KSA studios raise the profile of regional animation with strong indigenous stories created to international standards.
Welcome

It’s month three since we started discussing Covid-19 and now, it’s no longer a novelty. We have evolved from deluding ourselves into imagining this to be a temporary spell to looking at how to ensure business continuity in a virus-infested world irrespective of how long this situation lasts. So, while some of us have donned masks and gloves and bravely stepped out of our homes, businesses are also courageously revisiting their capital expenditures that may perhaps have been on hold.

No doubt, some businesses have frozen all investment indefinitely but there are others who may consider rerouting their CAPEX to address new priorities such as remote working and ensuring business continuity while still others may have seized this opportunity to cut some good deals. I believe solutions for remote working will now be considered as critical as any mainstream operation. Businesses therefore may potentially divert some of their investments to ensure that remote working is taken care of. Many may also now see wisdom in favouring OPEX over CAPEX and choosing cloud solutions. Businesses therefore may potentially divert some of their investments to address new priorities such as remote working and ensuring business continuity while still others may have seized this opportunity to cut some good deals.

I believe solutions for remote working will now be considered as critical as any mainstream operation. Businesses therefore may potentially divert some of their investments to ensure that remote working is taken care of. Many may also now see wisdom in favouring OPEX over CAPEX and choosing cloud solutions. In the meantime, while money has been hard at work crafting new narratives from their respective home offices. Businesses have been mulling new strategies to deal with the current situation and some innovative ideas will emerge in the coming months, I’m certain.

In the meantime, we had the opportunity to catch up with a few animation companies that have emerged in recent times in Saudi Arabia. Their strong storylines, rooted in Arabic culture, and high-quality productions, created in collaboration with local talent and international studios, are enabling them to conceive and produce ambitious projects that can have both regional and global appeal. Those projects haven’t diminished because of a pandemic. In fact, the argument for content has never been more compelling than in a lockdown, where demand spiked, and supply couldn’t keep up. As we gradually return to work, we are likely to see a whole subterranean stream of changes that will render obsolete the arguments that couldn’t keep up. As we gradually return to work, we are likely to see a whole subterranean stream of changes that will render obsolete the arguments that couldn’t keep up.

On this month’s cover…

Animated works from Zee Animation, Veeans Entertainment and Manga Productions.

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Mission accomplished

The task:
Build a mobile production tool that covers the following topics:
Full-IP | SMPTE 2110 | AMWA | NMOS

The result:
Two large Full-IP, SMPTE 2110 based OB Vans built for NEP Belgium and RTBF.*

*planning, manufacture, configuration and handover during COVID-19 – in time!
Mondo Globo announces Arabic multi-delivery TV platform in Europe

Mondo Globo/MCNC Group has launched a TV platform directed at the Arabic community in Europe, which includes more than 50 TV channels. Arabic-speaking viewers in Europe can access programmes via a multi-delivery platform including digital satellite box and Android TV OTT box in addition to digital applications for mobile, tablet, and Android Smart TVs. This is the first legal platform of its kind across Europe to distribute Arabic content.

Cedric Aoun, COO of the Globo/MCNC Group, said: "The Arabic content distribution landscape in Europe is polluted by many illegal and piracy platforms that do not have the legal rights to distribute and promote such content. Mondo Globo/MCNC Group plays a vital role in creating awareness and promoting the best interests of both the broadcaster and the viewer and is heavily engaged with different industry stakeholders to flush out such illegal activities and platforms to ensure consumer safety."

Mondo Globo offers customised bouquets catering to Arab audiences in cooperation with major broadcasting entities and telcos around the world.

Variance Films acquires theatrical rights to Image Nation's Scales

Variance Films has acquired all North American theatrical rights from Image Nation Abu Dhabi to Saudi Arabian filmmaker Shahid Ameen’s award-winning debut feature Scales. The film is a feminist parable set in a dystopian landscape. Scales premiered at the Venice International Film Festival’s Critics Week, where it won the Verona Film Club Award. Scales is a Film Solutions and The Imagination Films production, produced in association with Mohamed Jabarah Al-Daradji Productions. The deal was negotiated by Dylan Marchetti for Variance Films and Cinetic Sales Group. AGC International handles international rights to the film.

Etisalat Group CEO Saleh Al Abdooli steps down

Saleh Al Abdooli (pic below) has resigned from his role as CEO of Etisalat Group for "personal reasons". Eng. Hatem Dowidar has been appointed acting CEO of the Group. Dowidar was previously CEO of Etisalat International.

Disney exec joins TikTok as CEO

Disney’s head of streaming Kevin Mayer has joined ByteDance as CEO. In his new role, Mayer will lead music, gaming, Helo app, emerging businesses, and also serve as CEO of TikTok. Effective June 1, Mayer will report to ByteDance CEO Yanpeng Zhang and will oversee the Chinese firm’s global development.

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Dubai Film and TV Commission issues filming permits again

The Dubai Film and TV Commission has started issuing filming permits again with strict guidelines due to the coronavirus pandemic. Some of the guidelines include temperature checks at mall entry points, two-metre social distancing, and no buffets. The list also contains specific production-related regulations. For instance, casting is to be carried out remotely. Crew members on set must be between the ages of 18 and 60 and no filming is permitted between 10 pm and 6 am. No more than 10 crew members will be allowed on set at one time and makeup experts are to use single-use kit.

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Middle East customer opts for Net Insight

Net Insight’s partner Middle East Telecommunications Company (METCO) has signed a US $1m agreement with a Middle East carrier for a new nationwide media network based on the Nimbra solutions. Product delivery is scheduled for Q2 of 2020. The order includes Nimbra hardware, software as well as services. In line with Net Insight’s strategy to grow recurring revenue, the contract consists of more than 20% professional services and support, spread over the next three years.

The new network will provide HD and UHD/4K uncompressed contribution capabilities covering multiple locations. To ensure high-quality viewer experience, METCO will use Net Insight’s Nimbra products for multi-purpose transport, media acceleration and professional IP media transport.

Abdulahir Al Muscati, General Manager at METCO said: “We chose Net Insight as their open video-centric solution offers a combination of broadcast-grade reliability, scalability and simplicity to manage large media networks. The highly flexible Nimbra transport platform also allows for easy future network expansion.”

Turkey gets first Resolve-certified editor

Istanbul-based Ozan Celik, Turkey’s first certified DaVinci Resolve Studio editor, has successfully used Resolve as his primary NLE on feature film and TV projects including Romo, a 12-part series commissioned for Turkish broadcaster Show TV. Romo was directed by Yagiz Akyol, Celik’s longtime collaborator.

“I’ve been working in post-production for almost 20 years, four of which have been with Yagiz. We first joined forces to complete 84 episodes of his action series, Siz,” Celik commented.

With Turkish drama enjoying global viewership thanks to OTT platforms, Celik has seen a transition in his editing work from feature films to TV projects. The problem is that each episode of Turkish dramas typically runs to two hours or more.

“For Siz, I was using Final Cut Pro 7, which had been my NLE for more than fifteen years. However, I had a serious challenge: my pipeline was outdated, and unsuitable to new codecs and formats. It was also very rushed, as it involved cutting the equivalent of a feature film’s worth of footage in a week. Also, my team and I had to rely on a proxy workflow, so we needed to take additional time to conform the MXF 4K footage before the colourist could grade in Resolve and we could export the final cut. I knew this had to change if we were going to get Resolve done.”

