

The Mexican animator who bombed Dune and reached the Oscars



Ivel Hernández's work led to her collaborating on the science fiction film Dune.

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Ivel Hernández

Night on the desert planet **Arrakis** was interrupted when its sand reflected the color of **explosions** from an aerial attack, while smoke billowed over its **dunes**.

This is one of the scenes worked on by a **Mexican animator** who is a [Tec de Monterrey](#) graduate in **Dune**, a film that took home **6 Oscars**, including **Best Visual Effects**.

"I never thought I'd work on this. At the end, it feels good to see your work, especially in a film like Dune," says **Ivel Hernández**, a **Digital Art and Animation** graduate from the Mexico City campus.

Ivel overcame the challenges that came her way, such as obtaining a **scholarship** to study at the **Tec** or filling one of 3 vacancies to become a **digital animator** in

Canada, despite having financial difficulties.

Dozens of hours animating video games such as **Gears of War** and movies such as **Detective Pikachu** would lead Ivel to “landing” on **Planet Arrakis**, in the film that won 6 **Academy Awards**.

Por siempre y para siempre ♥ pic.twitter.com/WcHUIs6sqx

— ivelangas (@ivelangas) [March 28, 2022](#)

“Lie a little”: bombing the dunes of Arrakis

Ivel explains that “bombing” a planet isn’t easy, even if it’s done through a computer and using only **animation** and **special effects**.

Explosions take **a lot of work**, she explains, since simulating them as they’d happen in real life would give a dazzling result and make viewers miss many details.

That’s where her job comes in. “**Lie a little**,” she says with a laugh.

Ivel was on the digital animation team that gave the explosions the look requested by international director **Denis Villeneuve’s** team.

“There’s a scene where some ships arrive to attack planet Arrakis. The explosions begin, and people are running along a large esplanade.

*“During those scenes in Dune, we created **smoke** and things that have to do with **volume**, so they’d look like **real explosions** without losing the **details**,” she says.*

The challenge of simulating explosions on a distant planet

Ivel explains that she worked on the film **2 years** before its **release**, even before the pandemic. She points out that, even though it was a job she enjoyed, there were very challenging moments due to the **complexity** of the **animations**.

“There were scenes where certain effects got in the way, so to speak. Sometimes the client wants an effect like an explosion to happen, but without it taking up the entire screen.

“Explosions are huge, so when you do them, they can be very startling and you have to minimize a lot of things,” says Ivel.

“I never thought I’d work on this. At the end, it feels good to see your work, especially in a film like Dune.”

In that sequence alone, the **Mexican animator** says it took **more than a month** to achieve a **real-life appearance** and make the details occurring around a bombing that took place in the dark of night stand out.

Ivel first had to picture the **explosions** in her mind to generate the **smoke**, make sense of it, and then portray that in a computer using software known as *Houdini*.

*“Basically, your **brain** has to **imagine it** as if it were **reality**. Then, you have to generate that spark or fuel in the software and see how it’s going to detonate.*

*“In the end, you send your explosion to a department that lights your scene. We work with the **animation** and **lighting** departments and then they take charge of putting everything together,”* says Ivel.

Seeing the result of 2 years of work

The **Mexican animator** says that despite having worked on more than a **dozen films**, she doesn't usually go to the theater to watch the final result, as she already knows how the stories end.

With **Dune**, it was different. She went with her partner, and throughout the **movie**, **she was looking for any mistakes** in the special effects that she and the team had worked on 2 years earlier.

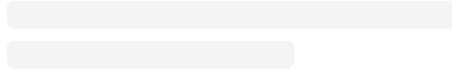
She laughs when she says she feels that **she didn't find any**.

*"There are movies in which you see some very computerized effects, but I don't feel like that happened in Dune. The **effects** were **very good**. I didn't feel that there were any failed effects. **I'm thrilled** to know that it's now **nominated for an Oscar**,"* she says.

