



Gina Gershon (top).stars in *Kettle of Fish*

Other Ways to Go: DI on a PC

How Offhollywood Digital Gave an HD Feature a First-Class Finish on the Desktop

By Thomas Jamieson

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Producer and co-founder Mark Pederson and his team are disproving the idea that digital intermediate finishing is an exclusive and expensive art. The film *Kettle of Fish*, which his company oversaw from pre-production through post, went through an HD DI using the PC platform, saving the filmmakers thousands over comparable applications. And the workflow Pederson describes offers a way for indie filmmakers to work hands-on, while getting more creative bang for their buck.

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Co-line produced by Pederson and Alday Sanchez, the romantic comedy was shot in HD by DP Neil Lisk on New York locations in five weeks. *Kettle of Fish* was, among other things, a study in effective time management. The team at Offhollywood Digital in New York City had just three weeks to complete pre-production and a mere two weeks to test the DI pipeline. To make things even more interesting, Pederson had to create a proprietary workflow for the DI process, as the Mac-based shop used a Windows-only technology.

Prior to *Kettle of Fish*, colorist Joe Mastantuono handled the DI finishing on numerous indie films using Final Touch HD. But this time around Pederson wanted to provide Mastantuono with a faster and more comprehensive color-grading tool. "We were looking for a DI technology that offered not only flawless conforming, but also a well-designed roadmap for visual-effects integration," says Pederson. What he saw in Assimilate's Scratch convinced him to move to Windows. The first obvious challenge was finding an appropriate Windows-based workstation. Pederson and his team went with the HP xw9300 workstation running on a Dual Dual-Core AMD Opteron 280 processor with an NVIDIA Quadro FX 4000 SDI graphic card, which he says offered more than enough muscle to get the job done.

From DVCPRO to DPX

All of the footage for *Kettle of Fish* — shot on a Panasonic Varicam in 4:2:2 color space — was initially captured in DVCPRO HD. Scratch, however, uses a DPX file-based workflow that's incompatible with QuickTime media. Pederson and his team had to find a workaround to get their HD project into the application. Their solution? Recapture all of the media into 4:4:4 RGB 10-bit log

- (1) Shoot on VariCam
- (2) Capture to tape in 23.98 DVCPRO HD via FireWire using Final Cut Pro 5 and a Panasonic AJ-HD1200A deck
- (3) Create visual effects in Shake 4
- (4) Edit in Final Cut Pro 5 (separate film into reels)
- (5) Use FCP Media Manager to create offline projects -- clips with unique names and handles (one per reel)
- (6) Re-capture media via Kona 2 into AJA's 4:4:4 RGB 10-bit log codec
- (7) Convert RGB QuickTimes into DPX files using AJA's QTtoDPX Translator
- (8) Conform to EDL, color-grade, and create pan-and-scan version in Assimilate Scratch
- (9) Render and export final graded DPX files (master sequence of each reel) onto FireWire drives for film-out
- (10) Use AJA DPXtoQT Translator to convert DPX files back to AJA 4:4:4 RGB 10-bit log QuickTimes
- (11) Output HDCAM SR master via Final Cut using Kona 2 dual-link

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format via AJA's Kona 2 card. The QuickTimes were converted to DPX files using AJA's QTT-to-DPX Translator. Once the process was completed, the project was conformed from editor Pete Beaudreau's EDL, which was created in Final Cut 5.

"There are several advantages that a DPX file-based workflow has over QuickTime," says Pederson. First, DPX has the same color space as 2K. This is a benefit for a colorist working with native HD footage, as it offers more room to finesse a shot. Scratch works in real time and, according to Mastantuono, multiple grades can be created for the same shot — if one choice doesn't work another can replace it almost immediately. "I was amazed at how fast I could create multiple grades of the same shot," he says. DPX also contains metadata in each frame, which means that if just one frame in a clip is corrupted, that frame can be rebuilt. By contrast, QuickTime requires that the entire clip be reconstructed, which is a far more time-consuming process. Working in DPX on *Kettle of Fish* proved to be more efficient and, by all accounts, enhanced the overall creative process.

Getting the Director Hands-On in the DI Suite

As DI technology goes, Pederson sees two trends emerging in the indie film world. One is that directors are becoming more tech savvy. "As they find out what they can do with desktop DI technology, they'll become more a part of the creative process," he says. And boutique shops like Offhollywood Digital are looking to provide filmmakers with a more hands-on experience. Price, of course, is an important factor. Scratch's \$45,000 retail cost is economical when compared with the \$100,000-to-\$300,000 price tag on leading DI technologies such as da Vinci, Quantel iQ and Discreet Lustre. "Scratch does everything the others do, and with the same high level of quality," says Pederson.

With bigger-budget indies and Hollywood productions moving to HD, color space is becoming a hot topic. Pederson sees this as another trend. "Right now everyone wants to know about 4:4:4 RGB," he says. "Since *Sin City* there's been a lot of curiosity about it. And it really made the difference for us on *Kettle of Fish*." He believes that workflows similar to the one Offhollywood Digital used on the film will become more standard in the future. Also, with the recent resurgence in Super 16, filmmakers are looking to telecine to HDCAM SR in RGB log or scan to 2K and master to HDCAM SR.

Kettle of Fish received a film-out via Arri Laser at Cinecitta in Rome, Italy. "The film already has foreign sales agents selling it overseas, and they have to deliver a 35mm print," says Pederson. But, like many others in the industry, he sees celluloid soon becoming more or less obsolete. "2006 is going to be all about HD," he says.