Pixar co-founder to speak at NMSU

by Steve Ginsberg, Reporter

Academy Award-winning computer graphics innovator and Pixar co-founder Alvy Ray Smith will speak at New Mexico State University’s College of Engineering at 4 p.m. Friday.

An NMSU alumnus, Smith returns to speak about his experiences at Pixar, as former director of computer graphics research for Lucasfilm and as founder of Altamira Software.

Smith obtained a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from NMSU in 1965. He received his doctoral degree in computer engineering from Stanford University in 1970 and was awarded an honorary doctorate from NMSU in 1999.

In 1974, Smith was a visiting scientist for Xerox PARC where he created the HSV color space. He began working at the New York Institute of Technology in 1975 and co-invented the concept of the alpha channel, which is the rendering of image elements into separate passes and then combining the resulting multiple 2-D images into a single, final image.

Smith took that concept and went on to be a founding member of Lucasfilm in 1980. In 1986, he co-founded Pixar and served on the board of directors and as the executive vice president. In 1991, Smith founded Altamira, later acquired by Microsoft, and became the first Graphics Fellow at Microsoft in 1994.

Smith has received two technical Academy Awards for his alpha channel concept and for digital paint systems. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering for “fundamental changes in the graphic arts and motion picture industries.” He was co-awarded the Computer Graphics Achievement Award by the Association for Computing Machinery Special Interest Group on Graphics in 1990 for “seminal contributions to computer paint systems.”

Smith retired in 1999 to devote time to the emerging art form of digital photography and to scholarly genealogy, to which he has contributed two books and several journal papers. He is currently writing a book for the lay reader, “Digital Light: A Biography of the Pixel.”

The lecture is free and open to the public and is part of the Verge Fund Lecture Series in Innovation, Ventures and Entrepreneurship. For more information, contact Spyros Angelis at 575-646-2975 or loky@nmsu.edu.