



SCRATCH Plays Well with *The Ant Bully*

Following on the success of Oscar® nominated "The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron, Boy Genius" and Emmy® nominated "Olive, the Other Reindeer," DNA Productions' animation genius shines again in "Ant Bully", a new animated feature film developed in conjunction with Tom Hank's and Gary Goetzman's Playtone and Warner Bros. ASSIMILATE's SCRATCH™ Digital Workflow Solution took on this animation bully as the post-production platform of choice for the film.

DNA Productions located in Dallas, TX is a small, multi-talented animation house that's made a big name for itself in the entertainment industry, turning out several animation hits on tight budgets since its founding in 1989 by John A. Davis and Keith Alcorn. Their most recent project, "The Ant Bully", follows the same principles they apply to every project - superior creative content and animation within the confines of limited time and budget.

With nearly 100 percent of the animation for "The Ant Bully" was done at DNA's Texas facility. DNA also set up a post-production team in the same facility that included Lee Supercinski as the Unit Production Manager. Lee's animation credits include producer of *Futurama*, now a FOX animated series; post production for *Game Over*, a UPN animated series; and post production for *Spawn*, the HBO animated series. According to Supercinski "The Ant Bully" project team, which also included Jim Eberle as the digital color grader and Ian Megibben as the head of lighting, lived and breathed "The Ant Bully" for nearly three years in Dallas. During those intensive years, Supercinski also made several trips to talent sites for the voice recordings.

Supercinski's responsibilities included overseeing the post production for "The Ant Bully". As production moved forward, he and his team were immediately in need of a stable, high-performance finishing system that could also be used for full-resolution review in a highly accurate color space at their facility. And true to the DNA business model, meeting the constraints of a tight budget was part of the requirements lists. The team did their research for available DI systems and took time for a thorough demo of SCRATCH while at NAB 05. Supercinski says, "When we compared SCRATCH to other available DI platforms, SCRATCH seemed capable of all the color grading work that the higher priced systems had to offer, yet it was less



Warner Bros. *The Ant Bully*: Used SCRATCH for color management.

than half the price. It also offered a full data pipeline for imaging projects and included other editing tools that we knew would prove useful to the project. Bottom line, this is incredible price/performance value."

SCRATCH at Work

"We used SCRATCH for color grading and conform of the thousands of files for the project, both theatrical and IMAX releases," says Supercinski. "The editors used Avid for the offline cut, and then created the EDL files that were converted into XML files to be read by SCRATCH. We also pulled the frames from the server to match the edit that had been done on the AVID. ASSIMILATE™ needed to tweak SCRATCH for a few aspects of conform, but then we were hitting the project hard again. Lucas Wilson and Leo Lovera of ASSIMILATE immediately stepped in to troubleshoot and get us quickly past this issue."

With respect to saving time and increasing speed of productivity, Supercinski notes that, "We had a tight timeline

for 'The Ant Bully.' SCRATCH helped us save time with the quick set up of the system and the fast loading of the files. The data management function was incredibly useful since we were working with somewhere in the ballpark of 115,000 frames for the theatrical release and 230,000 frames for the IMAX release. The real-time 2k playback and review process was also fast. The color grading was excellent - killer for the price tag -- and we were able to quickly move through the process."



Warner Bros. The Ant Bully: Used SCRATCH for color management.

"Using SCRATCH, we did the viewing of final lit shots that were accurately color calibrated using our proprietary LUTs," says Supercinski. "SCRATCH gave us the ability to see high-resolution final images in real-time 2K using a Digital Projection projector. The images matched what we were getting back from the lab on 35mm film...it was quite impressive. SCRATCH is now integrated into DNA's production workflow to be the final system used for evaluating and approving final lit shots of films."

Color Grading for Theatrical and IMAX Releases

Jim Eberle has done color grading for numerous commercials and welcomed the challenge of his first full-animation feature. SCRATCH was a new DI tool for Eberle, who has used Smoke and Flame for projects. Eberle notes how the SCRATCH manual clearly defined the product and how to use it. "I received the SCRATCH manual via email, and within three days I was flying; in three weeks I was singing. SCRATCH is amazingly intuitive to work with."

Eberle says that the color grading process was straightforward. "Once the AVID EDL files were converted to XML files for SCRATCH to read, we were good to go," says Eberle. "The files were put into the SCRATCH CONstruct mode to display the sequences." He notes that, "All our work had to line up to the final EDLs. In some cases, a final approved shot might not be rendered out at final resolution, or missing handles.

To ensure a precise reference point for future outputs and reviews, I created an exact jpeg sequence for each EDL sequence, including credits. I would then check our cut to the jpeg sequences to verify proper timing and sync."

Eberle explains his approach to color for this project, "Throughout the entire color grading process, I worked to achieve the director's, John Davis, vision of the look and feel for the film. The color shading and nuances contributed to depicting the range of moods such as eerie, ominous, awe, adventurous, or triumphant that John wanted to impart. Because SCRATCH enabled us to work in real time for the color reviews in the 2K DLP projection suite, John was able to direct tweaks or significant changes to impart a particular look and see immediate results. The process could be intense but it was very rewarding since we knew we were achieving the same look and feel the audiences would see on the big screen."

Eberle used the dual view on his workstation, one for the AVID reference cut and the SCRATCH timeline at 2K resolution. "SCRATCH was good at letting me color grade, copy to like scenes, and easily match up to the dual color view. It does the split and copy functions really well," says Eberle. "SCRATCH SCAFFOLDS would let me isolate and track a specific area, adjusting only that element of the shot. The color grading stacks in SCRATCH truly highlight the power and flexibility of the software, quickly bringing the desired vision to life."

"Once I had the sign-off for the theatrical release at roughly 115,000 frames, I copied the color set-ups and scaffolds to our second workstation to create the IMAX version," says Eberle. "Using SCRATCH, I then did the offsets for the left eye, right eye, overview, and final trim that would go into the IMAX release. The end result was approximately 230,000 frames for the IMAX version...a lot of work, but very rewarding."

Eberle says that, "Because this was such a positive color grading experience, I plan to steer my career to full-time DI. The ability to see your work and do the color adjustments in real time is an incredible thrill."

Final Results

"Because we were working in real-time 2K, all the review sessions for the directors were able to take place in the DNA facility. It was a very smooth process," says Supercinski. "We then moved on to final output to film using SCRATCH. The resolution independence of SCRATCH is another key benefit of the system. With digital files as input and the output to 35mm film, the production process is so much faster and smoother than the days of old. 'The Ant Bully' was my first animated full-feature film and I was fortunate because SCRATCH helped make the whole process a very good experience."