With support from Blackmagic Design’s distributor MediaCast, Celik tested a Resolve-based workflow for the edit, familiarising himself with the GUI before migrating the project in its entirety.

“It was an easy learning curve. We have now closed the conform chapter of our pipeline for good. We can now work natively in 4K without preview or round tripping and export a 140-minute episode in just under a week. Becoming certified has allowed me to consolidate all that operational knowledge to realise the potential of this project and know I can keep updated through ongoing training on future releases.”

Disney to make live-action short film based on Eid

Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures has announced plans to make a live-action short film about a Pakistani family that has shifted to the US. Entitled American Eid, the film is part of a low-budget SVOD programme called ‘LaunchPad Shorts 2020’ distributed by the company.

The short film, which will be directed by LA-based filmmaker Aqsa Altaf, revolves around Ameena, an eight-year-old girl, who desperately applies for the roles is July 1, with fluency in Urdu and Arabic.

Filming will begin later this year. The team is presently scouting for Pakistani talent with fluency in Urdu and English. The deadline to apply for the roles is July 1, 2020. Casting will take place in Los Angeles, according to castittalent.com website.

MBC Group condemns attack on studios in Iraq

MBC Group decried an attack on its studios and offices in Baghdad last month. The attack was reported to be in response to an episode shown as part of Malek Beltawilah, a family educational show that aired during Ramadan.

In a press statement, MBC Group said “places the matter in accordance with the laws and regulations in accordance with the laws and regulations in accordance with the laws and regulations.”

MBC2020 cancelled due to coronavirus pandemic

IBC CEO Michael Crimp announced last month that the 2020 edition of the show has been cancelled owing to the uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In an official statement, Crimp said: “It has become evident, through our dialogue with the IBC community, that an early decision is preferential to plan for the future. Despite the best work of the IBC team and our Dutch colleagues, there are still many unknowns. Important aspects of a large-scale event such as IBC will be greatly altered by social distancing, travel restrictions and masks, and the spirit of the show will be compromised.”

“With that in mind and based on what we know at this point, it is with a heavy heart IBC has made the difficult decision to cancel the IBC2020 show,” Crimp said.

With Turkish drama episodes running to two hours or more, Celik needed pipeline to work natively in 4K and export 140-minute episodes in under a week.

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Saudi fund buys stake in Facebook, Boeing and Disney

Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), has purchased minority stakes in US companies including Boeing, Facebook and Disney, according to a regulatory filing. The $827.7m PIF-disclosed stakes worth $713.7m in Boeing, about $522m in Citigroup, $495.8m in Facebook and $487.6m in Bank of America. PIF also disclosed an $827.8m stake in oil company BP, which has American Depository Receipts (ADRs).

PIF already has stakes in electric car company Lucid Motors. The fund now has managed to secure a portfolio of nearly $10bn in US-listed stocks. The Saudi sovereign fund has been buying minority stakes in global companies, taking advantage of market weaknesses in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had tasked the sovereign wealth fund in 2015 with diversifying the country’s economy away from oil by investing in companies and industries untethered to hydrocarbons. “PIF is a patient investor with a long-term horizon. As such, we actively seek strategic opportunities both in Saudi Arabia and globally that have strong potential to generate significant long-term returns while further benefiting the people of Saudi Arabia and driving the country’s economic growth,” the sovereign wealth fund said in a statement.

Shahid offers VIP subscriptions through Fawry outlets in Egypt

MBC Group’s Shahid platform has partnered with Egypt’s e-payment network Fawry to facilitate different payment methods for customers in the country to acquire Shahid VIP subscriptions. With Shahid VIP subscription cards, and the service of paying the monthly subscriptions for its audience through Fawry, the Saudi fund is expected to boost subscriptions. MBC has also partnered with TCL Electronics to offer Shahid VIP subscriptions cards and the service of paying the monthly plans for its audience through more than 140,000 outlets for Fawry and Fawry Plus. Shahid hopes to boost subscriptions.

Vox announces Drive-in Cinema at Mall of the Emirates

Vox Cinemas in Dubai has launched the Vox Cinemas Drive-in, a Drive-in cinema. The new experience, which opened to the public, will not allow children under 12 and adults over 60. The current capacity of the Vox Cinemas Drive-in is 75 cars, with a maximum of two people per vehicle. Once parked, viewers tune into a designated radio frequency for the movie audio to be streamed straight into their car.

With theatres temporarily closed owing to the Covid-19 outbreak, Vox Cinemas in Dubai has turned the rooftop of Mall of the Emirates, previously used for parking, into a Drive-in cinema. The new experience, although open to the public, will not allow children under 12 and adults over 60. The current capacity of the Vox Cinemas Drive-in is 75 cars, with a maximum of two people per vehicle. Once parked, viewers tune into a designated radio frequency for the movie audio to be streamed straight into their car.

Cameron Mitchell, General Manager of Vox Cinemas in Dubai, said: “We’re delighted to collaborate with Mall of the Emirates to launch a way for people to watch movies the way they were intended – on the big screen.”

MBC among top 20 with 2.5bn social video views in April

MBC Group has entered the list of top 20 media companies for social media video views, according to Tubular Labs April 2020 results. The report shows MBC Group jumped 11 positions, from number 32 in March to number 19 in April for global media and entertainment entities. Tubular Labs top five currently comprises The Walt Disney Company, WarnerMedia, Netflix, WarnerMedia and TheSoul Publishing. In April, MBC achieved a total of 2.5bn social video views in the Middle East, compared to 1.6bn views in March – resulting in a month-on-month (MoM) growth of +58%. There was video view growth in each tracked platform. On YouTube, views increased by 37.3% and on Facebook, by 76.4%. Instagram saw a growth of 56.8% and Twitter views increased by 53.8%. The growth rates are based on MBC’s performance during Ramadan. Over 50% of audience share was achieved in Saudi Arabia, with on-going audience leadership in the GCC, North Africa and other key markets.

High Resolution Cinematic Digital Film Sensor!

Featuring a larger 6144 x 3456 Super 35 sensor and EF lens mount, the Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera 6K is a High Resolution Cinematic Digital Film Sensor! The native ISO of 400 is ideal for scenes with on-set lighting. The secondary high base ISO of 3200 is perfect when shooting in dimly lit environments.

Dual Native for Exceptional Low Light Performance

The Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera 6K records up to 25,600, which means both the 4K and 6K models are optimised to minimize grain or noise in images, while maintaining the full dynamic range of the sensor. The native ISO of 400 is ideal for scenes with on-set lighting. The secondary high base ISO of 3200 is perfect when shooting in dimly lit environments.

The quality of RAW and the speed of video!

Blackmagic RAW is a revolutionary new format that preserves the quality of the camera’s sensor data in small, fast files. Unlike compressed video formats such as H.264, which add noise and artifacts that damage the image, Blackmagic RAW gives you feature film images with precise skin tones and gorgeous organic colors.

Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera 6K

Learn more at www.blackmagicdesign.com/ae

Dramatically increase the production values of your work by using cinematic 6K digital film quality!

