

SCRATCH goes into combat on Time Warrior at Area VFX Mexico

The Facility: Area VFX Mexico

Area VFX Mexico, based in Guadalajara, is a new and independent offshoot of the hugely successful commercials post-production boutique Area VFX in Sao Paulo, Brasil. Although it operates as a separate trading entity, the fledgling Mexican business shares the same values and ethos of delivering high-quality post, VFX and CGI services, and is a strategic step by the Area brand to break into the wider entertainment market of television and feature films, not just in Mexico, but also the US.

In its opening guise, Area VFX Mexico has launched as a finishing house, with ASSIMILATE's SCRATCH as its frontline DI color grading and media management hub, and plans to grow its VFX/CGI department from the plethora of local talent. And the recipe is working. The first project through the doors is *Time Warrior*, a 97-minute sci-fi action-adventure for teenagers, from US production company Jaguar Films, graded entirely in SCRATCH. The success of the project has helped the company to pull in the grade on a second feature *12 Segundos* (12 Seconds) from KraftLogic Studios, directed by Kenneth Muller.

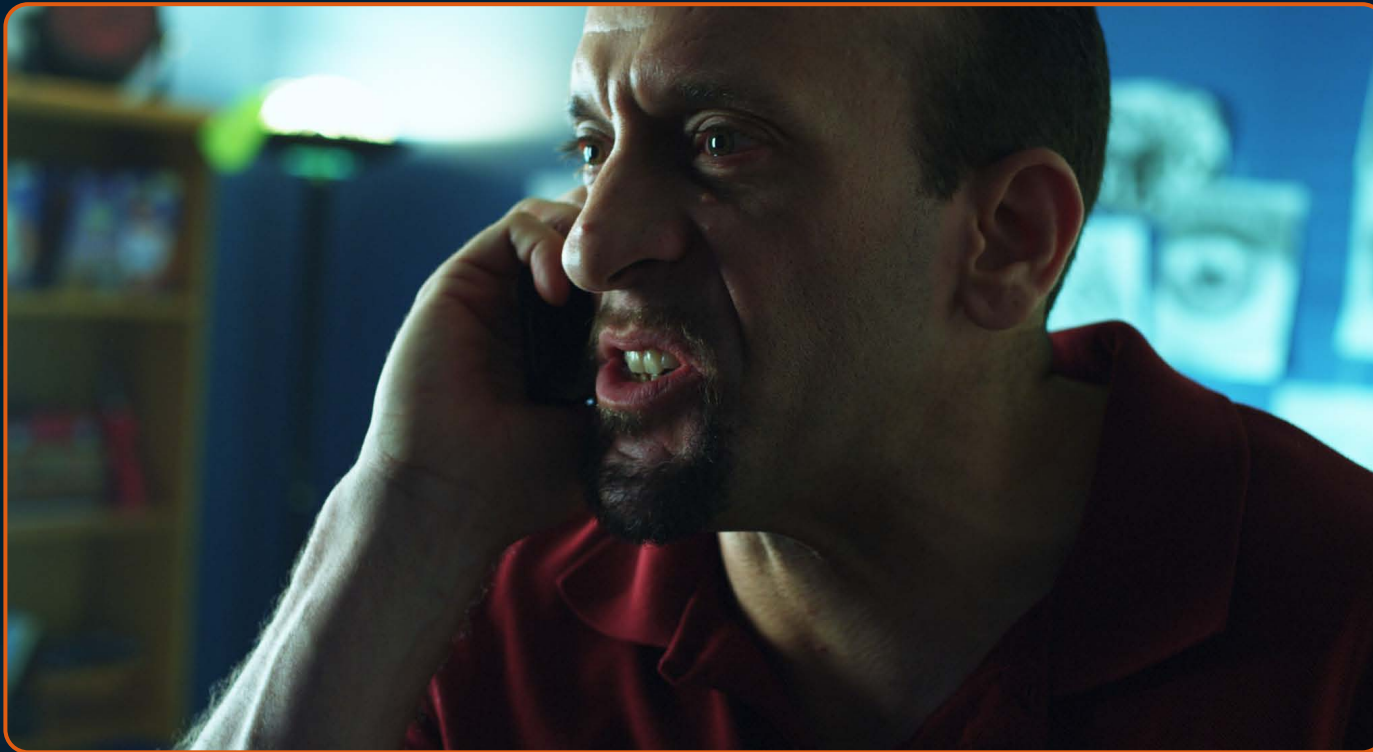
"Mexico is a thriving market for commercials, television and features, and is very US-oriented," says Area VFX Mexico founder Rodney Costa. "Along with some top-drawer VFX companies, Mexico also has a number of excellent film and

media schools focussed on high-quality student training across DI grading, VFX and CGI, and we will build our team from this talent pool.

"We're a small studio and SCRATCH, with its comprehensive grading toolset, has given us the opportunity to immediately enter the big screen world. But, I don't see SCRATCH just a grading system. It's a great project organizer too, as well as a solid, versatile pipeline hub for us to manage media assets and VFX content as we also grow into the advertising and broadcast industries."

Project Leader: Rodney Costa, DI colorist/VFX supervisor

In a career spanning 17 years as a CGI artist and VFX supervisor, Rodney Costa has worked at several leading post houses in Brazil, including Pix Post, Tribbo Post and Area VFX in Brazil, Ool Digital and Exodo Workshop in Mexico. He was VFX supervisor at Ovni and Boxer Studios in the US. Costa has supplied all manner of animated CG elements – characters, particle effects and cloth



Time Warrior, image courtesy of Area VFX

simulations – to big-budget spots for international brands including Coca Cola, General Motors, Fiat, Chevrolet and Nestlé.

