Brickyard VFX

By Kara Misenheimer

Brickyard VFX goes the distance in HD with Autodesk Solutions.

Producing seamless composites and effects that help advertising agencies and production companies realize creative ideas is the order of the business at Brickyard VFX. Founded in 1999, the Boston- and Santa Monica-based visual effects studio has steadily built a reputation of excellence, whether it's turning a city into a sports nirvana for Mobile ESPN or dropping a menagerie of zoo animals into a barnyard for Budweiser.

A boom of work in high-definition and CG-intensive animation—including simultaneous production of Super Bowl XL and 2006 Winter Olympics commercial advertising campaigns—has seen Brickyard raising its profile and expanding its artistic team and tools. Brickyard VFX has owned solutions from Autodesk Media & Entertainment since its inception and now boasts seven Discreet® Flame® systems, a Discreet® Smoke® system, multiple Autodesk® Combustion® software licenses, and Autodesk® Maya® 3D software between its two headquarters.

"We do all of our color correction in Flame. We also use it absolutely every day for 2D tracking," says Geoff McAuliffe, Lead VFX Artist, Brickyard VFX.

The extensive features of Discreet Flame came in handy when Brickyard was tapped to complete effects end to end for the Super Bowl campaign "Sports Heaven" for Mobile ESPN. The spots, shot on 35mm film and transferred to HDcam SR, were finished in HD. The spots were laden with invisible alterations to live-action footage to create a world in which contenders— from top athletes to Indy car drivers to the 2005 Spelling Bee champion— appear at every turn.

Discreet Flame provided the power to make changes to picture, replace elements, and very selectively color-correct tons of details that could not be tweaked during telecine. Brickyard's Flame systems also delivered the

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features needed for super-nuanced work, such as creating garbage mattes and masking people out of frame. The huge final sequence in "Sports Heaven" is a good example of how Brickyard VFX maximized Autodesk technology to pull out all the stops, even in HD resolution—from adding marathon runners shot on green screen and painting out logos to rebuilding the skyline, re-lighting the scene, and sending CG jets and fireworks over the scene.

"In the commercials world, there's a lot of money behind each ad and pressure all the way down the chain to deliver the best quality work. Autodesk's deep toolset enables me to perfect things the way the agency demands," explains Mandy Sorenson, Compositing Artist, Brickyard VFX. "It's also critical to view and present our work in the proper resolution, such as HD."

Sorenson praises a number of indispensable features in Flame, including resolution independence for SD, HD, or 2K to efficiently deal with any size file and the Divide action, which lets Brickyard artists get a clean edge to isolate CG elements. She also notes the usefulness of bringing in and manipulating layers from Adobe® Photoshop®, the Distort tool for quick and easy warping, and using Batch in Flame to keep track of all processes.

"Considering how much we are now doing in HD and film, Batch in Flame saves us time and creative cycles because we don't have to pre-render most of our elements," she says.

Bringing It Together with Smoke HD

Brickyard VFX's workflow allows its two locations to collaborate closely using a file archive system, saving work, sending it to FTP, and pulling in IFF files as needed. The studio's Discreet Smoke HD system often serves as the hub for conforming, editing, and organizing material.

"Our Discreet Smoke HD system is frequently the central hub of a project," states George Fitz, who mans Brickyard's Smoke HD workstation. "We like the timeline interface for keeping all of our elements, doing the main conform, editing, and doling out shots to our Flame artists. Its HD resolution capabilities are essential, especially since we're seeing nothing but HD productions these days."

Modeling and Animating the Whole World with Maya

Brickyard VFX delivered four jobs in HD, including the Super Bowl Mobile ESPN ads, and the Winter Olympics campaign (a series of spots for AT&T), in the same month. In addition to extensive compositing and effects, these commercials required heavy CG, created by Brickyard VFX's new dedicated 3D animation division using Autodesk Maya.

Maya was used for modeling, animation, texturing, and lighting setups by Brickyard's Robert Sethi and Yafei Wu, who would supply grayscale models or rendered elements that could be roughed in for placement and client approval in Flame.

"Maya is the backbone of our CG pipeline," Sethi says. "We love it for the ability to customize and write our own tools. It provides all the openness and flexibility we need to create things ourselves."

On the recent HD jobs at Brickyard, those "things" have had the team fielding the creation of digital uniforms, baseballs, cars, airplanes, and even a city-park-sized Heisman Trophy one minute and then producing cities, mountains, and ski lifts the next.

"We've had just an incredible volume of CG work on top of our compositing and finishing. Having the right technologies and artists in place has made it possible for us to handle this high volume of work and multiple projects simultaneously," notes Yafei Wu, co-head of 3D at Brickyard VFX. "There's great collaboration within the Brickyard VFX team and we can imagine that helping bring new synergies and interoperability to our 2D and 3D processes is something that companies like Autodesk will be building on for a long time."

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