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Art Format Lab begins show for new TV show scheduled for September launch

Art Format Lab has announced a reality TV show that follows young Emiratis as they prepare for their weekly magazine TV show called Atyaaf Magazine Show. The show will have 25 weekly episodes of 60 minutes each, and will start airing from September 2020. The idea of the show is to go behind the scenes to monitor the show hosts as they prepare to produce each segment. A related digital platform will serve as a hub for talents for each segment like Studio of Happiness, Music Box Studio, Bookathon Studio, The Lounge Break, Entrepreneurship, IQ Studio and Nutrition Studio. The programme is hosted by a team of six young Emiratis including a psychologist, a musician, a journalist and author, an entrepreneur, a scientist and a nutritionist. They will be led by show director Ali Al Nuaimi, who is also editor-in-chief of the magazine. Each host will present a segment within seven minutes. The programme is filmed in a studio set designed by Atyaaf’s IQ, where the editorial team prepares and films the programme. The set is divided into six dedicated studios for each segment. The show is an Art Format Lab Original and will be rolled out in Riyadh in partnership with Gorilla Films.

Nutanix and Avid partner to provide multi-cloud solution to broadcasters

Nutanix has announced that its Nutanix hyperconverged infrastructure (HCI) software has been certified to run with Avid Media Composer video editing software and the Avid MediaCentral media collaboration platform. Nutanix helps content producers transform their businesses by increasing engagement with faster content delivery, especially at a time when end users are looking to access digital entertainment and content. Nutanix cloud software enables customers to increase cross-channel engagement, empower content creators, drive operating efficiency, and improve decision-making that’s uniform across all functions and locations.

“Customers in the media and entertainment industry are looking for an IT infrastructure that enables increased customer engagement and faster content delivery, and the joint solution between Avid and Nutanix offers just that,” said Tarkan Maner, Chief Commercial Officer at Nutanix. “This collaboration offers companies a multi-cloud solution that can easily support business-critical apps in the industry while providing a platform that is simple, flexible, and powerful.”

Art Video & Audio Engineering has chosen Ikegami’s UHR-430 and HDK-99 cameras for a recently completed 4K OB vehicle. The vehicle was commissioned in time to cover Qatar’s National Day festivities. Commenting on the development, Art Video’s Vice President Alessandro Asti said: “The Ikegami cameras were selected both for their high signal quality and Ikegami’s excellent post-sale support. Eight UHR-430 models have been purchased plus two docking-style HDK-62x. All 10 cameras can be tripod or pedestal mounted to achieve steady long-zoom closeup capture of fast-moving action while retaining the freedom to operate in free-style over-the-shoulder up to a maximum of 2.74m. The acquisition will be paid by cash and debt. This acquisition will enable EVS to provide a comprehensive modern media and AI solution that includes advanced IP processing, SDI/IP conversion, SDN-based control and monitoring, as well as UHD-4K and IP switching. The combination of EVS’ Score Master SDP IP orchestrator, with Axiom’s Cerebrum control and monitoring system, Neuron IP stream processing platform and the virtualized modular infrastructure platform, will provide a scalable and redundant end-to-end solution to empower customers everywhere. This deal also allows EVS to expand its global footprint and leverage its international presence to accelerate the reach of Axiom’s expertise and technology. Additionally, EVS will benefit from Axiom’s relationships with channel partners, while also broadening the reach of its product portfolio to different distribution channels. The Axiom brand will be absorbed into EVS and its product portfolio will be integrated into EVS global solution offering. The objective is to integrate Axiom team members and to further invest in its technology and market expertise.”

Nigeria waives licence fees for TV stations

The federal government has announced a two-month licence fee waiver for terrestrial broadcast stations in Nigeria. The move is part of the government’s efforts to counter the negative impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the broadcast industry in the country. Terrestrial stations affected include Galaxy, AIT, TVC, MTV, Silverbird TV, NTA, which are all free-to-air channels for consumers. Licence fee costs as much as $7,661 a year to broadcast. It comes after the Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria (BON) pressed the government to approve tax rebates for TV stations as well as a one-year moratorium in the payment of annual operating licence fees payable to the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC).

EVS acquires Axiom for $11.5m

EVS has completed the acquisition of broadcast and media network infrastructure specialist Axiom. The value of the transaction is set at $11.5m, plus an earn-out up to a maximum of $2.74m. The acquisition will be paid by cash and debt. This acquisition will enable EVS to provide a comprehensive modern media and AI solution that includes advanced IP processing, SDI/IP conversion, SDN-based control and monitoring, as well as UHD-4K and IP switching. The combination of EVS’ Score Master SDP IP orchestrator, with Axiom’s Cerebrum control and monitoring system, Neuron IP stream processing platform and the virtualized modular infrastructure platform, will provide a scalable and redundant end-to-end solution to empower customers everywhere. This deal also allows EVS to expand its global footprint and leverage its international presence to accelerate the reach of Axiom’s expertise and technology. Additionally, EVS will benefit from Axiom’s relationships with channel partners, while also broadening the reach of its product portfolio to different distribution channels. The Axiom brand will be absorbed into EVS and its product portfolio will be integrated into EVS global solution offering. The objective is to integrate Axiom team members and to further invest in its technology and market expertise.”

Bitmovin appoints John Illingworth as sales director for MENA

Bitmovin has appointed John Illingworth as Sales Director for the MENA region. Illingworth, who has been based in the Middle East for nine years, joined Bitmovin in April to develop new business and provide local sales support to new and existing customers. He is based in the UAE and has been tasked with expanding the company’s customer base in the MEA market. Bitmovin announced that it has seen an increase of over +30% in video usage in March.
INTEGRAL LAUNCHES LINEAR CHANNEL, UNDERTAKES REMOTE OPERATIONS

Intigral was unfazed when a complete lockdown was announced in late March in Dubai. With most of its Ramadan productions ready owing to early planning and the launch of Jawwy TV on IP scheduled for the Holy Month, the only element left to ensure seamless operations was the deployment of a remote solution. Tony Saab of Intigral takes BroadcastPro ME through the content and the technology that ensured the successful launch of Jawwy TV on IP.

Intigral launched a linear channel called Jawwy TV on IP last month to complement the Jawwy TV streaming service. The IP version carries a mix of curated content that primarily includes some of Intigral’s originals and exclusives. As the launch coincided with the start of Ramadan as well as the Covid-19 outbreak, the Intigral team also implemented a robust remote operational strategy under the leadership of Tony Saab, VP of Content and Production at Intigral, to ensure a seamless entertainment experience for its viewers.

The remote implementation included the deployment of a CreateCtrl planning and scheduling system as well as a Lighthouse module from Pebble Beach Systems. The Lighthouse installation adds to the ongoing deployment of Pebble solutions that started at Intigral way back in 2014. As the brain behind Intigral’s recent content acquisition and production strategy, Saab says the addition of Jawwy TV on the linear box is part of the company’s efforts to ensure that it reaches a wider audience with its Originals.

