Nocturnal Migration Blazes Creative Trail for Alt.vfx
Post-production start-up uses Autodesk pipeline to create award-winning spot for Tooheys’ Extra Dry.

When we provide our artists with the right tools, the tools themselves become a non-issue and our artists can shine. Implementing a creative pipeline based on Autodesk tools has enabled us to fully unleash our artists’ talents.

—Colin Renshaw
VFX Supervisor
Alt.vfx

“Flame, especially Flame Premium, offers so many things that you can do instantly that are very time-consuming to do on other systems,” Renshaw explained. So the Alt.vfx team decided that they were going to make a commitment to two Autodesk visual effects systems: Autodesk® Flame® Premium and Autodesk® Smoke® software.

They worked backward from there to see how they could get the most out of their choices. Since Autodesk® Softimage® and Autodesk® Maya® software (along with Autodesk® MotionBuilder® and Autodesk® Mudbox® software) are part of the Autodesk® Maya® Entertainment Creation Suite Premium edition (ECS), they could easily include both in their kit.

“We wanted almost every seat to have access to the ECS Premium package so our artists could switch between using Maya and Softimage and also have MotionBuilder and Mudbox to use as well.”

“Our core beliefs formed what we were really trying to do, which was to create a new paradigm for post-production and visual effects—that’s why we called it ‘Alt’. In terms of the space, we didn’t want to go back to the old model of the windowless boxes so we found a space where the suites are completely open on three sides. You can control the lighting and open it all up so that the air blows through and the light comes in—so now we have spaces that are almost outdoor-indoor rather than suites,” said Renshaw.

The vision for Alt.vfx extended through to physically having the flexibility to tailor the entire facility to projects. Rather than locating artists in separate rooms according to their tasks, Takada and Renshaw wanted to build teams around their clients. In this way a director wanting previs could sit amongst 3D artists and work on 3D previews, with a Flame artist sitting next to them to handle compositing. The Autodesk® Entertainment Creation Suite was a key factor for Alt.vfx to realize their creative vision.
Creating reality through CG

While the facility was still just a design on paper, Renshaw and Takada landed their dream job when they were asked by director Garth Davis to provide CG for a Tooheys’ Extra Dry television commercial, Nocturnal Migration. The spot would feature a herd of hundreds of deer out for an evening in the city. Getting the commercial right would mean creating realistic, impressive CG representations of the deer. To do this, Alt.vfx committed to using tools that did not limit them to traditional models, affording their artists free rein to create the best visual effects possible.

After receiving the competitive brief, Colin flew to New Zealand to capture reference material of live deer to enable a prototype 3D deer model to be built. The model was animated and composited with a background plate of Renshaw to produce a shot of him “feeding” the deer.

Alt.vfx then used Deakin University’s motion capture lab, where 78 tracking balls were applied to a live deer with cattle glue. Loading the motion capture data from the shoot into Autodesk MotionBuilder 3D character animation software enabled Alt.vfx to clean up the data and create a library of deer movements. The original plan had been to shoot the majority of the advertisement with live deer on camera; however, after seeing the animation produced by Alt.vfx, the decision was made to change more of the live action shots to CG. Alt.vfx won the job and the resulting spot was 70 per cent CG.

“Using Autodesk Maya, our animators could select takes and propagate them straight into the scene. Using the animation layers in Maya lent us the speed we critically needed to animate over the top of the motion capture so we could have the basic movement and fidelity required to add another layer of performance,” said Takada.

Autodesk Mudbox refines hero shot

A dancing deer hero shot received additional digital polish in the dying hours before deadline when the director asked for more detail. “We ended up rebuilding that deer and then Mudbox came out and just owned it,” said Renshaw. “We didn’t have time to remodel the entire thing so we took the mesh into Mudbox and did a lot more displacement and added extra detail that wasn’t in the original model. We painted the texture live in Mudbox so we could get an absolutely customized texture for that one shot as it was a close-up. The texture was wrapped onto the geometry and we could actually see what it was doing. It’s a great tool because we didn’t have to keep breaking it out to the UVs and painting UVs. So Mudbox helped to really nail that shot.”

Nocturnal Migration puts Alt.vfx on the world stage

Once released, Tooheys’ Extra Dry Nocturnal Migration commercial received international acclaim, with Alt.vfx winning multiple awards for their work. These included two Cannes Lions in 2012 for visual effects and animation, and gold at the NXT Stage Hollywood International Awards for visual effects. The commercial’s official YouTube video has been viewed over 169,075 times since being uploaded less than a year ago. “The industry’s reaction has been amazing—we’re getting emails from competitors congratulating us on our work, which is really inspiring,” said Colin.

Looking ahead: Alt.vfx to take on local and international markets

Since the great success of the Nocturnal Migration commercial, Alt.vfx has been enlisted to work on many other high-profile projects. They were recently commissioned to create the CG for Foxtel’s Olympics advertisement ‘Seeing is believing’, as well as a new promotion for SBS entitled ‘Emotions on demand’.

To cope with the increased workload, Alt.vfx has added more Maya seats and an additional Smoke, as well as the recently announced Autodesk® Entertainment Creation Suite Ultimate edition. This gives the facility even further flexibility by also offering artists access to Autodesk® 3ds Max® software.

The time is now ripe to launch the company in the increasingly rationalized local and international markets. “Enabling our artists to do their best work without being limited by the tools at hand is a high priority at Alt.vfx,” said Takeshi. “With the Tooheys’ commercial, we knew we had the right tools for the job and, as a result, our artists were able to produce some of the most convincing CG animals created for a television commercial. We’re excited about a future where our artists’ creativity is supported and enabled by flexible, cutting-edge technology.”

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—Takeshi Takada
Executive Producer
Alt.vfx

Image courtesy of Alt.vfx