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Ron Thornton's Model-maker Mantra

by **Joe Fordham**

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- Visual effects designer Ron Thornton's original 22,840-polygon Starfury star fighter, built for the Emmy-award-winning television series "Babylon 5", lit and composited as a high-rez rendering by the ship's original designer, Steve Burg. Photo © Steve Burg, 2016.

'Slap a few nurries on it, coat of paint, walk away.' Those were the words that miniature effects maven Ron Thornton used to prod aspiring model-makers who were perhaps being too precious with their projects and, more importantly, our budget.



- Ron Thornton builds the Wanderer-class cargo

Ron was a bit of a legend when I met him in the late 1980s, fresh off the boat from England. Ron was the man that built the *Scorpio* spaceship for *Blake's 7*, the Robin-Hood-in-space BBC TV series created by *Doctor Who* writer Terry Nation. And Ron had also forged his own little niche in Hollywood as a bit of a bad boy model-maker from across the pond, with credits at Apogee's model shop for the impossibly long spaceship in *Spaceballs*, the Canadian TV series *Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future*, and David Allen's model crew on *Robot Jox* which achieved jaeger spectacle with car-sized model robots in the Southern Californian desert.

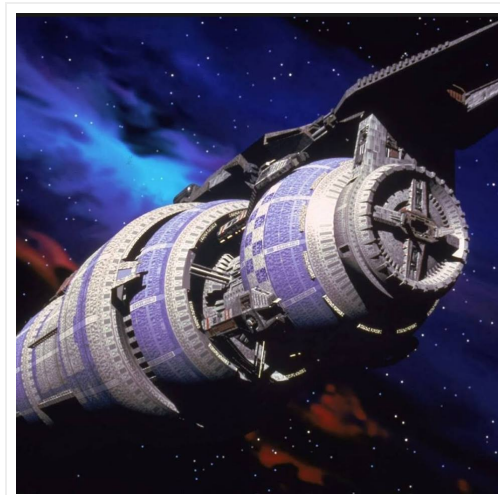
When I joined Ron's team as production assistant, Ron put me to work doing bits and pieces of

ship, Scorpio, for “Blake’s 7” © BBC TV, 1980.

things around, I was willing to learn, plus I’d made a few short films of my own and knew my way around a camera, so we hit it off, and we shared a similar love of movies. Ron was also a fabulous chef, with a bawdy sense of humor, and a rich vocabulary of Monty Python references.

After some time running around for Ron’s company, Foundation Imaging, which grew from his garage into a small industrial unit in North Hollywood, Ron sent me on an errand to go fetch his latest toy. I drove to a computer store on Colorado Boulevard in Santa Monica and handed over a check for an Amiga Video Toaster.

Ron greeted this with glee and he soon took to noodling in an early version of Lightwave’s 3D modeling program. His first project, I remember, was a British-racing-green Flash Gordon style space vehicle, a 3D reconstruction of one of his old *Blake’s 7* vehicles. He built out all the nurries, slapped it all together, gave it a coat of paint very reminiscent of Gerry Anderson’s *Thunderbird 2*, and animated it trundling through space. He asked me what I thought. As a card-carrying Spielberg fan, I told him it looked good, but as the shot was panning past a sun, shouldn’t there be a bit of a lens flare? Ron said, ‘Great idea!’ and he got on the phone to the Toaster makers at NewTek. Little did I know I had just suggested one of the biggest clichés in computer modeling, foreshadowing the Knoll Light Factory lens flare plug-in — at least, that was my memory.



— The space station at the heart of “Babylon 5”, modeled and animated at Foundation Imaging as a five-mile-long rotating cylinder, housing 250,000 intergalactic souls as the ‘last, best hope for peace.’ Photo © Warner Brothers Entertainment, Inc.

covering one of Ron’s numerous shows.

Foundation had become a staple of the *Star Trek* universe, revamping *The Motion Picture* effects for director Robert Wise’s video re-release, as well as providing animation and effects for *Nemesis*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager* and *Enterprise*. Ron also produced his own Saturday morning TV fare, with *Hypernauts* – I wrote a script, which never saw the light of day – and *Roughnecks*, an animated spinoff of one of Ron’s favorite sci-fi novels, Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*.