“With our core business being IPTV at the time, Intigral received feeds from all over the world and repurposed it for parent company, Saudi Telecom Company (STC), which also is the Kingdom’s incumbent telco operator. STC’s customers had the option to subscribe to Intigral via its IPTV channels. Later, Intigral undertook a major content management and playout system upgrade, including expansion of the Dolphin solution, and more recently deployed its remote management and monitoring tool, Lighthouse. Intigral installed and configured the system by itself, sharing remote access to Pebble in order to set up the new server. “This was all carried out remotely due to the current Covid-19 crisis, but it was completed quickly and efficiently,” says Samir Isbaih, VP Sales - Middle East and Asia, Pebble Beach Systems. “Pebble Beach Systems has been working with Intigral to support the launch of its new channel and implement its Lighthouse product, which runs alongside Marina. Lighthouse allows remote access to all active channels and operators are able to securely access and operate the entire system from home,” he adds. The Lighthouse integration allows multiple people remote access to the channel playout capabilities. Specific functionality includes the Lighthouse Channel Controller for working on the playout; the Smart Panel, which can enable master control switching; and manual addition of graphics if required; the Media Inventory, which enables users to see all the media they have across their system; and the Browse Player, where users can view and monitor the video streaming from Dolphin at home, as well as look through the ongoing content from their browsers to check accuracy and inspect for errors. Lighthouse offers low latency, secure, reliable access to the main on-premise Marina and Dolphin systems.

Intigral was the first media company in the UAE to deploy Pebble’s Marina automation, controlling its Dolphin integrated channel technology in 2014, enabling ingest from tape and live sources. Incoming media is recorded via RDD onto Dolphin’s internal storage and onto an external iSCSI storage. Once ingested via RDD, the files are

“We offer carefully selected content on Jawwy TV. If our audience likes it and wants to binge watch, they can go to Jawwy on the SVOD platform. Our objective is to offer our audience a wide variety of content on different platforms so they can really experience our entertainment through the medium of their choice,” Intigral was fortunate that it started on its Ramadan productions as early as Q4 of 2019, says Saab, as a result of which, it was able to air its original productions as initially planned.

“Some of our originals are Hawaa, a thriller; Eijaza, a drama series; Yamam, targeted at kids, Al Deeraan, a Gulf drama that has been doing extremely well, Bint w Wlad, a comedy, also doing very well, and Ejazah Khateeb, also a drama series. Some of these are 12 episodes, some 15 and others 39, and they were all created for Ramadan. We were lucky because I started early in the quarter and some, as far back as Q4 last year. The only production we did not manage to complete was a cooking show but all the major series we planned were out there,” he explains.

With the coronavirus pandemic and people having to work from home, however, Intigral had to quickly arrange for a more extensive remote operation “in order to make access available from home for our teams”, says Saab. “We have around 10 people working on our existing operations. They are dedicated to working on the channels all the way from playout and scheduling to branding and the other operations related to it. Lighthouse is a remote system that can access the playout in our data centre and allows our teams to operate from their homes. We already have an ongoing relationship with Pebble Beach Systems,” explains Saab. “To place the project in perspective, Intigral initially started with just Pebble Beach Marina automation and Dolphin servers for ingest purposes in 2014. “We moved a batch of developers and connected them to the mainframes. Once they were sorted, we did the second and third batches” Tony Saab, VP of Content and Production, Intigral.

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“We offer carefully selected content on Jawwy TV. If our audience likes it and wants to binge watch, they can go to Jawwy on the SVOD platform. Our objective is to offer our audience a wide variety of content on different platforms so they can really experience our entertainment through the medium of their choice.” Intigral was fortunate that it started on its Ramadan productions as early as Q4 of 2019, says Saab, as a result of which, it was able to air its original productions as initially planned.

“Some of our originals are Hawaa, a thriller; Eijaza, a drama series; Yamam, targeted at kids, Al Deeraan, a Gulf drama that has been doing extremely well, Bint w Wlad, a comedy, also doing very well, and Ejazah Khateeb, also a drama series. Some of these are 12 episodes, some 15 and others 39, and they were all created for Ramadan. We were lucky because I started early in the quarter and some, as far back as Q4 last year. The only production we did not manage to complete was a cooking show but all the major series we planned were out there,” he explains.

With the coronavirus pandemic and people having to work from home, however, Intigral had to quickly arrange for a more extensive remote operation “in order to make access available from home for our teams”, says Saab. “We have around 10 people working on our existing operations. They are dedicated to working on the channels all the way from playout and scheduling to branding and the other operations related to it. Lighthouse is a remote system that can access the playout in our data centre and allows our teams to operate from their homes. We already have an ongoing relationship with Pebble Beach Systems,” explains Saab. “To place the project in perspective, Intigral initially started with just Pebble Beach Marina automation and Dolphin servers for ingest purposes in 2014. “We moved a batch of developers and connected them to the mainframes. Once they were sorted, we did the second and third batches” Tony Saab, VP of Content and Production, Intigral.

With the core business being IPTV at the time, Intigral received feeds from all over the world and repurposed it for parent company, Saudi Telecom Company (STC), which also is the Kingdom’s incumbent telco operator. STC’s customers had the option to subscribe to Intigral via its IPTV channels.

“Lighthouse integration allows multiple people remote access to the channel playout capabilities. Specific functionality includes the Lighthouse Channel Controller for working on the playout; the Smart Panel, which can enable master control switching; and manual addition of graphics if required; the Media Inventory, which enables users to see all the media they have across their system; and the Browse Player, where users can view and monitor the video streaming from Dolphin at home, as well as look through the ongoing content from their browsers to check accuracy and inspect for errors. Lighthouse offers low latency, secure, reliable access to the main on-premise Marina and Dolphin systems. Intigral was the first media company in the UAE to deploy Pebble’s Marina automation, controlling its Dolphin integrated channel technology in 2014, enabling ingest from tape and live sources. Incoming media is recorded via RDD onto Dolphin’s internal storage and onto an external iSCSI storage. Once ingested via RDD, the files are
delivered into Intigral’s exclusively IP workflow for distribution to regional telecommunication operators.

The solution was developed to meet Intigral’s complex asset management requirements, providing intelligent rule-based media movement.

As part of the recent expansion, playlists are delivered to Marina automation from a CreateCtrl traffic system in native Marina XML format, and the system offers advanced SCTE-104 triggering for ad insertion.

As Intigral already uses Marina, the Lighthouse addition was easy to configure and quick to use. The fact that it has customizable widgets and dashboard reportedly made navigation simple.

“Lighthouse essentially offers a ‘view’ into Marina. The same actions that someone would do on an on-premise system can be done remotely with Lighthouse. It is a web-based application that sits outside the standard secure network that a normal automation playout system would be a part of within the broadcast facility, but with the correct permissions, Lighthouse can look into the on-premise network giving remote user privileges,” explains Saab.

Intigral then undertook the movement of teams to their home in batches once the outbreak began, explains Saab. “We moved a batch of developers and installed their workstations at home and connected them to the mainframes. Once we ensured that they were sorted, we did the second and third batches. I still have a small core team working from the office mainly on the content operations. File sizes for content videos are really big and challenging to operate from home so a small team continues to work from the office,” he adds.

Saab adds that Intigral created its own network and gave access to all its people as if they are working from its office.

The Lighthouse installation at the Dubai facility was managed entirely by the Intigral team. Both, system set up and training were conducted remotely.

