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Visual Effects in Italy: Videa Digital Effects

By Catherine Feeny

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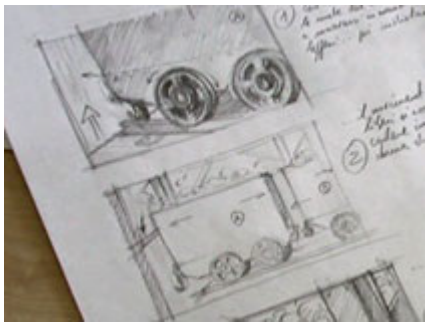
Visual effects supervisor Gianluca Dentici talks about Italian visual effects company Videa Digital Effects, and the state of the Italian film industry.

When did Videa Digital Effects open?
Videa Visual Effects was founded 12 years ago, at the exact time when the usage of digital technology was coming to the motion picture industry.

At first, our company worked on computer graphics for commercials. As the years went by and the technology evolved, new clients started to give greater attention to digital techniques. They began to understand the creative capabilities this technology offered them. That is why the company keeps growing.

Who founded the company?
Videa was built by Sergio Di Renzo, a video post-production expert, who is still the general manager of the company. The headquarters is located in Pescara (Abruzzo), the region where he was born. Thanks to the work coming from Italian productions, we have opened an office in Rome near Cinecittà studios.

Cinecittà is the most important studio in italy, and nearby there are printing labs and post-production facilities (telecine, film scanning, film recording, digital intermediate process etc.)



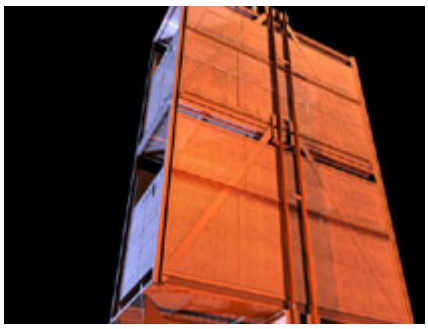
How many employees does the company have now?
We have nearly 20 employees and we plan to continue expanding as the demand for our work grows.

What are the components that make up Videa?
We are divided into several departments. The first is the art department, where we have two people working on concept and storyboarding. There is also a 3D department and a compositing one.

Recently we started a special collaboration with Tor Vergata University of Rome. The target is to create an R&D team for developing tools and software solutions for our visual effects needs. I'm very happy about it, because we will be the first Italian company to have an R&D department with University contribution.

The focus is on developing and enhancing tools that are already inside software packages -- creating add-ons and plugins. I also hope to realize one of my personal goals, which is to program a crowd-simulation software. The others already on the market are much too expensive for companies like Videa, who use them very occasionally.

We have four stations for editing (two Avid and two Speed Razor) avaible for freelance editors and productions. At the headquarters we have a little bluescreen stage with a good lighting system that we use to shoot particular scenes and elements. We manage video signals coming from the stage in the splitting-video room, and send them directly to workstations or to the main server for storage.



When did you start working at Videa Digital Effects?
I have worked there for four years as a visual effects supervisor on the motion picture side.

There is another branch of the company that does commercial videos, and that is led by art director Dino Vitullo. He is a very good artist with amazing ideas. His principle skill is to quickly understand which is the most efficient way to promote and graphically represent a product.

Did you study visual effects in school?
I owe a great part of my artistic inspiration to my father, Marco Dentici, who is one of the best set designers/production designers in Italy. I have been on movie sets since I was a kid. Those experiences and environments taught me a lot, expecially about respecting the various roles that people on the film crew play, and filmmaking processes and techniques.

I studied electronics, because I loved it. But I also felt I had an artistic sense growing in me, and decided to go to the European Academy of Special Effects founded by Carlo Rambaldi, who won an Oscar in 1982 for his work on "E.T. -- The Extra Terrestrial." Ironically, I had first started falling in love with special effects while watching "E.T."

Going to the Academy deeply increased my knowledge of filmmaking. We spent three years studying special effects and cinema history, cinematography, editing, script writing, and also took practical courses on things like special effects make-up, modelmaking, animatronics and computer graphics. We had special effects shoots, where we shot like a real crew. This training allowed me to understand the advantages and problems of each special effects discipline.

We also had great seminars with professionals, both Italian and American. Dan Jamele is a friend I met on one of my visits to the United States, and I invited him to the Academy. He owns Mediamation, a Californian company that produces motion systems driven by computer. They made some of the equipment that Stan Winston used for the movement of his animatronic dinosaurs in "Jurassic Park II."

When I got my degree, I put my cloths in a bag and took an airplane to Los Angeles with two collegues. Our target was to visit and meet friends who worked in great American effects companies. We wanted to understand the way those companies worked, their techniques and their pipelines.

I came back to Italy and I began to work as a 3D operator. After I got some good experience, I joined Videa Visual Effects as a supervisor. I was very happy to bring some of the things I learned during my

visit to L.A. back to Videa, even in a small way.

What is the visual effects industry like in Italy ?
Well, the Italian motion picture industry is not focused on realizing effects movies (disaster movies, sci-fi, etc...). Some producers and directors continue to be skeptical of the new technology -- they think that digital effects adds something too artificial to go with the classic images they create. This point of view pushes companies like Videa to improve themselves, to get closer and closer to absolute realism.