Dune won the **Oscar** for Best Original Score; Best Sound; Best Cinematography; Best Film Editing; Best Production Design; and **Best Visual Effects**.



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From dreaming of becoming a veterinarian to her love for video games

Before she helped bomb Dune, before she arrived in Canada, even before she studied Digital Art and Animation and the Tec, **Ivel** never imagined that **animation** would become her **career**.

In fact, when Ivel was little, she dreamed of becoming a **veterinarian**.

Everything would change in **high school**, when she sat down in front of a computer and started using **Photoshop** or other **web design** and **animation** programs.

Her new interest was joined by a love for **video games**, so she began to consider animation as a career that would bring her closer to creating those stories she enjoyed playing so much.

That would be the beginning of **Ivel's career**, but also the beginning of what she remembers as the **greatest challenges** of her life.

How studying at the Tec led her to Canada

Ivel was determined to study at **Tec de Monterrey**, despite the fact that her family couldn't fully support her financially.

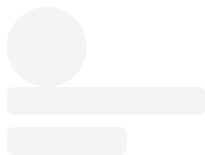
In order to do so, she had to get a **loan**, so she got a **90% scholarship** that **she would try to pay off** herself later on when she was working.

Semesters passed, projects and experiences were accumulated, while Ivel reached the final 6 months of her degree with a **new opportunity** and another challenge.

*"I focused on doing my **multidisciplinary project**. It's supposed to be something you work on for your **demo reel** (a video portfolio of your skills), and I focused on video games.*

*"Then, a **professor** who had taught me and moved to **Montreal** contacted us. He told us that the company where he worked would be **recruiting** and that **they'd be visiting Mexico** and other countries," she says.*

That was her first call of destiny to Canadian soil.



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Difficult times in Vancouver

Ivel had already worked to pay for a course focused on **video games** at **Vancouver Film School**, where she had her first encounter with Canada, but thanks to that professor, Ivel could turn that course into the **rest of her life**.

"I made a reel to apply to the special effects area. With that, they gave me an opportunity for an online course," recalls Ivel.

The online course was **preparatory training** for a **recruitment** process in which they would choose **6 people** from **all over the world** in the first stage, after which they would choose only **3 to work with**: Ivel was one of them.

The company took care of paying for her work permit for Vancouver. They even gave her 2 weeks in a hotel but receiving the salary of an animator-in-training meant the **financial pressure hit the roof**.

*"The problem came once the 2 weeks were over. **The pay was better** than any job in Mexico, at least in my profession, but **rent** in Vancouver is **extremely expensive***

*"I was in a **difficult situation**. I had a lot of awful problems. Financially speaking, it was bad, because I also had to pay off my student loan,"* she remembers.

*"I had borrowed money to get to Vancouver and I was **in the red**. At that point, I'd had enough. I distanced myself from everything. I put it all out of my mind and I thought: '**I'm going to focus on myself.**' I had nothing to lose."*

Her **resilience** made her carry on with the process in the hope of being **selected**.

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Animation makes her keep learning

Ivel received the long-awaited message: she was one of the chosen ones. She’d **earned a place by learning more and more on her own**, like when she used to sit down to use Photoshop in high school.

*“Math was never difficult for me, but I wasn’t a genius. I got here, and I had to mix it with **programming** and **physics**. Even to this day, I have trouble with it. It’s been a challenge to **study constantly**,”* says Hernández.

Canada was now her **home**. After a search through several neighborhoods, she managed to find **a place to live** that was **affordable** and to her liking.

Opening the door, she walked in with her suitcases on her shoulders. She dropped them to the floor and would later sit next to them staring at an **empty apartment**, but at the same time, it was a place she could **fill** with her **dreams** for the **future**.

Ivel has created special effects for projects such as Detective Pikachu.



Sharing advice on her social networks

Ivel was on the animation team for the **Gears Tactics** video game, from the **Gears of War** series for **Microsoft Xbox**, something that she treasures and talks about with a smile.