Perhaps one interesting aspect to this last installation was that Pebble and CreateCtrl have developed a new interface for the traffic system. Intigral added eight fully redundant channels of playout, together with an expanded ingest capability to the existing Pebble solution late last year. The installation is completely scalable and if more remote user licenses need to be added through Lighthouse, this can also be done, says Saab.

With a full remote operation in place, Saab says he is pleased. With viewership having spiked significantly during Ramadan and his remote operations running without a glitch, Saab is now contemplating more content additions to the Jawwy platform. In fact, as we were going to press, Saab also confided that Intigral had acquired the first pay window rights to a few Arabic movies including Egyptian 2020 production Lees Baghdad (The Thief of Baghdad).

“We offer carefully selected content on Jawwy TV. If our audience likes it and wants to binge watch, they can go to Jawwy on the SVOD platform”

Tony Saab, VP of Content and Production, Intigral

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Cartoons are the epitome of most people’s childhood experience, with popular shows such as Road Runner, Sponge Bob, Dragonball Z or Scooby-Doo bringing an instant smile to our faces when we recall them. Animation isn’t just viewing material for children; it has risen to fresh popularity over the years, finding an audience among millennials with shows like The Simpsons and Family Guy. More importantly, films such as Pixar’s WALL-E or Frozen have become all-time family favourites, signalling rising enthusiasm for such content among all age groups.

The total value of the global animation industry was $254bn in 2017 and is projected to reach $270bn by 2020. This growth in demand has had a positive impact on animation production worldwide. Developed countries such as the US, Japan and the UK have a mature animation industry owing to household names like Disney, Nippon Animation and Aardman Animation.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are latecomers to animation production. The most popular animation in the Arab world was a 1979 regional adaptation of Sesame Street titled Iftah ya Simsim (Open Sesame), shown as one- to two-minute spots designed to teach children Arabic letters and numbers. Due to a lack of infrastructure, the show was outsourced to production houses in Japan and France.

Saudi Arabia now has a handful of animation studios producing content tailored to local tastes, and these have been ramped up with the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 initiative. A few have been making headlines due to high-quality content or high-profile partnerships with big players in the region. Cases in point are Zeez Animation, a Saudi animation studio, with its award-winning series Brq & Bana; Vision Entertainment, which recently sealed a deal with Abu Dhabi’s Image Nation; and Manga Productions, a state-backed animation powerhouse that has strong connections with the Japanese animation market.

While a lot of bold storytelling is in the making, there is a lack of representation of “real” Arabic culture in the market, according to Abdulaziz Othman, Managing Director and Creative Director of Zeez Animation. “We saw a gap in the market that needed to be filled. We believe that we have a lot of stories to tell and the region generally is really short of premium kids’ content and animation productions.”

Interviews with Saudi animation studio owners, however, indicate a changing tide with more people
It is evident, in 1997, “We set out to create will not just be a TV series and investors/distributors so that business will grow. The trick will be satisfied on the business opportunity. It's inevitable that the media and distributors will look to satisfy the local talent pool. “Investors and brands for the Saudi Arabian, aim to create high-quality content 2030. Princess Sarah also helms a version, having already worked as localised version of to the situation by introducing a global companies a few years ago. He was one of the first to respond to the need for animated content in the region. With a background in social entertainment, Knežević partnered with Princess Sarah Bint Faisal Bin Bandar Al Saud in 2018 to launch Vision Entertainment to promote the values of Saudi Vision 2030. Princess Sarah also helps a company that produces apps and support materials for children. Vision Entertainment markets itself as a content and IP company with an aim to create high-quality content and brands for the Saudi Arabian, MENA and international markets. “That is what Saudi Arabia needs,” remarks Knežević. He believes that market demand will lead to the animation industry creating opportunities to develop the local talent pool. “Investors and distributors will look to satisfy audience demand and capitalise on the business opportunity. It’s inevitable that the media business will grow. The trick will be to find a business model that rewards both producers/creators and investors/distributors so that local content can flourish.”

“Our saw a gap in the market that needed to be filled. We believe that we have a lot of stories to tell and the region generally is really short of premium kids’ content and animation productions.”

Abdulaziz Othman, MD and Creative Director of Zezz Animation

Othman from Zezz Animation agrees. “The way content is being consumed is evolving both regionally and globally. The power is shifting from advertisers to viewers with the rise of subscription video on demand (SVOD).” However, a shortage of artists and the undeveloped cinema and media industries are serious obstacles to the shift in the paradigm. One of the challenges for regional animation studies is finding enough qualified candidates to execute its vision. Zezz Animation boasts a team of highly skilled and experienced people who hail from the region. “Our team consists of managerial and creative talents. Each production computes a director, a producer and a production manager, in addition to a number of talents for every step such as character design, storyboarding, voice-over, animation, composting and other phases,” says Othman.

Despite the steps taken to create an indigenous industry, where everything is built from scratch with local talent, there is a dearth of skilled manpower, the foundation of the animation industry. “This area is one where we constantly face some challenges. The region hosts a great number of talents but not all of them are willing to jump into the animation industry. It is also a challenge to build synergised teams that can work together to produce such complicated productions,” notes Othman.

Knežević adds: “Our stock and trade is creativity. We’ve found a lot of creative talent out there, but they are what I would call raw talent because there are no industry standards to provide guidance and professional discipline. And because of this missing link, there is not much scope for production. Yet, when I look at Saudi Arabia, there is tremendous potential for production. People are building physical infrastructure without much attention to IP.” But all that is changing now as animation talent emerges with the support of several government and industry initiatives to train the local talent pool, which, in turn, will result in more production. “The market is young but there is a need for overall infrastructure, technology and investment in individuals who have the potential to grow,” says Basam Bukhary, CEO of Manga Productions, a Saudi state-backed animation house with strong affiliations to Japanese animation houses. Bukhary himself speaks Japanese fluently and his company is at the forefront of creating animated productions.

Technology has also elevated the local animation industry to new heights, adds Othman. “It is now driving the productions heavily. We are expecting to see more premium productions with advanced and improved equipment. Additionally, the demand for local content is surging, so we expect to see more local stories,” he points out. There has also been a sharp rise in the number of courses offered at Saudi universities to cover skills related to the animation industry. Dar Al-Hekma University in Jeddah offers a course in Graphic Design, while Al Yarmouk University in Riyadh has Graphics and Multimedia and Dar Al-Ioum University also has a similar offering. “To encourage young people, we have collaborated with schools and universities globally for internships, training and development to enhance their skills,” says Bukhary. Providing young people with media training, courses and diplomas, however, is not enough, Knežević points out. “You need a thriving industry to provide jobs to those graduates. Our view is that it is better to invest in media projects and properties and provide on-the-job training opportunities. That’s how we see our contribution to the industry – launching projects that will provide jobs where motivated people will gain invaluable experience when they work alongside media professionals.”

To that end, the company has partnered with Image Nation Abu Dhabi to produce an animation series called Dates. “We set out to create iconic characters that are rooted in our traditions and culture. Dates are a ubiquitous staple in our homes, so we decided to bring the world of dates to life in a fun animated series. We hope audiences of all ages across the region will relate to this authentic, homegrown story,” says Princess Sarah.

