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Networking & Storage page 104

The High-Speed Market Grows Up

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Digital video editor David Leathers takes After Effects v. 4.1 for a test run on a recent project.

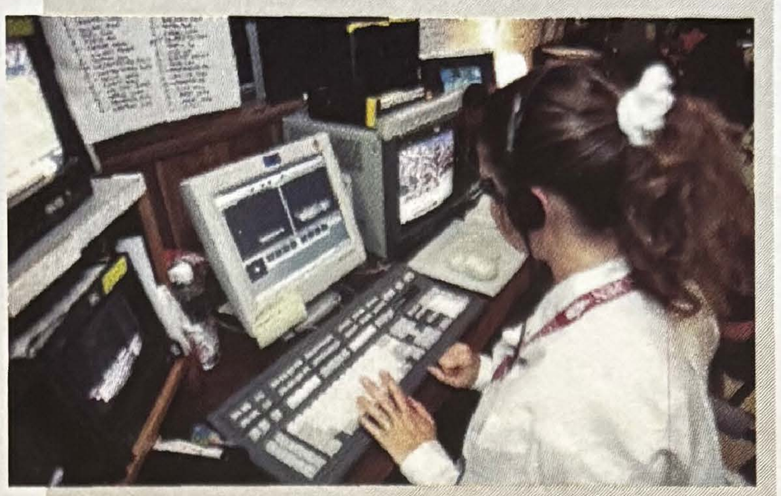
Exclusive Hands-On Review

Power Effects

After Effects 4.1 Supercharges Post

Pinnacle Generates Character for the U.S. Open

USA Network chose five FXDeko character generators and a Thunder MCS 4000 digital media server from Pinnacle Systems for its coverage of the U.S. Open



Pinnacle's FXDeko scores for USA Network at the U.S. Open.

tennis tournament, which was held in Flushing Meadows NY, from August 30 to September 12. The five FXDeko systems and the Thunder server were connected on a high-speed BroadNeT network, allowing for tight integration and file sharing among the systems.

"We had a great experience with the FXDeko systems we used earlier this year, for our coverage of the French Open," says Senior Producer Greg Picker of USA Network, who has been producing Grand Slam events like the U.S. Open and the French Open since 1995. "FXDeko provides more animation and transform capabilities than other CGs, and it's easy to import graphics from the Internet or other platforms. The system gives our artists a lot more flexibility, which allowed us to put more dynamic visuals on the air."

Pinnacle's Deko product line uses the open Windows NT platform to provide resolution-independent CG solutions with sophisticated font manipulation tools, including instant creation and resizing of characters, instantaneous font changes, and real-time effects capabilities. Standard features include real-time dissolves, wipes, pushes, rolls and crawls, downstream keyer, fit to fill, unlimited editable layers, touch-up paint capabilities, and BroadNeT connectivity with a wide range of platforms and technologies.

At IBC, in Amsterdam, Pinnacle announced "Rocket for FXDeko," a software option for the CG system that enhances on-air production with 3D elements.

Info: RS#031 or **www.pinnaclesys.com**

Tales of an Animation Road Warrior

Working By Remote Control

By George Avgerakis

Tony Johnson lives two lives. In Manhattan, he is a leading teacher of Softimage products at Future Media Concepts, a leading training facility for Avid, Media 100, NewTek's LightWave, Softimage, and other media related skills. In Sag Harbor, on the eastern tip of New York's Long Island, Johnson runs Hamiltoonz, his full-service animation production studio. Trouble is, Johnson's two lives are separated by a two-hour car ride.

"Faced with the problem of two career loves," explains Johnson, who, until recently, was one of only three people to be certified as both a Softimage 3D and DS instructor, "I chose to seek a technological solution."

Johnson went to IBM after seeing the 770X laptop at a trade show. "What I liked about the

Have IBM 770X Laptop, Will Travel: Tony Johnson runs Hamiltoonz, a thriving animation business, with his laptop running Softimage.

machine was that it was designed from the ground up to be infinitely configurable with a wide range of hardware options, most significantly a huge hard drive and lots of RAM." Johnson's idea was to build a laptop on which he could control all of the functions of his Sag Harbor studio—from his Manhattan classroom.

"My animation business began taking off a few years ago, but I didn't want to give up teaching," he relates. "Since my teaching job is located in Manhattan, I needed a way I could remotely operate my Sag Harbor studio. If I could achieve this goal, I could turn the idle time in Manhattan into productive time in Sag Harbor and literally be in two places at once. In Manhattan, I have lots of opportunities outside of the class time, and often, students will want to see—during class—what kinds of things a professionally employed animator can do. Consequently, my teaching could also improve while my business improved."

Configuring His Own Dream Laptop

Johnson began by sketching out the configuration of his "dream" laptop. Requiring the highest resolution screen, he chose the 770X with a resolution of 1280 x 1024, which, on the generous 15-inch wide display, offers rich detail and sufficient real estate to operate complex interfaces like Johnson's favorite animation program, Softimage.

