

the *DI R*-evolution

SCRATCH at Cinesite Europe Ltd

When it comes to earning your stripes as a DI technology developer, there's probably no more challenging an environment to win them than at Cinesite in London, one of the largest and most diverse visual imaging facilities in the world.

Cinesite, which has purchased no fewer than four SCRATCH Data-Centric Workflow Solutions from ASSIMILATE, is among the world leaders in feature film visual effects. Officially opened in 1994 under the auspices of Eastman Kodak, Cinesite today services international film and television productions from its Soho base.

Over the last decade the company's film scanning and recording services have flourished, as have its visual effects capabilities. Cinesite is a major player in the European visual effects industry, winning its third Emmy nomination for digital effects on the epic television series *Band of Brothers* in 2001, and since then completing digital effects on films including *Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy*, *King Arthur*, *Sahara*, all of the *Harry Potter* series of films, *Alien vs. Predator* and *Troy*.

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The first SCRATCH systems were installed in November 2004, and after rigorous validation, were implemented on Warner Brothers' *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire* in February 2004 to assist playback and review of the effects on the film. SCRATCH's fully configurable player allows true, real-time 2K playback and review from whole timelines to individual shots, with a myriad of users controlling how shots are displayed to meet different requirements.

The adoption of SCRATCH is something that Cinesite's 2D technical director Aviv Yaron has been intimately involved with. If anyone can claim to have in-depth knowledge and experience in creating an efficient production workflow, it's him. Yaron has worked at Cinesite practically since it opened in

London, starting as a data op, progressing to compositing, to a position today where he is responsible with Kevin Wheatley, Cinesite's senior technical and network systems architect, for the research and introduction of potential innovative solutions that will boost the company's workflow and other aspects of its differentiation.

"In digital film, knowledge is a very important commodity," says Yaron. "With projects like *Band of Brothers* we reached a level of excellence, using proprietary equipment, and gained a huge amount of experience in high-end, digital film methodology that we've been able to harness for the benefit of our workflow today."

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Yaron has followed the development of SCRATCH since its very early stages. "We went to visit one of ASSIMILATE's first customer sites in Holland, and liked the way it had been implemented, as well as the way ASSIMILATE worked with their customers on development issues - very direct, very responsive. We thought the development path for SCRATCH looked promising, and liked the design ethos of the product as a whole - that it was coming from the artist's standpoint, while also providing options for the editor and the color grader."

SCRATCH in the Workflow

Yaron says that while Cinesite's fundamental workflow has not changed for a long time, the equipment has and with it the artist and client expectations too. "In just a short time we have moved from 1K to 2K playback, and real-time 2K is the new standard. Before, we would have investigated



developing our own systems, but there's enough choice out there now that we don't need to go to that trouble. When we met with ASSIMILATE, we realised there was a lot we could do together to develop a playback/review system to meet Cinesite's production workflow needs. We continue to work closely and this has resulted in an excellent solution."

As a leader in its field, Cinesite naturally sets a high entry bar for any new potential technology, and Yaron was instrumental in making sure that SCRATCH underwent thorough validation routines and dry runs before bringing it into the pipeline.

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*- Aviv Yaron, 2D technical director
Cinesite Europe Ltd*

"Efficient production workflow is everything," he says. "We need equipment to fit into a slick workflow, and to do this it has to be open, flexible, stable and easy to use. SCRATCH ticks all the boxes. We have been able to fit it into our existing network and data management systems very easily. SCRATCH can pull in data without the need for secondary operations."

SCRATCH systems are now seamlessly implemented to Cinesite's carefully color-calibrated environment, principally on the production of Warner Bros. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Separate systems are linked to monitors in a special playback/review room, and to a Barco digital projector in the company's rather sumptuous 36-seat screening theatre.

"Because we had put SCRATCH through such comprehensive validation processes, we had no problem in implementing it into our pipeline and releasing it to the *Harry Potter* team," says Yaron. "From the very first moment it was installed people here jumped on it and for all sorts of different purposes. Now SCRATCH is a viable production tool used every day within Cinesite."

Typically, SCRATCH "clients" or users might be 2D or 3D VFX artists and their production supervisors scrutinising the latest digital dailies, or an in-house

producer showing completed scenes to the film's SFX supervisor, producer or director, marking them as either requiring further work, or ready for film-out. SCRATCH users also include the company's PR or marketing teams who regularly use the system to play showreels at client or press presentations.

One daily SCRATCH user at Cinesite is VFX supervisor Simon Stanley-Clamp. Working on an effects intensive film like *Harry Potter* means that he needs to have easy accessibility to the mind-boggling number of versions being produced, to compile these in various orders, make subtle color grading changes, provide notes on work-in-progress and pass the data back into the system.

"Other software can be intimidating, but not SCRATCH - it is very easy to use," says Stanley-Clamp. "It has a well-designed and interactive UI that makes it easy to organize and view different versions of a scene, or put scenes together and view them in context to the timeline. It's very fast to jump between libraries too. The magnifier tools are a real benefit as we can pan around the image to check that composites are perfect. The fact that SCRATCH has primary color grading is relevant for stylizing issues - we can balance shots or try different grades, and send any new settings back as project files."

As a VFX supervisor, precise communication with his VFX team is vital. Stanley-Clamp and his colleagues regularly take advantage of SCRATCH's ability to annotate individual frames or scenes with 'sticky notes', ensuring that instructions about any changes are clearly conveyed.

R&D is Everything

Yaron is a great believer in collaboration, and praises the dedication to duty of ASSIMILATE's R&D team throughout the introduction of SCRATCH. "They have been very quick to cater to our needs - very responsive and understanding of what the system needed to do before it would meet the quality threshold of Cinesite."

As for the future, Yaron says, "Our reputation for contributing to the art and science of digital effects has assured Cinesite's position as an industry leader. The future capabilities of SCRATCH are very exciting, it has lots of potential that we are keen to follow and contribute to. We look forward to working closely with ASSIMILATE on these developments."