“The project will employ local writers and creatives who will be paired with seasoned mentors to help build that professionalism and discipline,” adds Knežević. “This project will see characters rooted in Arab tradition and culture, and Dates does that very creatively,” Knežević notes. “The Dates concept is best told through animation. We are currently deep in script development. The pilot production was initially set to begin in March with full series production slated for the end of the year,” he adds. Knežević further reveals that Dates will not just be a TV series but a brand that both partners hope to elevate both regionally and globally. “You will see various brand experiences roll out soon … live shows, digital content, mobile games, products and merchandising themed around Dates. It is evident that the region is ripe for a locally inspired consumer brand, and we’re positioning Dates to be that brand. All of us love Pixar and Disney, but the Arab world should have the...
Manga Productions entered into a similar arrangement with Japan’s TOEI animation to produce its first animation series, Future’s Folklores, which premiered earlier this year on MBC1.

“The series, which received overwhelming response from the regional audience, has successfully reached over 40m impressions in the first two episodes. We are very excited to create more content to cater to our fanbase,” reveals Bukhary. Manga Productions was planning to premiere the first Saudi/Japanese animation movie, called The Journey, during the Cannes Film Festival which has now been postponed indefinitely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

With so many productions coming up, Saudi Arabia is poised to be a catalyst for the region’s media industry. “Abu Dhabi’s Image Nation and twofour54 are the perfect examples. They made a massive investment that kick-started the local media industry, which is now taking its rightful place as one of the key drivers of a diversified economy,” remarks Knežević. “Saudi Arabia is on the same track and will have a much bigger impact on the regional content business. In the end, it is all about the IP.”

It is precisely this promising growth that has motivated Zeez Animation to choose Saudi Arabia as its initial market, with a focus on action-adventure, comedy and edutainment.

“So far, this strategy is working perfectly for us,” says Othman. “Saudi Arabia is one of the largest markets in the region. However, we see very few animation productions that target the regional market. The reason is the difficulty in producing local and regional productions that can compete with imported global productions. To counter this, we target the whole region with productions that appeal to the tastes of the people here. We produce premium 2D and 3D original and collaborated productions.”

Zeez Animation made a mark in the market with its educational animation series Brq & Bana, which won Best Animation at the 2019 BroadcastPro Awards last November.

“We have a dedicated team working on projects from scratch... A 2.5D animation takes a long time to produce, as most of the frames are hand-drawn and go through many stages of development.” Essam Bukhary, CEO, Manga Productions

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We have a dedicated team working on projects from scratch... A 2.5D animation takes a long time to produce, as most of the frames are hand-drawn and go through many stages of development.”

Essam Bukhary, CEO, Manga Productions
in terms of advertising, where each episode contains a carefully selected product placement for Goody’s peanut butter,” explains Othman. Zurek has developed another animated series titled Yamaan, which has been touted as a Jawwy TV Original. “It is a premium 2D production set in the future that tells the story of an adventurous kid living in Saudi Arabia. In each episode, he faces some challenges and always saves the day, while learning a lesson from a video recorded by his late father on his robot, Meraal. The series was in production for three years and recently streamed exclusively on Jawwy TV,” reveals Othman.

The number of productions emerging from the region has, no doubt, increased but more importantly, some of them are high-quality animations. Good quality productions also require a lot of time and effort. “The production timelines vary, depending on the number of episodes, the duration of each episode and whether the production is made in 3D or 2D. Sometimes it takes a couple of months to release a single episode or movie, and at other times (such as with Yamaan), it takes three years to finalise the entire production,” Othman adds.

Bukhari seconds this. “We have a dedicated team working on projects from scratch. Creating a 2D animation takes a long time to produce, as most of the frames are hand-drawn and go through many stages of development and production.”

While production is taking off, advertising is still in its preliminary stages and could hinder the growth of the industry, according to Bukhari. “It’s well documented that the region suffers from one of the weakest advertising markets in the world. Low ad spend perpetuates a cycle of low revenue, which in turn leads to low spend on content, low production budgets, leading to low-quality content. This results in low audience interest, which circles back to low ad spend. In other words, because there is little incentive to invest in quality content, the result is an output of poor programming with low commercial value which perpetuates the underperforming economic impact of the media ecosystem.”

This vicious cycle deters growth in any industry – in order to keep going, capital injection is critical. But that will take time, says Othman. “Animation is very costly to produce, and it competes with global productions for the same time slot and attention. Budgets vary depending on the size of the production, the number of minutes and whether it is 2D or 3D.”

“Our process starts with the development phase. We put a lot of effort into developing our projects and this begins with ideas and concepts with character development, locations, writing scripts as well as visual development. After that, we go into production, where we do our best to ensure cohesive premium storytelling. This is finalised in post-production, and in parallel, we work on distribution,” says Othman. “At the moment, we outsource only a few of our projects. We usually work with in-house talent and hire from a wide pool of freelancers depending on the nature of the project.”

Maqa Productions aims to complete all stages of production in-house soon, says Bukhari. “Most of the pre-production is developed in-house, which includes character design, background design, story creation, transcoding, video game development and producing. We aim to build full production capabilities in-house in the future.”

Vision Entertainment works on a different business model which does not include building in-house technology or production capacity. “There is a lot of production capacity available in the region, but frame-by-frame rendering doesn’t exist just yet in the Middle East for each project. So, we outsource such tasks to competent vendors, and exercise overall and quality control to deliver quality content,” explains Kneževic. “Dates will be designed and produced simultaneously in Arabic and English for international distribution,” adds Robert Knežević.

“Because there is little incentive to invest in quality content, the result is an output of poor programming with low commercial value which perpetuates the underperforming economic impact of the media ecosystem”

Robert Knežević, CEO, Vision Entertainment

is really challenging, given the size of the regional market. That is why global distribution is important but continues to remain a challenge. The studios that produce animated content in KSA have barely started producing premium stuff for premium distribution. We need a couple of years to see how the market is headed and how much value can be created with it.”

“In the meantime, Saudi Arabia is catching up with global competitors “with the amount of productions that are happening”, says Othman. “With more production studios coming up in the region to grab a piece of the pie, one would think there is fierce competition, but that is not the case. “On the contrary, we root and cheer for anyone that can develop and launch a good media property – and we will extend any support to help others succeed,” says Kneževic. “Our view is that any individual’s or company’s success is a success for everyone in this business, because it builds and expands the industry and that paves the way for others to succeed. As they say, a rising tide lifts all boats.”

Othman agrees. “A number of local Arabian studios are working on new projects. However, every local animation studio is working with different genres directed to different audiences.”

“This leaves room for global circulation of local productions, he says. “One of the advantages of our medium is the flexibility in this area. Animation can be easily dubbed and distributed globally. Being local in terms of story and execution is appealing to other markets as well, because it is considered a new and different kind of content,” notes Othman.

However, the market is not mature enough, he points out. “We do not have enough productions or data to analyse. We are still figuring out what genres and formats the kids in the region would prefer from us.”

Knežević puts his faith in quality content. “Control and ownership of high-quality content is vital to a vibrant and profitable media ecosystem. We positioned Vision Entertainment to be part of the Saudi media industry as it matures toward global standards.”

“Developing premium content while testing new genres and stories will contribute to capitalising on the rising growth of animation, says Othman. Bukhari concurs. “To that end, we are collaborating with world-renowned acquisition studios to ensure we are developing and customising our production methodology to empower our local market needs.”