Ron’s final credits included a remake of George Romero’s *The Crazies* and a handful of television shows. We last spoke in person about five years ago, when I happened to be in town for Christmas. Ron called out of the blue, wanting to go for a drink. Sadly, I was working that evening and when I got clear of my deadline, he was not around. But that was Ron’s style. He went where the wind took him, so I didn’t think anything of it. Ron was probably out carousing.

A few months ago, I heard that Ron was not doing well health-wise, and one of Ron’s NewTek colleagues, Chuck Baker, confirmed he was raising money to help cover Ron’s medical expenses. I was glad to be able to offer some help by posting a link to Chuck’s

model-making work. I was hopeless at it. But I had a big truck, which was useful for hauling

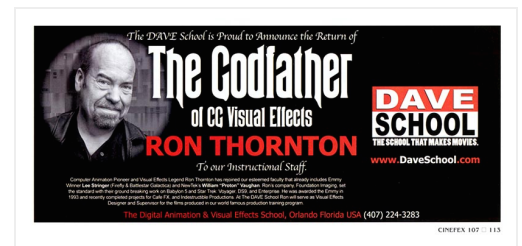


— Ron and his Yakovlev Yak-52 Soviet trainer aircraft. As well as animating ships in flight, Ron was a passionate aviation enthusiast. His Yak was his second love. Photo © Robert Cazzell.

Ron’s 3D experiments, and his collaborations with NewTek eventually won him an Emmy award for the visual effects he created for *Babylon 5*, Joe Straczynski’s *Casablanca* in space, a hotbed of intergalactic intrigue set on board a five-mile-long rotating space cylinder. Ron made all the space ships on NewTek’s software and blew everybody’s minds. In 1993, no one had done anything on that scale for television. We built a few miniatures, too, and John Criswell and Greg Aronowitz and their creature effects teams made many crazy aliens, but pretty much everything else was done with off the shelf PC software.

What Ron brought to that format was not only a nerdy love of tech. He still had the same hands-on approach, using CG tools as building blocks, with a three-dimensional sensibility to lighting, texture and camera blocking. It served him well, and years after I stopped working for Ron I saw his face looming out of the pages of Cinefex magazine, in advertisements for the DAVE computer graphics school where he mentored students as ‘The Godfather of CG Visual Effects.’

I last saw Ron at a memorial service, and he gave me a hard time for not answering his emails. We had gone our separate ways. Ron founded another studio in New Mexico, and worked as a freelance visual effects supervisor. I’d been working for Cinefex for years and never got around to



— “The Godfather” in Cinefex 107, October 2006.



— Ron Thornton at 94th Aero Squadron Restaurant, Van Nuys, California. Photo © Kevin Quattro.

fundraising page, assisting Ron's medical expenses, on the Cinefex Facebook page (see below). The Internet responded with a huge outpouring of sympathy, all those lives he touched, from fans to industry insiders.

Sadly, Ron passed away November 21. I'll miss him. He was a larger than life character, but I am grateful to him for giving me my first safe harbor in the LA film community. And all the knowledge that I've accumulated since then has served me well in the multifarious disciplines that I cover every day writing for Cinefex. He taught me not to be too precious. Get your hands dirty. Slap a few nurnies on it, coat of paint, walk away.



— The Thornton Design model-making crew poses in front of the "Highlander II" Shield Corporation pyramid, North Hollywood, 1990. L to R: Tom Gleason, Joe Fordham (with puppy Flash), Mike McFarlane, James Belohovek, Karen Mutter, Ron Thornton, Mark Ellis. Photo © James Belohovek.

- [GoFundMe](#)
- [Cinefex Facebook](#)
- [NewTek LightWave](#)
- [Steve Burg](#)

Ron remembered:

"Many of you are finding out that Ron Thornton passed away. The Babylon 5 ranks keep thinning. We had a rolling coaster ride of a friendship, lots of laughs, many many great dinners, a few tears and thank god, memories that no one can take away.

"I first met Ronnie in Toronto on Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future. He'd been brought in to run the model shop and serve as the art director, along with Dale Fay, of the miniature shoots. We became good friends on that show. He was a mad visionary and brought a special perspective to everything he worked on. After Captain Power, we worked on a couple of 'industrials' for Lockheed and the Air Force. Ron and I shared a love for all things aviation. You may or may not know that Ronnie's 56 seconds of animation that was essentially a shot that could not have been done with models, was what finally pushed the executives to give Babylon 5 a shot with a pilot.

