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Beta Sight: Autodesk Flare

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Smoke & Mirrors is first with Flare.



Smoke & Mirrors was the first visual-effects studio to purchase Autodesk Flare, a companion to Autodesk Flame and Inferno. Pictured: Kirk Balden, VFX supervisor and senior Flame artist at Smoke & Mirrors New York.

When Autodesk Flare, the new companion software for Autodesk Flame and Inferno, was introduced at NAB Show 2009, Smoke & Mirrors was the first visual-effects studio to buy it. In fact, we made the purchase—two seats—during the first hour of the show. It was a decision made after many months of beta testing, putting Flare through its paces at our facilities in New York, where I'm based, and London. (We also have an outpost in Shanghai.)

Because we've outfitted Smoke & Mirrors with the most recent versions of **Autodesk Flame**, **Smoke**, **Toxik**, **Combustion**, **Backdraft**, **Maya**, **3ds Max**, and **Softimage**, Flare fit seamlessly into our pipeline. We run it on **HP xw9400 workstations** with the CentOS operating system. Since our purchase in April, Flare has already helped us efficiently finish visual-effects work on a PSA for ad agency BBDO New York, and it is currently being tapped for many other exciting upcoming projects.

What's Flare?

Flare operates like an assistant station so commercial post facilities can maximize productivity by freeing up the Flame and Inferno suites to perform the heavy lifting on visual-effects jobs. Based on the Batch compositing environment, Flare has the same creative toolset found in Flame and Inferno, which means you can execute compositing, graphics and design, rotoscoping, retouching and dust removal, project setup, and keying the same as you would on Flame. It's also one-fifth the cost of Flame, so you can leverage the power of Flame at a fraction of the cost.

Because it's a software product that comes as a floating license, it enables a modular workflow, so a facility like ours can dynamically tailor a visual-effects suite to the needs of a particular project or client. This might mean integrating 2D and 3D departments into one bay—with Flare, Flame, and Maya all in one room—allowing you to work more creatively on the same project because 2D and 3D aren't separate departments on different floors.

Putting Flare to the test

A 30-second PSA called "Signs," which we recently completed for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), was perhaps the world's first Flare project.

Shot in one take from the first-person perspective of a commuter driving down the freeway, the spot shows handmade welcome-home banners hanging from overpasses with various messages to convey the difficulty of approaching and engaging a friend or family member who has recently returned home.

We were originally brought on by the agency to do simple clean-up and shot stabilization on the signs, which were made from bed sheets and hung from the overpasses. They soon found out that it was illegal to hang banners of that size on freeway overpasses. The signs had to be re-created digitally, so what started as a simple finishing job turned into something much more substantial.



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Starting with the original background footage, which was shot on 35mm and transferred to 2K DPX files, our solution was to derive four 3D tracking solutions (one for each sign) for the whole scene in Flare and attach a simple 3D object created in Softimage to the four overpasses. We then created the sign composites using a combination of stills shot with a digital SLR and HD video captured with a prosumer Sony HD camera to obtain the flapping motion made by the wind on the edges of the sheet. Those signs were then projected onto our 3D objects, completing the illusion of a piece of fabric draped over an overpass.

Efficiencies in workflow

Integration between Flare and Flame is absolutely seamless. All our tracking and garbage masking was done in Flare, and then renders were taken out of Flare and imported back into Flame for compositing and color correction. Our spot featured 24 seconds of uninterrupted 2K video, so stringing all the signs together and hitting render would have taken 26 hours per go. So we broke the process down, working on each sign separately. We'd load the setup on Flare, kick off a render, and then start working on the next sign in the sequence.

From a pure efficiency perspective, this was a great workflow. We didn't need to clog up the Flame system with rendering tasks, nor were we spewing footage into other parts of the facility, thus polluting other framestores as tends to happen when you get other Flames involved in a project that should be living on one system. This can cause organizational nightmares if you're not constantly moving files back to the master station every day. With Flare, I simply launched from my Flame's framestore and rendered back to it without worrying about where the footage was going.

Adding Flare to our post workflow on this project not only helped us improve efficiencies, it provides our junior Flame artists with a valuable career-advancing opportunity because they're learning an industry-standard tool.

The bottom line

Flare is one of those systems that, in the short term, makes it possible to get assistant work done more affordably, efficiently, and easily. In the long term, it enables you to redesign your facility in ways you may never have imagined. The floating license unchained from hardware lets you do more than you could by wheeling a Flame into a bay. The freedom this affords is pretty exciting.

Kirk Balden is a VFX supervisor and senior Flame artist at Smoke & Mirrors' New York outpost. He has been a Flame and Smoke artist since 1998. Smoke & Mirrors is a visual effects and postproduction company servicing advertising, film, and music video projects.

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