girard. "We made serious efforts to stay away from the generic plastic-looking visuals in many other CG films."

Costing about one-fourth of a current CG-animated title, the movie certainly looks more expensive than the sum total of

its budget. An ensemble voice cast of recognizable stars, state-of-the-art sound design and Peter Kater's majestic score inspired by Native American music help push the movie to a higher playing field. If this is the future of indie animation, then the studios have their work cut out for them.

Jones sees various pluses in working in the indie arena. "For all practical purposes, we were left alone to deliver this world. We had the freedom to figure out quick solutions that best fit the CG world. In contrast to 2D animation, you don't have 80 years of features in the box to point you to the right direction. CGI is still a new medium. Many people are trying to get into this CG-animated field and some are struggling because they rely on the same methods and formulas. This was our chance to keep the indie spirit alive and put our own personal stamp on it." ■

**To learn about the movie, visit [www.legendofsecretpass.com](http://www.legendofsecretpass.com). The feature is expected to have a theatrical release this spring in the U.S.**