“Ron continually pushed the envelope to visually enhance the storytelling on the projects he worked on in new and exciting ways. And he was a gentle soul as well. As I think back on the years, Ron and I went from a post apocalyptic Earth to aerial combat over the Fulda Gap in Europe, to the far reaches of space and finally winding up with woolly mammoths in the last ice age. Quite a span.

“Ronnie, you were such a mad visionary and hopefully a little rubbed off on the rest of us. Godspeed ol’ friend.”

— John Copeland, producer/director

“Ron always saw the potential. He could look at a solid wall and see the door that ought to be there, and if there wasn’t a door he’d make one. He was like that with people, too. I never met anyone with a better knack for hiring unknown, untried talent and really letting people shine.”

— Steve Burg, conceptual designer

“I had the honor of being Foundation Imaging’s first employee; Ron took a chance and hired a 3D novice because he saw in me the most important characteristic for the job: enthusiasm. ‘You can teach anyone the software,’ Ron told me a few years later, ‘but you can’t teach them to love their job.’ And love it I did. I — and so many others in the business right now — wouldn’t have a career if it weren’t for this gentle, genius of a man who contributed so much and asked for nothing in return.”

— Adam ‘Mojo’ Lebowitz, digital artist

It’s so heartbreaking that the visual effects community has lost a great pioneer of VFX. Ron, you had a vision, and saw the potential for desktop VFX to be used for television way back on Babylon 5. To hundreds upon hundreds (including me), you were a mentor, a teacher and a good friend. Thank you for believing in me and allowing me to start compositing on the second season of Babylon 5. You were so generous with your knowledge and shared so much of it on a bunch of kids who were learning the ropes of visual effects back then. Thanks for teaching me so many things, from how to paint in Photoshop (version 1.0!) to rendering in Lightwave, to how to shoot a proper blue/green screen, to how to make a great roux (you were such a great cook)!! As so many have said before me, we were all a family at Foundation... from the BBQs, the parties, to developing creative content for television together. Thanks for believing in all of us you mentored, thank you for encouraging so many of us to pursue our dreams and help create visual effects all around the world.

— Sherry Hitch, digital artist

I never considered myself a ‘star’ model-maker, I was always learning from others. Ron gave me the job of detailing out some of the miniatures for Plymouth (the 1991 ABC TV moon colony drama). I had never done that before and told him so. He gave me a few pointers and then let me go at it. It was a fun time. Best of all, he liked what I did, God bless him.

— James Belohovek, model-maker

“I met Ron through Steve Burg, a fellow New Jersey-ite who went to Cal Arts with my wife, Kathy Zielinski. Steve was working on the Stuart Gordon film Robot Jox, taking over the design task from Ron Cobb to build robots and sets. It was while visiting Steve in a small Burbank shop space that I met Ron Thornton who was fabricating the rather large miniatures for the film. It was really cool stuff to see in person, and Ron and I hit it off immediately. I mean, come on! Building giant robots?

“Soon after, I went to Ron’s apartment where he showed me something on a small Amiga computer he had been working on. If I remember correctly, it was a TIE fighter flying through some asteroids. The thought I kept to myself was, ‘This poor guy... This is never going to look good enough for film or TV!’ Well, I guess, I was wrong about that. You think? Ron had faith.



— Nurnies galore, featuring detail of the Thornton Design hydrogen miner from the ABC TV pilot “Plymouth” and the Shield Corporation pyramid from “Highlander II: The Quickening”. Photos © James Belohovek.

“Ron kept pushing the new technology, while never forgetting his love of physically building models, and I was excited to see what he was up to on a new television series called Babylon 5. He showed me some of his work, which knowing the desktop computer solution was pretty groundbreaking! He also showed me a sequence done on a Paintbox system in the edit bay of some glowing orb animation that cost a small fortune to do, and Ron asked me, ‘You could do this, couldn’t you?’ With Ron’s blessing I was composing a national TV show at home surrounded by seven Macintosh computers. Ron had faith in thy ability to figure it out. And just in time, I did. And Ron’s invitation forever changed the path of my career.

