

Taking It To The Desktop -- High-End Technology Closing The Gap Between The Quality Of Hollywood, Home Movies

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Press "play" and the screen before your eyes explodes with images - tumbling toward you, sliding by you, blossoming from one thing into another. Graphics are flying by, cartoons are replaced by actors. A palette of fluorescent colors suddenly becomes a face which, after winking at you, vanishes inside of a flower.

What are you seeing? One: a low-fi, digitally made mini-film. Two: a commentary on pop culture. Three: a wholly reconfigured universe, made by two close friends and a set of computers.

Matthew Clark and Mason Nicoll started making films at college, which for them was the Rhode Island School of Design. Then, in 1994, Clark landed a job at Microsoft. Nicoll, a Tacoma native, soon joined him in Redmond. Here, outside working hours, they nursed a pair of addictions.

One was for something called a Video Vision board - a product that, plugged into a Macintosh, acts like a high-end Hollywood editing suite. The pair's other fascination was for public-access television, which they decried as alternately comic and gross. "Some of those shows were incredibly funny. We decided we'd try a show of our own," says Clark.

They baptized the project "Live Nude Girls" and applied for a Tele-Communications Inc. (TCI) time slot. Says Nicoll: "We developed a different theme for each show. It was a nonlinear collage, on subjects like 'Star Wars,' custom cars, kung fu, 'The Simpsons.' "

Nicoll was part of the Microsoft Network team; Clark worked in The Blender, Microsoft's multimedia complex. Once they were assigned a place on public access, "Live Nude Girls" began to dominate their lives. To fulfill TCI's broadcast agreement, they made a program every 14 days.

Says Nicoll: "We'd put in a 10-hour Microsoft day. Then we'd meet at The Blender some time around seven. Then we'd work on 'Live Nude Girls' until around two in the morning." Every time they chose a new idea, the pair hit Scarecrow Video. There, they would make a beeline to the appropriate section and, as Clark puts it, "rent, rent, rent." They would capture appropriate images, annotate their chosen footage, scan in additional ammo, then start assembling the graphics.

The basic "Live Nude Girls" was made with two software packages: Adobe Premiere and Adobe After Effects. Animation was done in Softimage 3-D. Each piece was then completed in a "straight 24 hours," using a Flame supercomputer system that belonged to Microsoft. (The Flame is usually the province of blockbuster special-effects teams.) It enabled Clark and Nicoll to meet their broadcast deadlines.

Clark and Nicoll's six-month saga of all-nighters had unexpected returns. Although each show had a different look and aesthetic, the series as a whole won quite a spectrum of fans. During one show, Clark and Nicoll got 60 phone calls - and a commission from The Center on Contemporary Art. MTV was proudly given a tape of "John Woo versus Jackie Chan" by Chan's own publicist. And ID Magazine presented the pair with a Design Distinction award.

Last month, Clark and Nicoll started a company of their own. Called Houston, it handles graphics, multimedia publishing and Web design. Yet the pair retain a fascination for public access. Says Clark: "Eventually, we want a national show, syndicated on public-access stations. We know if you do-it-yourself, it's all possible."

Hollywood in the home

Independent digital film - low-fi film made by Mac or PC - does genuinely expand the possibilities. If low-fi film in general is Seattle's new grunge, then garage bandwidth has replaced the garage band.

Sometimes, like Nicoll and Clark, its producers have some access to pricey equipment. But more frequently, they're doing more for less.

At the moment, "less" remains a relative term. It takes around \$12,000 to set up a "desktop studio" - including the high-end computer that can house and power it. But the gap between Hollywood budgets and homemade movies is closing.

You can now buy more than a dozen different kinds of digital video camcorders. And, with aids like Firewire cable, shots are easily moved from camera to computer. Once there, a user can edit, composite and manipulate - with a new and expanding range of desktop tools. Instead of basking in the high resolution of film stock, digi-filmmakers scan, alter, tune and texture to create impact.

"All you need to know," says Clark, "is what equipment to look for. Then you need to know how those things work together." Low resolution, high ambitions

But not everybody knows what to look for. Especially if they cannot access - or cannot afford - the knowledge. Multimedia teacher Luversa Sullivan knows this, and it altered the way she approaches high technology.

