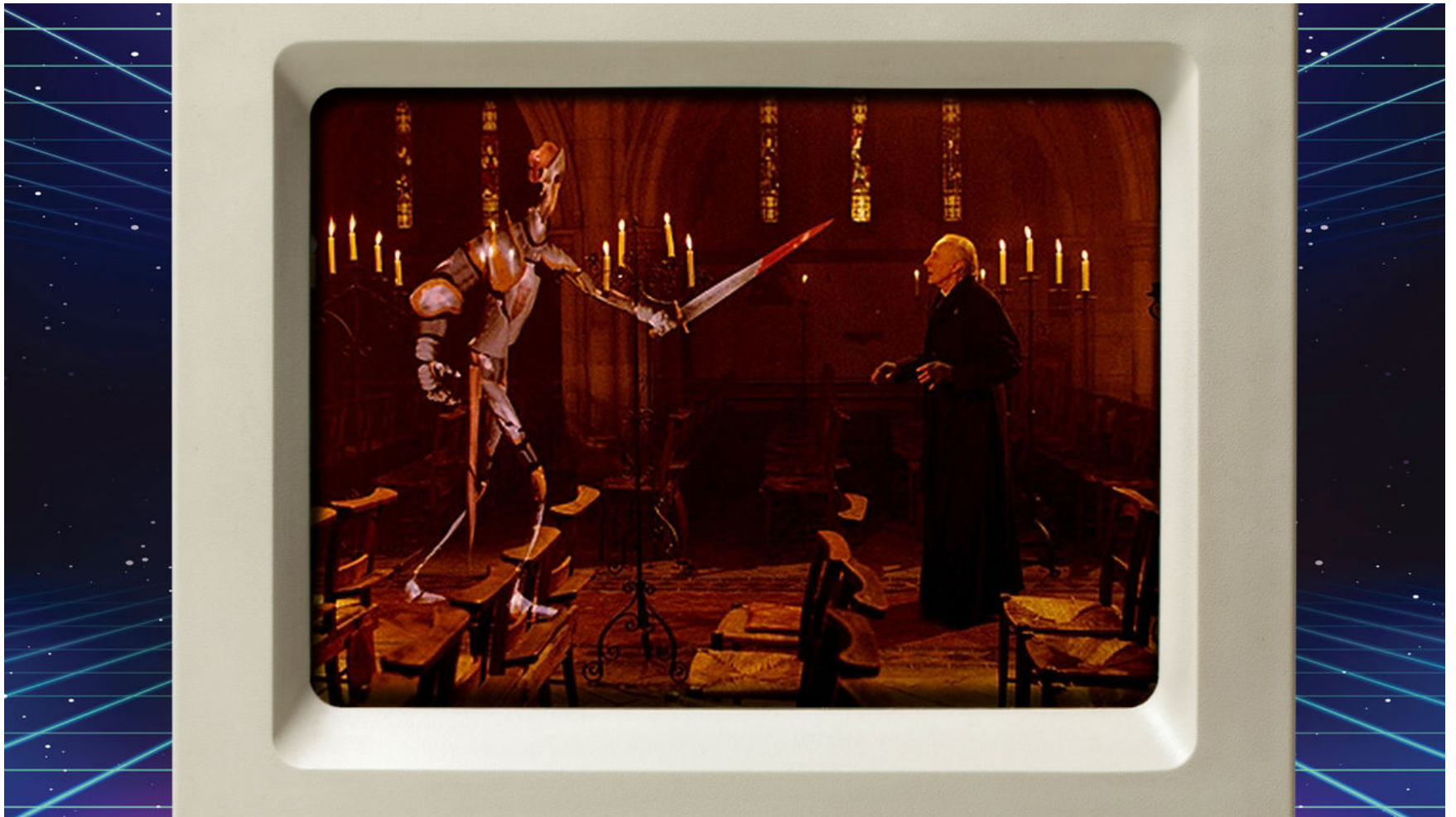


# Firsts: The first all-CGI character, made before Pixar became Pixar

[Jeff Spry](#)



In 1985, moviegoers were treated to a trip into the past, and perhaps less famously but no less significantly, a giant leap into the future. Obviously, *Back to the Future* was that year's most iconic film, but when a knight sprang out of a stained glass window in *Young Sherlock Holmes*, history was being made.

After all, this was the world's first all-CG character, and "magic" was exactly what creator [John Lasseter](#) and his Lucasfilm Graphics Group (later branded Pixar) at Industrial Light & Magic had in mind.

## More firsts month

Now, over 30 years later, CGI characters mix in with humans with ease. But back then, Lasseter — who would later become Disney's chief creative

officer — and his small crew, including *Star Wars* special effects legend Dennis Muren, were doing something unprecedented.

Executive-produced by [Steven Spielberg](#) and directed by Barry Levinson, *Young Sherlock Holmes* is an entertaining and shamefully underrated fantasy adventure written by Chris Columbus and released on December 4, 1985.

Faithful to the Arthur Conan Doyle characters, this Sherlock Holmes origin story was well received by fans and critics lured in by the Spielberg name, but it failed to ignite box-office charts, ultimately only pulling in \$19.7 million off an \$18 million budget. A nice chunk of that money must have gone to its boundary-breaking digital actor.

The digitized medieval swordsman who leaped from the window to stalk a holy man took six months to create and signaled the dawn of a new and exciting era in cinematic visual effects.

Our historic scene takes place when a humble vicar lighting candles in a church finds himself the target of a drugged dart that causes hallucinations. In a haze, he imagines an armored crusader emerging from the arched panes of glass.

Frightened out of his tainted mind, the crazed clergyman flees into the snow-dusted streets of London and is swiftly trampled by a horse-drawn hansom cab.

With an eerie scrape of steel and crackle of reflective panes, the stained glass knight is a fully realized character in *Young Sherlock Holmes*, inciting fear and dread as candlelight flickers off his flattened figure. The slice of cracked glass that makes up the wraith's stern face adds to the surrealist detail of the scene in a strangely subtle way.





Lasseter and his computer animators worked for half a year on this jaw-dropping sequence. To accomplish the wizardry, ILM Modelshop crew member Jeff Mann donned a special costume and was photographed against a grid to provide reference footage for the eventual computer animation.

In the above photo, Artistic Supervisor John Lasseter stands with ILM Visual Effects Supervisor Dennis Muren. Employing state-of-the-art equipment (for the time) and working around the clock, the team conjured a clay and glass maquette figure of the phantom knight, which was digitized using a Polhemus Three-Space Digitizer. The resulting geometry was then rendered in vector form on an Evans and Sutherland monitor.



One year after the release of *Young Sherlock Holmes*, ILM's Pixar division was sold to Apple's Steve Jobs and renamed Pixar Animation Studios, where Lasseter eventually produced his groundbreaking all-CG animated feature film *Toy Story* in 1995. But the experimentation and advancements made during Lasseter's tenure at Industrial Light & Magic set the bar for more astounding cinematic wonders to come.

Do you remember the startling stained glass knight? What were your first reactions to this Hollywood sorcery?

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