“When Ron was pitching his Hypernauts series, he asked me if I wanted to do the music for the reel. He had heard some of the music I had done (just playing around) and I thought it would be really fun to do something out of my comfort zone like that. Once the series sold, Ron then asked me to do the music for the series. I kind of freaked out. I told him ‘I pretty much gave you everything I have in he demo.’ I was pretty sure I would run out of ideas halfway through the first episode. Ron was actually disappointed, but I thanked him for letting me do the pitch reel and explained to him I didn’t want him to hate me once I failed to deliver. The point is, he was the type of person that was willing to give a novice, ‘musician’ the keys to his series kingdom because one of his talents was he was able to persuade people to do their best work.

“I only worked at Foundation Imaging for a brief time, but I know he and his partner, Paul, had built what is now a rarity in this business: A small group of talented, enthusiastic people that were more a family than they were employees. And the number of people that were brought into the business for the first time by Ron is pretty impressive, as well.

“Ron was a person who could always see what was possible, and worked constantly to make it happen. He did it not out of any ego, or personal gain, or hidden agenda, but for the reason most of us got into VFX. It was what we do, and it was fun and Ron really loved doing it, and through osmosis, we loved working with him. He was a tireless source of ideas and enthusiasm, and he was a loyal partner in any project. I’ll miss that dialogue with him as he runs a new idea or project by you, and the infectious feeling of thinking, ‘I have to do this with him!’

“Ron Thornton was a good friend, and to everyone who knew him, a truly good person. Gifted, willing to share and, in the best way, a big kid at heart. To realize I’ll never hear him call and tell me about his next adventure is the saddest thing imaginable. To say Ron Thornton was a visionary would be an understatement. To say I really miss him is another...”

— Kevin Kutchaver, visual effects supervisor



— Visual effects supervisor Kevin Kutchaver and his wife Kathy celebrate Ron’s birthday. Photo © Kevin Kutchaver.

Thanks to Tim Scannell, Tom Gleason, Steve Burg, Chuck Baker, John Copeland, Sherry Hitch, Mojo, James Belohovek, Kevin Kutchaver, Robin and Ron Cobb for contributing to this article.

4 THOUGHTS ON “RON THORNTON’S MODEL-MAKER MANTRA”



Daren R. Dochterman
on [November 24, 2016 at 10:02 am](#) said:

What a lovely tribute to a giant. I, like so many others, was inspired to be better, to work harder, and create, from Ron’s inspiration and guidance. I was so grateful that he and Foundation Imaging were able to take on the monumental task of the Star Trek – The Motion Picture: Director’s Edition with us... his enthusiasm and “give ‘er all she’s got” spirit helped immeasurably with getting it done properly, even with our monumental budget restrictions. He found a way. I’ll be forever grateful for his wisdom and spirit.



Adam M. Berger
on [November 25, 2016 at 12:49 pm](#) said:

Oh no. I did not know Ron had passed away! So sad. He was such a talented guy. I had the pleasure of working alongside him in the early/mid-1980s during his FIRST stint working in the U.S., sponsored by another visual effects legend, David Stipes (a period in Ron's career not mentioned in your article). Even then, relatively early in Ron's career, I could tell that he was a tremendous talent and would be going on to do even more impressive things as his career continued. Also, he was an all-around great guy to be around. Anyway, thanks for writing this touching tribute. I really appreciate it.



Joe Fordham

on **November 27, 2016 at 3:21 pm** said:

Thanks, Daren and Adam. I first met Ron after he'd completed his early adventures with David Stipes on "Real Genius" and (a vague memory) his NASA space plane project. Later on, I was not present during the majority of Ron's CG career, after his project with Todd Rundgren, when "B5" took off as a series; but I decided to keep this personal, rather than a formal obituary. And I recently added a few more pics, family snapshots unearthed by master model-maker Jim Belohovek.



Adam M. Berger

on **November 27, 2016 at 4:07 pm** said:

Yep. Real Genius. That was one of the pics I worked on with Ron at David Stipes Productions. Ron built the models and Michael Karp and I photographed them. It was a cool project, though very exhausting. (But weren't they all?)

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