Sullivan moved to Seattle in 1980; initially, she worked for Honeywell Marine Systems. "That," she says, "was how I got so strong in multimedia. They were buying these different systems and I was transferring data between them."

By 1988, Sullivan was teaching in high schools - and at Rainier Beach, she says she noticed an absence. "Two groups were missing from the whole multimedia world. There were no women and there were no people of color."

In 1993, with "some like-minded minority women," Sullivan co-founded the Women's Community Impact Consortium. WCIC was aimed at reaching at-risk youth through digital filmmaking and multimedia training. Sullivan's first projects were staged after school and on the weekends, under the name Developing Capable Youth Leaders (DCYL). In five years, DCYL has had 500 "graduates" - 50 of whom still work at sites such as Nintendo, Asymetrix, Starwave and Microsoft.

A year ago, Sullivan established a school of her own: The Institute of Electronic Design. Currently housed in a West Seattle storefront, it was wired together by its core of 14 students. The school meets every Saturday, and two weekday evenings, and is populated by word-of-mouth.

"Most of the kids," says Sullivan, "have some kind of a problem. But others come just because they love computers."

Digital video editing is the first skill Sullivan's students learn.

"They work with Premiere right away. We make Quicktimes, we make CD-ROMs and we use real video on our Web site." Lately, the institute's partnerships have grown. In May, US West will send Sullivan and a colleague to Ghana. There, they will make a presentation on "distance learning."

Building a better desktop

Sullivan has taught at a spectrum of local sites. And some of her ex-students can be found in interesting places - such as the inner sanctum of Adobe Systems. Here, as product marketing manager for After Effects, Erica Schisler inhabits a fast-moving, cutting-edge world.

"But without Luversa," she smiles, "I probably wouldn't have gotten this job. She taught me Hypercard and Director. She's the first person I studied Adobe Premiere under. I saved all my class notebooks, all my notes."

Schisler, who studied optical printing at Evergreen College, wanted a job at what was then CoSa, later Aldus and - finally - Adobe. "I read all the company press releases, went through them all with a highlighter. I marked every word I didn't understand." She took the mystery vocabulary to Sullivan's classes; today, explaining it to others is her job.

Schisler works around two of desktop filmmaking's most popular tools: Adobe Premiere and Adobe After Effects. Both complement the monolith that is Photoshop, by dealing with moving rather than static imagery. They also help spur change in homemade, as well as high-end, film. After Effects can mimic many tactics used by the giant studios - effects houses such as Digital Domain or Industrial Light & Magic. But increasingly, they are being used inside these studios, as well as in the homes of their employees.

Dan Wilks, the engineering manager for After Effects, was part of CoSA back in 1990 (After Effects debuted in '92). Wilks is not surprised by the age range of his product's fan club, which embraces both professionals and their children.

"Kids understand digital grammar intuitively; they have absorbed it from gaming and from television. Kids perceive boundaries far, far less than adults."

Digital data - imagery, sound or text - is stored as a sequence of numbers. It can be manipulated in manifold ways by any computer. With After Effects, users see what happens numerically - Wilks describes it as "a spreadsheet for images."

Such descriptions seem dry, however, when one views the results. For desktop filmmaking tools buy flexibility. Says Schisler: "People think a digital filmmaker works alone; they envision a single person and a lone computer. Well, you can do that - or you can work with a hundred people. What it really means is your creativity's freer. It's less subject to a budget or a cultural gatekeeper." True enough. High-tech firms

are filled with employees nursing special projects after hours. Wilks, for instance, has just finished the digital edit of a full-length movie. Called "The Fourth Horseman," it was made by William Jackson, who is a high-school friend from Oklahoma.

Jackson says he started out, "on the typical film-maker's path. I moved to L.A. after film school, I wrote some TV shows, I got an agent and found out I hated it." When it came to the script he really cherished, Jackson shot it in Oklahoma. He used 16mm, transferred that to video, then started mailing his efforts to Seattle. "Once Dan compressed it onto CD-ROMs, we could send them back and forth. It was really easy."

Instead of edit-suite arguments about the structure, Jackson and Wilks battled via CD-ROM. And the result? An 89-minute movie, one that used digital tools for economy, not for effects.

