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A resource for the digital intermediate industry

Scratch 2.0

Product: Assimilate Inc. Scratch

Version: 2.0*

Manufacturer: Assimilate Inc. (www.assimilateinc.com)

Price: \$35,000 +options

Performance & stability: n/a*

Features: 8/10

Expected return on investment: 9/10

Support: n/a*

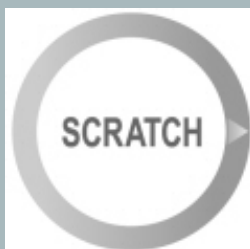
Longevity: 10/10

Flexibility: 9/10

Pros: New "scaffolds" module rounds off a complete feature-set with secondary colour-correction capabilities

Cons: No native deck control, does not conform from multiple reels

Bottom line: The ultimate digital intermediate workhorse, with features to rival some of the more expensive systems



Scratch 2.0

*This review is based on demonstrations, evaluation of documented features and interviews with the developers rather than first-hand experience, so no data is available for reliability or performance.

Assimilate Inc.'s Scratch product slipped under the radar. At the International Broadcaster's Convention (IBC) in

September last year, while everyone seemed to be fussing over the latest secondary colour-correction features, Assimilate, a company comprised of many members of the 5D post-production software developers, presented the first incarnation of the all-in-one software solution for digital intermediates. This wasn't anything exciting in itself, and many shunned it in favour of systems such as Lustre, by then at version 2.0, with many more glamorous features.

The big difference between Scratch and most of the other digital intermediate systems, is that it is purposefully designed as a support, or "project management" application, rather than a full-featured colour grading system. With this in mind, Scratch can be used as a viewing (read "digital dailies") tool, as it is at Cinesite (Europe) Ltd., a conforming/editing system, a paint tool, or a data management tool. Or, most importantly, all of those things. With the standard primary colour correction module included, Scratch embodies the capability to complete a digital intermediate with exactly the same tools that a filmmaker would have when working with a photochemical process. With all the digital intermediate systems available right now, it is easy to forget that secondary colour-correction is in fact a luxury that would not normally be available to the film-maker. The ability to selectively change eye colours, even individual strands of hair, is possible with secondary colour correction options on many systems, but that doesn't mean it's necessary to complete a film. Scratch can do everything else just fine. Having said that, the new "Scaffolds" option now available will let you apply secondary colour-correction to your heart's content. More on that later.



Scratch runs on a Windows XP-based PC. As with other software-based systems, a more powerful PC will provide greater performance in terms of playback and processing. Scratch will input and output to a variety of data formats, supporting file sizes up to 64k images (though i can't imagine an application that would require such huge images...), and is resolution and format-independent. Scratch will not control a VTR directly, which is one of its only limitations. It can directly control Imagica's line of scanners, but if you're using a different brand of scanner you'll have to put the scans somewhere Scratch can access them (though the capability to control a scanner is more of a luxury than a requirement). Where Scratch excels in is managing data already on the network. It provides an incredible array of tools for organising data for separate projects or "CONstructs", both by interacting directly with the system, and by using xml-based control files, meaning you can sit on the beach editing and send the control files back to the master system. In terms of conforming, a number of different formats are supported, from the ubiquitous EDL, through to CDLs (colour decision lists), theoretically allowing colour decisions to be carried throughout a production. A great inclusion into the system is the ability to easily reconform a timeline to a new EDL, preserving changes made. Of this part of the system, the only area that falls down is that there is no way at present to auto-conform multiple virtual reels- these must be indexed separately within Scratch. There is also no support for keycode conforming as yet (this support will be in a release in the near future)- the keycode can be read from compatible file formats, but not used for organising data. Once conformed, the timelines can be exported to other applications, or edited within scratch.



Scratch takes a node-based approach to working with individual shots, which makes it ideal for compositing. Like Grass Valley's "Bones", and Filmlight's "Baselight", Scratch supports the new "Open FX" plug-ins system, which means there are already a number of products available as third-party extras, from the Primatte chromakey software, to The Foundry's Tinder range of effects filters. What this all means is that Scratch competes with most online editing systems from the get-go, able to compete with more dedicated systems, such as Autodesk's Fire (or at the very least, Combustion) systems. Even just in the

playback module of Scratch, it seems that everything has been thought of. It's possible to display multiple windows that can be "ganged" together, split-screens for comparisons, and timelines can be synced to 2-channel audio files. Pan & scan tools are comprehensive, and there is support for the Kodak, Pandora or Imagica colour management systems.

Scratch also has a generic primary colour-grading module built-in. This already has powerful features, such as the ability to match grades between two shots, grade to five different axes (two HLS colour axes, and a gamma, lift, and gain axis), as well as provide an interactive histogram and support for third-party panel interfaces. All of these can be used on a linear scale familiar to telecine operators, or a printer points scale, for laboratory graders. New in the latest version is the optional "Scaffolds" module, which adds the coveted secondary colour-correction toolset into the Scratch system. With Scaffolds, hundreds of layers of colour correction can be applied to each shot, each with the standard tracking, keying and masking options as you'd find anywhere else. With the addition of such a system, Scratch has evolved into an all-in-one solution. Yes, it is possible to complete an entire film just using Scratch. Of course, the colour-grading capabilities are not as extensive as Baselight or Lustre (the most significant difference is the apparent lack of any curve-based colour-grading tools), but then its not nearly as expensive as either of those systems, and actually does many of the supporting functions much better than either, probably putting it on a par with Quantel's iQ system.

Scratch is an extraordinarily capable system that has been over-shadowed by its more expensive counterparts. It can form the basis of a project-management system, a digital dailies system, or a colour-grading system. Ultimately, the question is, what do you want to use Scratch for?

More information can be found at <http://www.assimilateinc.com>

All reviews are based upon the principle that the hardware or software reviewed is to be used within a commercial digital intermediate environment; as such the review may not necessarily reflect the product's intended purpose.

About the reviewer: Jack James has been working with digital imaging technology for 10 years. He has worked within a number of digital intermediate environments since joining Cinesite (Europe) Ltd.'s Digital Lab in 2001 to work on HBO's Band of Brothers. He has a number of film credits, and has published the book "Digital Intermediates for Film & Television" with Focal Press.



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