Indeed, much has been done. The wheel has been set in motion to put the Saudi animation industry under the global spotlight. With investment in quality content production, perhaps it won’t be long before regional content starts competing for viewership on the global market.
RED GIANT VFX SUITE -
A GAME CHANGER?

When the Red Giant VFX Suite for After Effects was introduced last year, the big question on everyone’s mind was whether it would really give the end user the ability to take their compositing and effects work to the next level. Post-production expert Alistair Rankine, who has been testing the Red Giant VFX Suite for the last few months, gives us his verdict on whether this is indeed a game changer or just another market launch.

A few months ago, Red Giant asked me to road test their new VFX Suite plug-in collection for After Effects. For those people not in the loop, Red Giant, which was founded in 2002, is one of the largest developers of After Effects plug-ins and has an excellent reputation in both the VFX and Motion Design communities. Like many of their products, the VFX Suite bundles many of their individual plug-ins to ensure a more effective collection of VFX tools.

The VFX Suite incorporates powerful tools for compositing, chroma-keying, motion tracking, clean-up, distortion as well as lights and glow. It comes at the seemingly hefty price of $999 ($499 for students), which is actually a fair price considering what is included in the bundle.

Included in the package are the following individual plug-ins: Supercomp, Primatte Keyer 6, King Pin Tracker, Spot Clone Tracker, Optical Glow, Chromatic Displacement, Knoll Light Factory 3.1, Shadow and Reflection. As a user of Red Giant plug-ins for some time, I have found them extremely user friendly, allowing the user to spend more time honing and refining their work rather than spending time trying to figure out how to use the actual software.

There are so many features available within the VFX Suite that it almost makes it feel like an entirely new workspace available to you right there within After Effects.

Supercomp
Users of other Red Giant plug-ins such as Trapcode and Magic Bullet will be familiar with the Supercomp panel. It is basically a “looks Builder” that allows the user to drag/drop, reorder and adjust effect parameters to the finest detail. It eliminates the need for endless pre-composing within After Effects and is extremely fast at previewing and rendering due to some clever GPU acceleration under the hood.

Supercomp allows the user to choose from an arsenal of tools such as Light Wrap, Reverse Light Wrap, Edge Erode, Heat Blur, Grain Management, Edge Blend, Diffusion and many more. None of these tools are new to any professional VFX Compositor; however, this has a much more user-friendly GUI than products such as Flame and Nuke offer.

There are also excellent tools essential to creating realistic compositions that allow for greater refinement of the foreground and mattes created in the Primatte Keyer. One of my favourite features within Supercomp is “Context Aware Effects”. This basically allows any changes that you have made within your composition to be rippled throughout. This allows the user to swap out backgrounds, re-order layers etc and all the applied effects will automatically change with it.

All compositions within Supercomp are 32-bit floating and offer proper gamma management throughout, allowing for more realistic and seamless compositing.

I find Supercomp to be fast, efficient, accurate and relatively easy to use and understand.

Primatte
Next up is Primatte, Red Giant’s chroma key plug-in. Primatte now comes with a new interface that is much more streamlined and user friendly than previous versions. This keyer is now the best it has ever been. As with all chroma keying, the biggest challenge is usually how well the green or blue screen has been lit during the film shoot and what file format it has been shot on. I tried the keyer in various scenarios and it performed extremely well. I would never expect to pull a perfect key the first time around but the selection tool on Primatte did a good job with plenty of added tools to help refine the Matte. The Spill Killer feature works extremely well when trying to remove any blue or green reflections from characters and objects and can be a lifesaver if you are dealing with poorly lit material.

Primatte also ups its game with...
Spot Clone Tracker allows users to remove small objects from the footage by cloning in pixels from neighbouring areas.

the inclusion of the new Core Matte function. This works well when trying to pull complex keys such as those where the subject matter has long flowing hair. The Core Matte allows solid areas within the Matte to stay solid while also helping to preserve finer detail where there are transparent edges. All in all, the Primate Keyer does everything it needs to do at a professional level. I am a big fan of the Foundry's Keylight Keyer and tend to use that first if I work in Nuke and After Effects. I imagine now that Red Giant has updated Primate and added features such as the Core Matte that allow more advanced refinement along with the ability to refine the process even further inside of Supercomp. I will be more inclined to use Primate as my go-to Keyer inside of After Effects.

VFX King Pin Tracker
Motion Tracking has vastly improved over the years with software apps such as Mocha leading the way in planar tracking and others like Nuke and Flame developing their own planar trackers.

Red Giant has now released its own planar tracker within the VFX Suite. The new tracker is extremely fast and robust and offers first-class planar tracking right within After Effects. Red Giant even claims that they have had to add their own “results window” due to it being so fast that the After Effects Comp window can’t keep up with the speed of the tracker.

Having used the King Pin Tracker in various scenarios, I am impressed. It is, in fact, very fast and accurate. I would like to see it open in a separate interface in the same way that Mocha does rather than using the After Effects GUI and control panels. That said, it works extremely well and is easy to use. Something that has always been frustrating within After Effects is the ability to work with Corner Pins when tracking, making it difficult to corner pin non-rectangular objects. The ability to “pin any shape” helps to overcome this allowing the end user to choose which part of the shape will become the basis for the corner pin.

This is extremely useful and saves a huge amount of time and effort when trying to accurately incorporate objects into your match moving. Combine this with excellent refinement tools to scale, rotate, reposition and offset your tracked object along with the ability to add motion blur that matches the Motion Blur within your After Effects Comp and you have a planar tracker that offers high-quality sampling and the ability to choose a balance of smooth to sharp rendering depending on the needs of the Composite.

I have always been a huge fan of Mocha for planar tracking. I don’t see myself moving away from it completely as I am very familiar with the interface. Knowing what I can and can’t achieve when I use it, I, however, do now see myself moving between Mocha and The King Pin Tracker depending on the needs of the shot in question. The King Pin Tracker really holds its own and as I believe it will only get better with future releases. One wish, a less After Effects-like control panel.

Spot Clone Tracker
The ability to remove unwanted objects from scenes quickly and easily is essential for every compositors. Over the years, this has become a less time-intensive process with the ability to clone and track objects becoming more refined as technologies advance. The Spot Cloner allows you to clone areas of a shot and then track them to another area of the same image in order to remove items that you don’t want in the shot. It does this with ease and can easily overcome the challenges of different lighting and textures between the source image and the result. It offers six different methods of cloning and repairing, all of which allow manual adjustment for further refinement.

It would be great to see both the King Pin Tracker and Spot Cloner Tracker incorporated into one Individual Tracker so that all the VFX Suite trackers are in the same place with their own custom user interface.

Since I have had the VFX Suite to road test, I have used the Spot Cloner Tracker daily. Like all object cloning and removal tools, there isn’t a magic button that handles the process automatically. You will still need to understand the processes of what you are trying allowing all less flare to be fully customizable in both 3D and 2D.

New features here include automated behaviours such as pulsing, Bickering and strobing. Lens textures allow the user to add more realism to their lens flares by adding additional dust and scratches.

Working with the Light Factory is incredibly intuitive and fast. It provides exceptional results both for VFX and Motion Design work. Not many plug-ins get it right when it comes to Lens Flares, but Red Giant has done well with the latest version of Knoll Light Factory.

