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CINESITE USING SCRATCH FOR DI WORK



Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy/Buena Vista Pictures/Cinesite.

LONDON — First there was *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Next came *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *V for Vendetta*. Then there was *X-Men: The Last Stand*, *Omen 666*, *Stormbreaker*, *Little Man*, *Gale Force 10*, *Underdog* and *Miss Potter*.

Blockbusting fantasy, comedy, action and adventure, they are all given equal treatment at motion picture, digital imaging and special effects facility Cinesite Europe (www.cinesite.com), and they all used

Scratch, a datacentric workflow solution from Assimilate.

The tale of Scratch at Cinesite is an on-going, evolving story. It involves not just the capability to play back 90 minutes of 2K footage, but clever XML automation, digital projection, critical color judgements and sticky notes too. Additionally, Scratch is resolution independent, so files of any source or format can be integrated into the project at hand. All of these capabilities combine on a daily basis, enabling Cinesite's visual effects supervisors and 2D & 3D digital artists to work in more efficient and creative ways with their filmmaking clients.

In just 18 months, the London-based company has pumped literally thousands of digital special effects shots through its multiple Scratch suites. The company has four systems — all of which are networked and are routable into a 36-seat screening theatre fitted with a digital cinema standard projector and sound system. To keep projects in order with so many images and sequences being generated, Cinesite generally dedicates one Scratch suite per movie.

Simon Stanley-Clamp, one of Cinesite's visual effects supervisors, has overseen all of the effects work going through Scratch since it arrived at Cinesite at the end of 2004. A former compositor at Mill Film, Stanley-Clamp has worked on *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Black Hawk Down* and *Gladiator*. He's watching the evolution of digital intermediates (DI) with interest, viewing it in the larger context of a digital pipeline.

"Not so long ago, expensive compositing systems were assigned to inappropriate tasks such as playback/review," says Stanley-Clamp. "Now, cost-effective DI systems like Scratch have not only conquered the 2K playback issue, but are offering us many new and interesting features and options in our day-to-day work. The DI workflow is changing because of technology like Scratch, and the ability of developers like Assimilate to listen to our needs."

In terms of automation, Cinesite's engineering team has integrated Scratch, via a proprietary XML-based application, to its in-house proprietary database and data management system. Every evening 2D and 3D artists working on a particular film publish their shots, and when rendered these shots load automatically into the relevant Scratch system. Shots coming into Scratch are often from 30 or more 2D and 3D artists.

"The great thing is that when we get into the Scratch suite in the morning, the dailies are already in the Construct module ready to go. We then sit down with the crew and review them," explains Stanley-Clamp. "But it's not just 2K we review; we also regularly have different resolutions on the same timeline — video-res shots from the Avid cut, TIFFs and quick 1K comps, all in context with completed 2K shots. It doesn't matter to Scratch."

PROJECTION, COLOR DECISIONS

The latest development at Cinesite is the installation of JVC video projectors across three Scratch suites. The output of each Scratch system is slaved to a monitor and a projector — the monitor being used for work involving precise color decisions, and the projectors for the general review of content, animation and line-up. *Miss Potter* is the first film to use the new projection facility in earnest.

"Now we watch the dailies projected quite large, about eight feet across, on the wall in the suite," explains Stanley-Clamp. "It's like a mini cinema. Rather than huddling round a small monitor, we're now watching much larger images and can get a really good view of any problems that need fixing."

However, when it comes to color, and critical color decisions, the team defaults to the monitors. He explains, "Scratch gives us powerful and accurate color grading options. We run our own LUTs on Scratch, and all our monitors are calibrated every morning. Using Scratch, we can adjust the printer lights and know that what we see on the monitor will be true to our film output."

"In client-attended sessions we use Scratch to apply grading tweaks on a shot, balance it out with other shots and then view the result in context on the monitor. In our daily work in-house, if the effects supervisor wants to know how a scene is going to look desaturated, or a stop up or down, we can do that in Scratch too. It stores the data about any color changes and feeds this back to that original 2D or 3D artist who can then re-render the sequence using new color values."

COMPARISONS & STICKY NOTES

Stanley-Clamp says that clients really like being able to compare shots - what a shot looked like last week, or three weeks ago, compared to the way it looks now. It's been an especially important aspect on effects-laden motion pictures such as *Harry Potter*, *Charlie* and *V for Vendetta*.

"One shot might have 30 iterations, and sometimes you have to be perfectly clear in a client-attended session as to exactly what the changes and improvements are. Not only can we keep all these versions 'live' on Scratch, we can easily do split-screen comparisons, or rock-and-roll between versions."

And as for Sticky Notes, he believes these are a real boon to effective communications. "Before the client comes in, I use Sticky Notes as personal memos, reminding me to draw attention to particular items within a shot. I can easily attach them to the head of each shot, and switch them on and off as required. I also like to attach any requests and "to dos" coming from the client session to a shot using Sticky Notes, as these can be easily read by the compositor or CG artist."

Simon believes that the process of creating digital effects within the DI pipeline is no longer about having a front-end viewer. "Things have moved up another level. Clients want to look at

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the output, view material in context and review progress, as well as make color decisions too. They want the best quality, with no buttons on screen, no distracting widgets, no spluttering or crashing. Scratch gives them all that. There's no other word for it than impressive."

EVEN MORE EVOLUTION

Standing still can be fatal. Cinesite's 2D technical director Aviv Yaron and Kevin Wheatley, the company's senior technical and network systems architects, are responsible for the research and introduction of innovative solutions that boost the company's workflow and other aspects of its differentiation. Yaron is keen to point out just how important the working relationship with Assimilate has been in helping Scratch to evolve.

"We have a fantastic relationship with Assimilate. We can talk equally to the R&D team and the CEO of the company to give our advice and suggest new ways in which we want to work," states Yaron. "Of course, there are a lot of nitty-gritty details to get right, but the response is always professional and timely, and today Scratch does exactly what we want it to do. As the world of DI and the development of films, images, and visual effects evolve and change, we will continue to work with Assimilate to better refine its capabilities and the way we drive it. As for the future, all I can say is: 'Watch this space!'"

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