Now, the young Brazilian is the founder and CEO of Area VFX Mexico. He's responsible for building the business, and has also found himself extending his array of talents into color grading using SCRATCH.

“Working as a CG artist and VFX supervisor I have always had to collaborate with colorists and compositing artists, and pay strict attention to color consistency as VFX elements pass through the post production pipeline,” he says.

“Establishing Area VFX Mexico has meant me moving into a

new discipline, and SCRATCH has helped me to learn the art of color grading very quickly. Although I have a technical background, SCRATCH is very easy for anyone to learn. Features like EDL/XML conform, CONstructs, multi-format timeline, and grading via Scaffolds, are very intuitive. You can work like an artist, and concentrate on the techniques of grading, rather than battling with the technology.”

The project: Time Warrior

When a pirated copy of a popular videogame lands in the hands of impressionable teenagers Matt and Jimmy, they immediately think it's the coolest game they've ever played. But, little do they know that what appears to be their favorite videogame, is actually an evil recruiting device that turns selected kids into real Time Warriors at the service of “The Lord Of War”, an

evil character behind every war since the beginning of time.

Time Warrior, a Jaguar Films production, was produced by Michael Halverson, and directed by Joaquin Rodriguez, with Ricardo Valdez the DP and editor. The production was shot in and around Las Vegas, using a combination of RED MX 4K, Sony F3 and Canon 5D DSLR cameras.

Colorful, dramatic, and packed with VFX and CGI effects, the production has been carefully crafted at Area VFX Mexico to target the teenage and gamer market, and was planned as a possible Hollywood movie franchise.

The challenge: Remote grading, matching camera footage, and creating a big-budget look and feel.

Shot and post produced on a modest \$2 million budget, the most significant challenge for Costa in grading *Time Warrior*, was to deliver a final result with the look, feel and quality of a mainstream, high-budget production. Within this overall challenge lay the tasks of matching footage from different cameras, with material often being acquired in difficult lighting conditions, managing the VFX pipeline, and keeping the producers in Las Vegas up to speed on the DI grade taking place in Mexico.

The solution: SCRATCH

A remarkable aspect of the post-production on *Time Warrior* is that the entire grade was conducted remotely – with Costa operating SCRATCH in Guadalajara, the producers in Las Vegas, and calibrated monitors to ensure color consistency and each end. In preparation for the grade, Costa was involved in planning a color decision script with the director and the DP, so that in advance of the SCRATCH grade he knew which scenes required pre-defined dense, dramatic and theatrical grading treatments.

Using SCRATCH's remote review via HTML capability Costa could easily and quickly publish thumbnails of any images the producers wanted to scrutinise, to check for such things as framing, for example. "If they wanted to check color I would send them RAW and graded reference frames so they could see an accurate view on their monitors. We even used Skype screenshare so the director and DP could see the SCRATCH interface, and review a stack of Scaffolds, whilst I was doing realtime grading," he says.

For Costa, one of SCRATCH's wow factors is the ability to play back, and grade, multiple formats and resolutions in realtime on the same timeline – in this case RED 2K and 4K R3D files, combined with ProRes 444 footage from the F3 and Canon 5D cameras. Another vital capability was in helping to match the footage acquired with the three different cameras.

"I used SCRATCH to do a primary grade to bring a consistency to the overall look. But, before I started, I resized scenes and balanced the luminance levels of footage that had been shot using the different cameras. There were differences in noise levels, particularly on dark scenes and nighttime sequences,



Time Warrior, image courtesy of Area VFX

between the cameras. As SCRATCH supports REDColor2, REDGamma2 and RED Meta Data (RMD), I could bring the RED footage closer to quality of the F3 and 5D material. I also selectively used SCRATCH's Degrain and Texture tools to finesse the balance of the footage even further."

In terms of the big-budget, mainstream look, Costa says *Time Warrior* has a very modern style – saturated and colorful to attract the teenage eye.

"We spent time in pre-production developing different color styles for the film using SCRATCH Scaffolds, so I knew when to apply a particular dense, dramatic or theatrical grade. When you're grading a 97-minute feature, with more than 145,000 frames, being able to create looks and plan your workflow is very helpful in terms of time-saving."

Finishing the color further, Costa used Scaffolds to variously apply, for example, subtle soft-edged vignettes to draw viewers' eyes to the correct part of the image. Going even further, he used several Scaffold layers - combining tracking masks, the HSV Keyer, color and luma controls - to balance the skin tones across footage captured from the different cameras. He then used SCRATCH's keying

and compositing capabilities to remove a shadow cast by a microphone in one scene, along with many other small scenery fixes.

Along with SCRATCH's prowess as a DI grading system, Costa values its performance as a pipeline hub. "It's a great advantage to the overall workflow on a VFX-laden project like *Time Warrior* to be able to export VFX shots and check VFX dailies, and then to EDL conform, or manually place, those VFX dailies on the same timeline as the live action takes."

"I have to say that I am a really big fan of ASSIMILATE and SCRATCH. When I've needed any support, I have felt that I'm part of a culture that cares about me, my project and the success of its software. Being part of a product's evolution is cool. And above all, SCRATCH has proven that it can easily compete with other DI systems that are many times more expensive." www.areavfx.com



Time Warrior Executive Producer Micheal Halverson, Rodney Costa, Director Joaquin Rodrigues