Discovering a digital voice

A fascinating aspect of low-fi's digital kingdom is the spectrum of personalities it attracts. The medium intrigues curious minds that always cross boundaries - and it attracts artists such as Mark O'Connell. O'Connell has college degrees in philosophy and photography; for 20 years, he was mainly a musician. Born here, he has worked in Boston and Los Angeles. What drew him back to Seattle was its digital buzz.

Now, in a home office that resembles a Boeing cockpit, O'Connell creates award-winning digital art shorts. Although many see these tools as props for other media, he is hoping to distill a new vocabulary. He does it by making mini-films that are both poetic and popular.

O'Connell shorts with names such as "Love Street" or "Beach" are also acclaimed abroad - shown in Germany, Scotland, France and Switzerland. Before Christmas, he was chosen by the Henry Gallery as one of several Digital Artists in Residence. O'Connell jumped ship over "artistic differences" - but was recently recognized by the Seattle Art Commission, who awarded him a grant of \$7,500.

O'Connell's work marries stills, film, video, music, and voiceover. But he sees such digital work as an infant art.

"There's no history, no real tradition. Digital film is wide open, it's like the old Wild West. Anyone can walk in now and play a part in its definition."

Like many low-fi types, O'Connell is a casual guy. He teaches classes in Premiere and digital editing; he edits Hollywood projects - but he's also worked as a janitor. He likes variety, and stereotypes don't bother him.

"I'm not a nerd, you know, I don't really like computers. I would never even use one to write a letter. But treating moving imagery? I had to get in on it."

With an artist's sense of color, audio and timing, O'Connell's work poses this moment's central question, which is: Can desktop digital film find a "voice" of its own? For every innovative filmmaker like him, trying to hear the new technology speak, there is a product such as FilmDamage. That's the After Effects' plug-

in that guarantees to add "realistic dust, hair, dirt, scratches and stains to create that authentic look of film."

Low-fi filmmakers know this battle is looming. After all, who will dictate what is "authentic"? Says Houston's Matthew Clark: "Just look at the animation on 'South Park.' Initially that was done with construction paper! It costs nothing, yet it shows what matters - storytelling.

"Today, however, that's rarely how it works. You might see something like that, something actually fresh. But, before long, you'll see it again and again. Only, this time, someone's spending loads of money on it. Pouring millions into it, to just make it look rough and low-budget."

Mark O'Connell says he worries most about copyright law; so much of the low-fi realm is based on digital sampling. After all, if you can't afford a digital camera, there are "found images": screen grabs and bootlegged files. However, many of these images have owners. On March 4, the House Judiciary Committee backed a new extension of copyright protection. (If the extension passes, it would extend the current protection era two decades.)

O'Connell sees such moves as serious problems.

"Electronic media shapes our lives in a million ways. But we're not allowed to use the media to comment on it. You can only do that if you license the rights to do so. Which, to me, is not very democratic."

Restrictions preoccupy O'Connell and his ilk, because they feel innovation lies with the low-fi player.

"Face it, the next generation is gonna be different. Today, most kids play in a band, they've played with video cameras. They grew up with video games and watched a lot of TV. Instead of pressing vinyl records, they're gonna burn DVDs."

As he speaks, images flicker across O'Connell's TV monitor. Clouds become waves, then dissolve into dancers, then transmute into voices. As he suggests, it's like an old Fellini film - moving you gently from one reality to another. But the difference?

"This time, you don't set it all up, then direct it. Little things do something for you, they emit a resonance. But it's up to you to say, 'These things go together.' Then, it's up to you to answer the bigger question - how?"

----- For more information -----

-- For information on Adobe After Effects, call 800-685-3504; for Adobe Premiere, 888-724-4507 or <http://www.adobe.com>

Mark O'Connell's "Boy Runs to Window" is featured in the Portland Art Museum's Northwest Film & Video Festival: Nov. 5-12; Northwest Film Center, 1219 SW Park Ave, Portland, Ore. 97205; 503-221-1156.

-- Franklin Joyce, one of the Seattle Independent Film and Video Consortium founders, will show "And the Universe Expands From Bang," April 25 at 911 Media Arts Video Shorts 17; he and sculptor Gerry

Tsutakawa are also two of three visual art/digital art partnerships in the Henry Gallery's 'Digital Artist in Residence' program, which opens July 16.

-- The Institute of Electronic Design may be contacted at 206-932-2331, by fax at 206-932-2650 and on the Web at: <http://www.rainier.net/ied>