"Next, I chose the 300 MHz Pentium II processor, the highest spec CPU available at the time, and I asked IBM to pack 320 megs of RAM into the box." Still, Tony Johnson was not satisfied. "It was like I kept asking, 'Can I have this? Can I have that?' And the IBM guys kept replying, 'Yeah. Sure, why not?'" So Johnson went for a 100BaseT network adapter and capped off the entire package with software, like PC Anywhere, that lets him control his office computers from his laptop over a simple "twisted pair" telephone connection.

"Now I was really ready to be an animation road warrior." Johnson cracks an engaging smile, revealing the charm that won him coveted demo presenter jobs at several NAB and SIGGRAPH shows over the past several years.

Starting with the Client

Johnson's reputation as a leading Softimage creator is supported by the high-tech image he establishes the moment he walks in the client's door.

"My animation production pattern is kind of cyclical," he explains. "Normally, I'll begin work with a client at the client's location, examining storyboards, making suggestions, tweaking the design, and establishing a fee structure for the work. Now that I have the IBM 770, I can actually begin the work right before the client's eyes. The client may have called the meeting to explore the possibility of a bid, but when he sees his dreams forming before his eyes and we haven't yet talked money, well, you can imagine the effect."

The effect Johnson refers to has been felt on a wide range of clients, from NASA and the International Space Development presentations, to producers for *NOVA* (in association with The Animation Cafe), Fox TV, Cinevista, and the Sci-Fi Channel. Even Johnson's origins testify to a highly technical skill. He began in the animation field by creating realistic "fly throughs" of building designs so that architects could take their clients from blueprints to reality before the plans were finalized.

"I have this idea for a show reel that I want to do that will explain everything," Johnson muses. "It's built around one scene, say for instance, an alien walks onto the flight deck of the Starship *Enterprise*. We see a title, 'Lowest Cost Version,' and the alien walks in. He looks good, the humans greet him. Fine. Then another title, 'Middle Cost Version.' This time the alien comes in and he casts a shadow on the wall. Last version, titles says, 'Highest Cost Version.' Now a puff of steam accompanies the alien through the door, and the twirling red warning light on the bridge creates pulsing flash reflections across the alien's slimy face. I need a demo reel like that to explain what I do and why it costs what it costs."

Johnson's hand makes a long sweeping motion, suggesting the passage of a long period of time, "Someday, I'll find the time to make it."

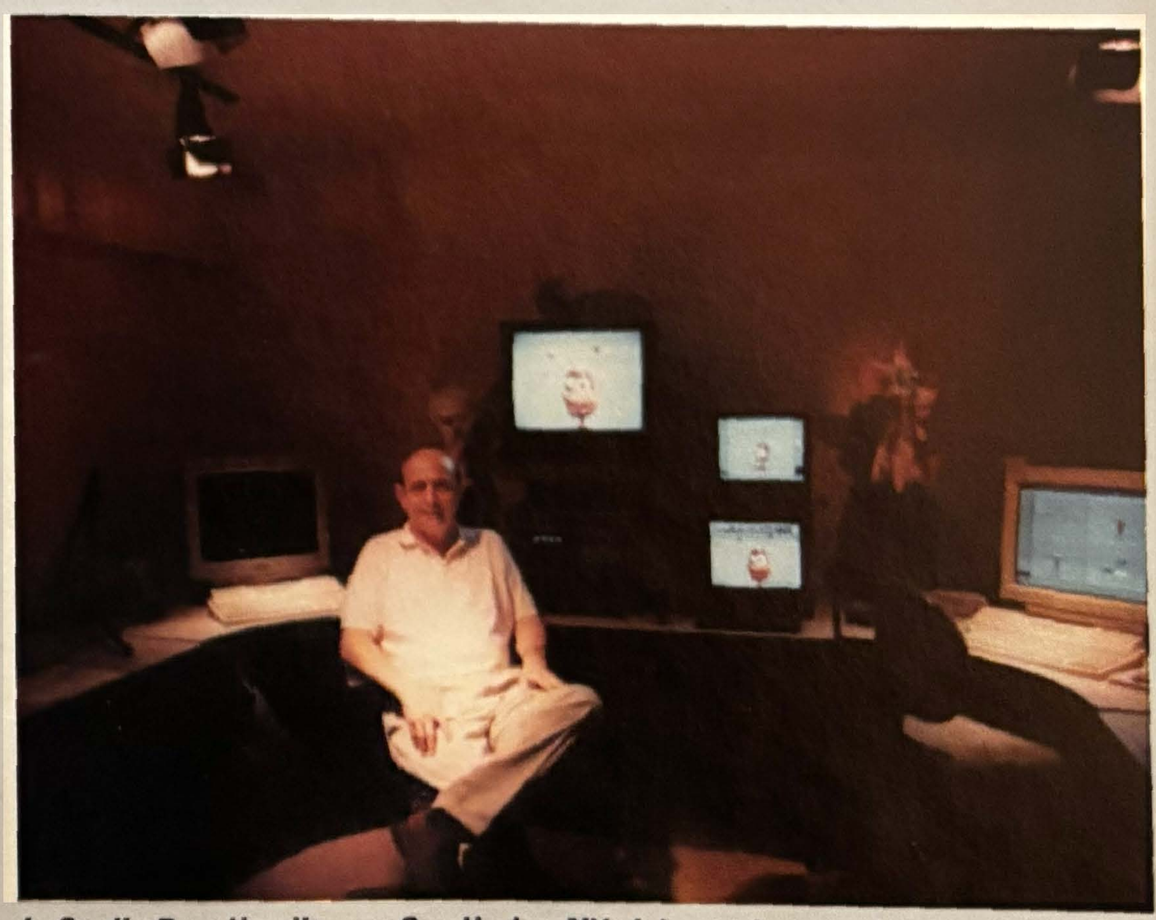
For now, Johnson is too busy in both careers. His Manhattan class at Future Media Concepts is full and there's a waiting list of new students, eager to enroll. His Sag Harbor studio has recently taken on a new assistant.