Building great spaceship battles or giant monsters is sometimes easier, because no one has seen them in reality, and also because the audience goes to the theatre knowing what they are going to see, and they accept the premise. This doesn't mean I don't appreciate movies like 'Star Wars' -- everyday we wake up hoping for an Italian George Lucas who will ask us to create a new world!

But Italian cinematography is very different. If the director sees the effects, he throws it into the trash, and you lose his trust! Then it is a challenge for the next company to convince him that they can do the work in the right way.

However recently, the Italian industry is starting to recognize the artistic freedom offered by the new digital technology. Part of that is thanks to the digital intermediate, which has arrived here. Using this new system, cinematographers and directors have begun to understand digital processes in a better way. Also, they are going into facilities where there are digital effects teams, and being exposed to what 3D and compositing techniques can offer them.

Understanding that the digital intermediary process is aimed at preserving the original image quality has helped directors and producers overcome their scepticism about post-production work.

In terms of visual effects, we work a lot on digital background reconstruction and CGI extensions, techniques that producers are liking more every day! Because, off course, they think in term of money. But production designers are also happy, because they have the freedom to create stunning designs that we can build for them.

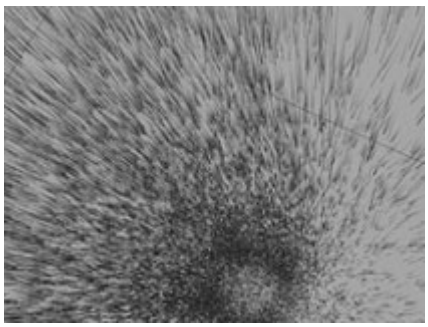
2004 is the first year that the "Best Visual Effects" category has been included in the "David di Donatello" awards. They are the most important Italian awards for the motion picture industry, and this is very important because it means that now effects work is recognized by the Italian industry.

Do you see yourself as part of an Italian film industry or as part of a European film industry?
Until now, most of our effects work has for been for Italian productions. The European industry is becoming so huge, and almost every country has its own post/VFX facility. Why go abroad? It can be expensive for a production to manage trips for directors and cinematographers just to check visual effects work. In most cases, with this kind of work, artists and directors need to be in the same place, to

watch the movie together and evaluate the work, once it is printed on film.

But in the near future technology will permit us not only to edit a movie via satellite (as they have already done), but also to send a high definition signal to a theatre, and allow the cinematographers to view effects and grade them, even if the original "digital footage" is on a server in another part of the world.

Our company is starting talks with several foreign productions. Our goal is to become an important center for post-production in Europe.



Can you describe the last project you worked on?
We have just finished several projects. One of them (not yet released) was a movie about a prisoner, where they asked us to put CG 3D flies in a prison cell. The director's intention was to create a dusty, dirty ambience, with excrement that is attracting more and more insects. We started observing the real behavior of flies and then drew digital paths with our 3D packages and put the fly models on them. For other shots, I wrote simple scripts to randomize the movement of the flies. The final touch was another simple script that assigned causal expressions to several CG objects in the scenes. The list of expressions that each artist could assign randomly was avaible in our central database.

For another movie, a historical film titled "E Ridendo L'Uccise" we made a digital background of a medieval village, which was designed by Giantito Burchiellaro. He is one of the most famous Italian production designers, and we were very pleased to work with him. He is a very nice person and our collaboration went well. We started working together during pre-production, planning what he could build on set and what we had to do digitally.

The most significative work we have done so far was for a TV mini-series titled "Marcinelle." It tells the true story of great tragedy that happened in a coal mine in Belgium in 1956. We created 27 minutes of visual effects for the movie -- it has more visual effects than any Italian T.V. movie ever made. For some scenes we worked with a 28 X 8 meter greenscreen on stage, creating digital stunts for dangerous sequences. We worked with something like 100 nodes in our compositing tree, including real flames and haze (shot with high-speed cameras on a black background) and other elements created in CGI. We used a particle simulation script that allowed us to have more control over the digital water we created for three scenes.

What kind of software and hardware do you use ?
We use various software and hardware solutions for our purposes, and we like to test and experiment with new tools to find the potential in each one and make sure we invest our money in the right way. I dedicate a few hours every week to finding information on new products and techniques.

From a software point of view, we use mainly two packages for 3D, Softimage XSI and 3ds max. We are

also considering Maya, which I am already familiar with. For compositing we use Cyborg, Digital Fusion and some old licenses of Shake -- the last one before Apple purchased Nothing Real. We intend to upgrade to the latest release of Shake because it is a very good package.

We have also two workstations with Avid DS that we use for little editing and effects tasks in Video and HD.

Still, I think that is not good to talk about the "power" of one software compared to another, because many companies today produce good solutions that are very similar to each other. I think the real "power" lies in how they put the tools on the user interfaces and how easy it is to learn to use them.

We have SGI, Mac and PC systems and we are going to make the entire system Linux, because it has very good architecture with great stability and perfomance and more flexibility for managing computer networks.

We have two machine-rooms that house the heart of our processing power: a central server and several bi-processor renderfarms that we use for 2D and 3D rendering.

Our philosophy is not focused on machines and software but on the operators. I have seen awful images created with expensive systems like inferno, and amazing works made with grandmother's PC! When our general manager sends me new people to interview, the first thing I try to ascertain is if they have a good eye -- or if they just know where to click. Our work is images! There is a phrase that I love to use: "To make this work you must have a good eye and a sufficient finger and not a sufficient eye with a good finger."