VOLT STUDIOS
(www.voltstudios.tv)
Minneapolis, Minesota

Autodesk® Smoke®
Autodesk® Flame®
Autodesk® Maya®

Editing To Perfection

How Autodesk Smoke Benefits a Workflow that includes Autodesk Flame and Autodesk Maya

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>
> —Charlie Lach
> Executive Producer
> Volt Studios

Image courtesy of Volt Studios.

Summary

Successful national spots can reinforce brand image, increase sales, and expand market share, so it's not uncommon for every second of a high-end spot to be scrutinized, modified, or enhanced to boost its impact and appeal. With only 30 or 60 seconds to sway our buying habits and viewpoints, it's no wonder that advertisers and ad agencies strive for perfection in every frame.

This is the creative but pressure-filled world that Volt Studios is steeped in. As a prestigious commercial post house in leading ad market Minneapolis, MN, Volt Studios meets stiff client demands and expectations by leveraging its Autodesk workflow, including two seats of Autodesk® Smoke® editorial finishing software; Autodesk® Flame® software for visual effects compositing; and Autodesk® Maya® software for 3D and CG animation.

While all three tools have distinctive yet complementary strengths that make them an outstanding arsenal for tackling Volt Studios' huge volume of complex spots, Smoke is especially well-suited to this challenging work because it helps integrate the editing and effects tools that most spots need within a single toolset.

"I've been running Smoke for 12 years, and I personally couldn't imagine working on any other editing platform," said Steve Medin, Volt Studios' president and Smoke artist. "I've never wished for another tool or imagined needing another tool. Smoke is indispensable for the kind of editing and effects I need to do for high-end spots."

The Challenge

The artists at Volt Studios move from one creative challenge to another as they edit, enhance, and finish memorable ads for advertisers such as Tresemme, Subaru, Payless Shoesource, Toro Power Mowers, Harley Davidson, and others. With so much riding on the success of these ads, it comes as no surprise that much of what viewers see has been embellished and tweaked.

"The greatest challenge we face is just beautifying the film image until it's perfect. 90-percent of the work we do is completely undetectable to viewers," said Medin. "If we do our jobs well, no one can tell what we've done to an image, or that anything has been done to an image at all."

The reality is that much of the source footage Volt is given to work with often contains natural or production problems that detract from the image—like power poles on a scenic road; dirt, leaves and debris on a street; or production gear in shot—and these all have to be removed and the rest of the image fixed seamlessly.

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There are also instances where elements have to be added in order to complete shots, like placing signs, graffiti, or logos onto walls; or inserting backgrounds into green screen backdrops. Many of these fixes can be done equally well in Smoke and Flame.

"Car spots often require complicated fixes and effects. And car-makers often request last minute changes to the look of their vehicles, such as the type of tires, and reflections on the car body and windshield," said Randy Gackstetter, creative director and Flame artist for Volt Studios.

"On one Subaru spot, there was a large camera rig on the side of the street during filming which left an unsightly reflection on the car's sheet metal for approximately 60 frames," Gackstetter added. "We used Flame to remove that reflection and fix the painted surface well enough that no one would ever have suspected the glitch."

The Solutions
We live in a pretty fast-turnaround universe, and typically work with dozens of 2K or 1080/24p 4:4:4 HD resolution image layers," said Charlie Lach, executive producer of Volt Studios. "Aside from our Smoke, Flame and Maya pipeline, we haven't found any other solutions out there that can handle the heavy lifting and fast processing we need to get the job done in the tight timeframes we're given."

When commercial jobs arrive at Volt, those calling for heavy editing and versioning generally go to the two Smoke systems, while ones requiring heavy visual effects and compositing lean toward Flame, depending upon which workstation is available. With Flame, scenes can be treated with the help of 3D and multi-point tracking, bicubic distortion, dramatic 3D lighting effects, projection mapping, and compositing for virtually any visual effect envisioned for the spot.

Image courtesy of Volt Studios.

Flame and Smoke work closely together, and project ideas, Batch setups, scenes and media frequently transfer between the two over a high-speed Autodesk® Wire® (InfiniBand) network. Maya can support the visual effects pipeline by being used to help create 3D animated assets.

Since much of their toolsets overlap, 75-percent of Volt's spots can be posted in either Smoke or Flame. "But, it's advantageous to have all three in-house because each has its own strengths. So, when all three are contributing to the Autodesk workflow, there's virtually nothing we can't do. Our clients don't always know what equipment we're using, and frankly, they're simply trusting that when they hand us a job, we'll have a facility capable of handling their creative mission."

The Results
"When we get a call on a job, if we're given sufficient time to work with, there's virtually nothing we can't do with Smoke, Flame, and Maya," Lach said.

"It's a real tribute to these Autodesk tools that they seem to vanish into the background while letting artists work in an unfettered way to realize their creative visions," said Lach. "Our Autodesk software is pivotal for the commercial work we do, and paramount to the success of our customer-driven business."
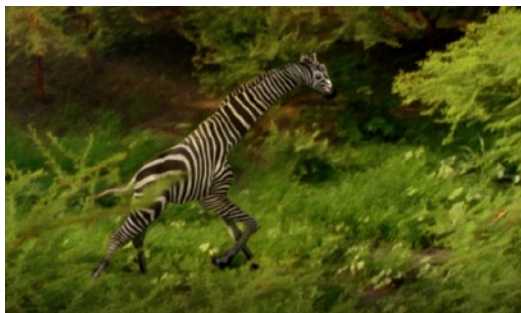

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