The Home Factory

"Unlike large animation plants," Johnson explains, "I have a low overhead and I make personal attention to the client the highlight of my relationship." Once the storyboard and fee is finalized, Johnson may work the preliminary scenes and objects on his laptop and then port the render-intensive parts of the project to his studio's render farm.

"The studio's configuration is always changing," says Johnson with a resigned shrug. "Right now, I have two great Intergraph computers, a 425 and a GL2 with dual 500 Pentium IIIs, equipped with the Wildcat graphics boards. I also have an SGI Indigo2 and an Accom digital disk recorder (DDR). Of course, all of the machines are net-

At Future Media Concepts, a training facility in New York City, Johnson instructs students in both Softimage 3D and DS.



In Studio B, at Hamiltoonz, Sag Harbor NY, Johnson has two Intergraphs—a 425 and a GL2—with dual 500 Pentium IIIs, equipped with Wildcat graphics boards.

worked together and can be controlled, remotely from the IBM 770, or the 770 can be joined into the network at the Sag Harbor studio, contributing another 300 MHz processor."

Once the client approves the price and storyboards, Johnson starts building the scene.

"Originally, I had thought that I would do the simple part of the work—the basic models, the environment, the motion paths—on the laptop and then do all the complex stuff at the studio along with the rendering. For that, I bought two programs for remote operation, the best of which was PC Anywhere. The idea is that I can run everything at the Sag Harbor studio remotely from anywhere on earth."

Therefore, Johnson can close a contract with a client in Boston, for instance, build the basic elements on the train to New York, download these elements to Sag Harbor from his pied-à-terre in midtown Manhattan, start a test render, go to class, start teaching, watch the images rendering frame by frame over the telephone connection during the class, tweak it during a break, finish it over a microwave dinner, and download a sample to his client by bed time!

"It actually works." Johnson exclaims, grinning, "Although the only serious snag is that over a telephone connection, the highest resolution pictures I can get online are 256 colors. That's okay for preliminary work, but when it gets to the serious stage, I have to do a regular download and that takes time."

Clients Satisfied

"Many of my clients are sophisticated enough to tie directly into the way I work and make the most of the fast turnaround," offers Johnson, mentioning one client who owns his own animation plant and subcontracts Hamiltoonz to do the most complex elements. "The client dials in to my server, goes to his private subdirectory, downloads the finished frames, and assembles them with a DPS Hollywood platform."

Other clients require the finished work on Betacam SP or digital tape. "For these guys, the loop is a little longer," he explains. "If I'm in Sag Harbor, I render the scene to tape there. If I'm in New York, I can download the frames to my IBM 770—it's got a large enough hard drive—and dump the files in any nearby online studio. Either way, the delay is only a few hours more than a direct download, from either location."

Surprise Results

As in most experiments, Johnson's results in attempting to build a remote control animation facility were not quite what he expected. Instead of ending up with a fully functional base operation and a remote control device, he found that his remote control device was suitable as a fully functional base station on the road!

"Once I had everything loaded on the IBM 770, I found that there was less and less need to interconnect to the Sag Harbor studio except for the brute force of the rendering farm and the convenience of the DDRs for viewing full resolution playback," Johnson recalls. "I purchased a license to run a full version of Softimage on the laptop and found that the IBM was completely capable—and really quite comfortable—to use as a complete workstation both in the Sag Harbor studio and on the road."

He doesn't balk at the weight of the 770 which, when fully loaded with Johnson's specified hardware, tends to yank a bit on the shoulder bag straps. "The weight is manageable and what I gain as a highly competitive, highly mobile, heavyweight animator is more than worth the extra pound or two. It 'BUFs' me up, you might say." ■