From **animating earth** into the air through explosions, **spreading fire**, and even **smoke** that **turns people** into **Pokémon**, Ivel has created **special effects** for projects that bring her ever closer to her dream of creating video games.

In the meantime, she smiles as she tells her story, which she occasionally shares on her [TikTok account](#), where **she gives advice** to those wanting to follow in her footsteps.

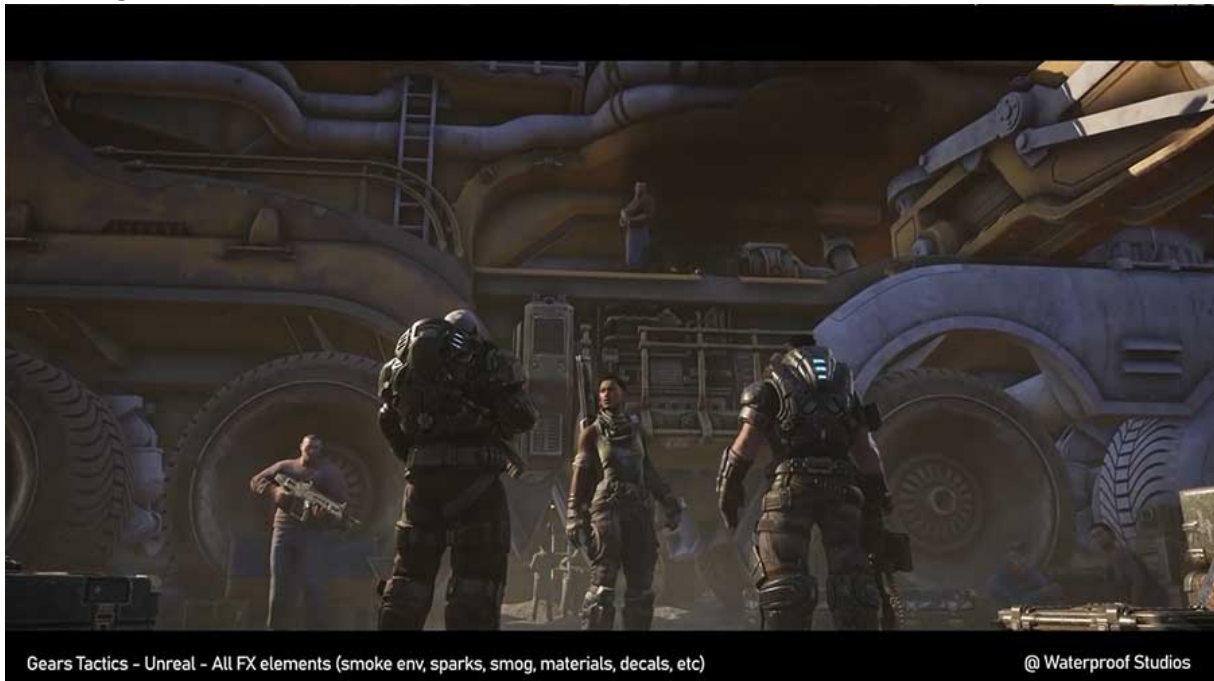
She also continues playing as she used to do, after venturing onto the [Twitch platform](#) to **stream video games**.

*"I'd like to go for **video game** animation. That'd be the **next step** in my career, and I know that I can do it better now."*

*“There aren’t always **opportunities** in **Mexico**, and I know that a lot of people have the same dream as me. The **advice** I give is what **I would’ve liked** to have been **given**,” she says laughing.*

*“I’m not really interested in people remembering me for what I’ve done, what **I want to do** is **help** people.”*

Ivel believes that video game animation is the next step in her career after working on Gears of War Tactics.



Dune is a science fiction film directed by Denis Villeneuve about an interstellar war that takes place on planet Arrakis, also known as Dune. It’s based on the 1965 novel of the same name by author **Frank Herbert**.

The film was released in **September 2021** and had a budget of 165 million dollars. After its success at the box office, part 2 was announced, which is expected to be released in October 2023.

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