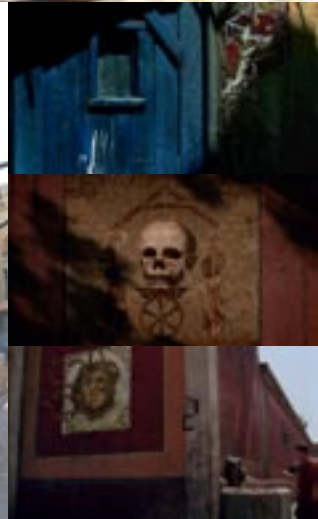


A52's Creativity Sizzles with Discreet® Flame® and Autodesk® Burn®.

By Claudia Kienzie



HBO's "Rome". Images courtesy of A52.

With viewer expectations and client demands at an all-time high, there's nothing more disconcerting than the pressure to fill the screen with fabulous, innovative visual effects. With Discreet® Flame® effects systems software, "The speed with which our ideas can be developed, produced, and rendered is the key to making our deadlines and staying competitive," says Pat Murphy, A52's visual effects supervisor.

Invaluable Toolbox

At A52, two Flame and two Discreet® Inferno® workstations are supported by Autodesk® Backdraft® and Autodesk® Stone® and Wire® software products, which foster a powerful creative collaborative environment.

"Flame has intuitive, organic tools that promote experimentation so that we can quickly develop the most compelling visual imagery possible for our clients. At the hub of Flame software, the Batch module offers the freedom to experiment with all kinds of Flame tools at once—color correction, effects, 3D tracking, keying, and more—with incomparable speed and interactivity," says Kirk Balden, one of A52's lead Flame artists.

For a 90-second program open for "Rome," the HBO and BBC co-production that premiered this Fall as an HBO original series, Balden pushed the creative envelope to visually transport viewers back to the days of Julius Caesar and the myths and mystique of ancient Rome.

Credible Effects

In the Action module, "Flame has a really phenomenal 3D tracker that enabled us to track our CG elements with the live action camera move," says Balden. "3D tracking played a critical role in the creation of the 'Rome' open."

Autodesk®



Nike's "Kid Tiger". Images courtesy of A52.

Throughout the open, a live action camera dollies in a continuous move giving viewers a glimpse of life on the streets of ancient Rome—a woman carrying a basin, a man and a boy walking through pillars, and friezes carved into the walls. A52 used the Flame 3D tracking tool for precision tracking of that live camera move in order to position colorful, animated, CG stick figures so that they appear to be graffiti dancing on the walls.

"Each CG graffiti element had to stay lined up with a certain spot on the wall while maintaining proper reference to the live action camera as it passes by," says Balden. "The 3D tracker was a life-saver because it performed far more sophisticated and precise tracking than any 2D tracker ever could."

This montage also required extensive color correction on film that was transferred to HDSR, including applying dozens of "grime" layers to the stone walls and matching all of the colors in every shot and layer. "The interactivity of the powerful Flame color correction software enabled us to play with many different hues and looks quickly, and then apply the desired look created for one shot to another in an easy cut and paste fashion. Considering the massive amount of complex, multi-layered color correction we used on 'Rome,' these tools saved us considerable man-hours."

At times, the "Rome" open reached 30 layers of 12-bit 1080/24p HD resolution video. Balden and Murphy say they know of no competing brand of workstation capable of delivering comparable processing performance or such unlimited creative freedom over film resolution video.

Layered Workload

During the work on the "Rome" open, A52 also devoted its resources to several other high-end projects. "Kid Tiger," a 60-second Nike spot, featured 20-year old VHS home movies of golfer Tiger Wood transformed via A52's artistry to appear as though Woods was mowing the crowd at the British Open when he was only five years old.

"The integration of these 'home movies' presented many compositing challenges considering the very tight deadline," says Murphy. Young Tiger had to be isolated from the source footage and tracked into the composite shot, which required extensive artistic cleanup and finessing. Murphy removed other golfers and spectators who blocked the view of Tiger; as well as added stands of crowds and other plates to make the scenes work properly. "During the compositing, we added some grain and other enhancements to give the finished product the visual quality of home movies and laid it back off to VHS."

Another project, "Speed of Sound," created aesthetic lighting and color effects for Coldplay's new music video, which was nominated in the Special Effects category of this year's MTV Video Music Awards. And for a Honda Civic "Keyhole" spot, Murphy says, "We took Action set-ups for color correction done for one group of layers and applied them to others to save time. With 150 layers of CG, this capability greatly streamlined an otherwise labor-intensive process."

"Flame keeps us on the cutting edge of creativity and design," says Balden, "which distinguishes us from other visual effects companies."