Chromatic Displacement
The Chromatic Displacement plug-in boasts full GPU acceleration with the ability to render in CPU mode should you not have access to GPU rendering. Again, this plug-in is incredibly fast.

Chromatic Displacement uses one layer to displace the pixels of another, while smoothly separating out the colours. Unlike the Displacement Map effect in After
Effects, Chromatic Displacement uses the displacement image as a height map, which gives you beautiful, organic results.

This allows the user to create effects such as heat ripples, light refraction, force fields as well as creating new and interesting ideas for motion graphics artists. It is easy-to-use and provides stunning results. What you achieve using this plug-in will depend on your material and what you are trying to achieve. A good addition to your VFX plug-ins arsenal.

The VFX Suite also comes with the VFX Optical Glow plug-in for photo-realistic glows, VFX Shadow to allow the user to add realistic perspective shadows and VFX Reflection to add realistic shadows to your composition.

In short, having put the VFX Suite through its paces, I am awed by most of its features and its ability to deliver what it has promised. I believe from my experience with the product that Red Giant keeps the end user firmly in mind when they designing their toolset and puts a great deal of time and effort into creating plug-ins that the end user actually needs and not what they think we may need.

The plug-ins are extremely fast, user friendly and allow for extreme precision when creating both VFX and motion graphics and will be a welcome addition for compositors, finishing artists and motion designers alike.

Alistair Rankine is a post production manager, colourist and VFX artist working in both the UAE and the UK.

The Good

The Supercomp plug-in, the King Pin Tracker and the Spot Clone tracker are all excellent time savers when working on compositing and clean-up work.

The Bad

The $999 price tag could be a dampener for some. I don’t have a problem with it because if your work warrants using the VFX Suite daily, I imagine the financial returns will outweigh the initial costing. If your returns don’t warrant the $999 price tag then you probably don’t need it in your toolset.

My Wishlist

An entire new standalone User Interface would be great. I have always loved After Effects but have preferred the parameter controls on products such as Flame and Nuke. If there is a way of combining all of the individual plug-ins into one concise GUI, I would be extremely happy.

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Mustafa Abbas was recently in the spotlight for his latest short film, *The Long Game*, which won Best Mystery Film at the Los Angeles Film Awards 2020 and Best Action/Crime Short at the London Independent Film Awards. It also picked up accolades at the New York Film Awards and the Top Shorts Film Festival. The Emirati filmmaker talks about the making of *The Long Game*, his upcoming projects and what makes him tick with Shifa Naseer.

Director Mustafa Abbas has been making films for the last decade and has won critical acclaim in the festival circuit for several of his shorts. Known for making films that evoke different interpretations, he made headlines recently with his latest short, *The Long Game*, a 30-minute crime thriller in which a former criminal teams up with a mysterious woman to avenge his lover’s murder.

“The plan for this film was conceptualised in 2016, but I only began working on it last year,” explains Abbas, who has a penchant for crime stories. “I’m proud of what I have achieved with *The Long Game*. It is a bit of a heavy film, and such films take a toll on you when you’re writing as well as directing.”

While Abbas doesn’t reveal the inspiration behind *The Long Game*, he explains that the paradoxical nature of the characters appealed to him. “A former criminal leaves his life of violence for love. And it is that love that takes him back on the same road. The film portrays the test of character, a point of no return. This is what I built my story on.”

*The Long Game* was still doing rounds in film festivals globally until the Covid-19 outbreak. Scripted for an English-speaking audience with an almost-all British cast, it was completed over summer last year and screened at film festivals earlier this year.

“A lot goes into the production of a film: there is pre-production, filming, post-production, and all of this involves a number of other steps before the final packaging. We took our time with this film,” says Abbas. “It was such a great experience for me, especially interacting with the actors. It was heartening to see that the entire team was on the same page and vision to bring the characters to life.”

When directing thrillers, he prefers dark visuals and hard lighting to convey the mood. For instance, a scene from *The Long Game*, which Abbas claims is one of his favourites, shows a woman hidden...
partly in the shadows against a bright background, and a man in black standing over her, delivering lines in a deep, coarse voice. The clip has been shared on his Instagram profile.

In stark contrast, *Sunset State* (2013), another Abbas short, explores the inner thoughts and feelings of two neighbours. "Writing something like *Sunset State* doesn’t come as naturally as the crime genre, in which I have more practice. To me, *Sunset State* was a movie about human beings and emotions. The film tells the story of two men battling the same situation in completely different ways. "The response to the film has been overwhelming, because it is a film people can relate to. His psychological thriller *Sarab* (2010) is a case in point. The film appears to be exploring the relationship between a husband and wife, but we learn that appearances can be deceptive. The film does not offer the usual closure expected in traditional storytelling. In fact, it leaves us disturbed.

Abbas admits that the storyline has indeed confused many viewers. "*Sarab* is more of a puzzle. It is a 10-minute film; it couldn’t be longer than that. The film is a jumble you CAN solve; the clues are in there. I don’t believe in open endings; I believe in endings that look open, but the answers are always there." This thinking outside the box is perhaps what probably makes his plots unique and artistically appealing. "You can write about things that excite you, intrigue you. But with the fourth or fifth project, you form a style and then you no longer consciously get inspired by other works of art. So it’s hard to tell where the ideas come from, and thus you keep the mystery alive. There are a lot of elements that go into making a film, but more than anything, you need passion. It’s the passion that you put into it that acts like the fuel."

That passion is also reflected in the other life Abbas leads as Managing Director of Legend Group, his family business. "For me, the film part came first, and then slowly I got involved in the family business and took off from there. As they say, with time you come to realise that you’re passionate about more than one thing."

To that end, Abbas founded a gentleman’s salon named Chivalry, a leather product brand called 35 Burgundy, and Aficionados PR and Communication, an agency to support home-grown businesses and brands in the UAE. He is also the Managing Director of Legend Group, his family business.

Abbas admits that the storyline was screened from exhibitions and festivals to its release, we used to get requests people can relate to. Even years after its release, we used to get requests to leave his viewers unsettled; his latest one is better than the previous one. I am probably yet to make that one."

"Having had success in the short film format, Abbas is eager to now venture into his ultimate dream of making a feature film. He had the opportunity to make one 12 years ago, but it fell through. "I’m glad it didn’t work out."

In writing, directing and editing almost all his films, Abbas makes sure his stories don’t fall into the trap of giving just one perspective. "I listen to whoever is watching the first cut, the second cut, and keep asking if we need to make any changes. If I’m unsure about something, I make it a point to get a second but valid opinion. Sometimes I just show the film to a handful of friends and see what feedback they give, before releasing it to a film festival or to the public."

Asked to pick a favourite, Abbas says: "With each film, you improve. A lot of times, creatively, or intellectually, the latest one is more than that. The film is a puzzle you CAN solve; the clues are in there. I don’t believe in open endings; I believe in endings that look open, but the answers are always there."

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For Abbas, films offer the perfect medium to tell a good story. "Everybody makes movies for different reasons. It’s not about culture or society for me. It’s about the characters and the story."

"Abbas’ signature style seems to be to leave his viewers unsettled; or perhaps it’s his stories that have that quality to them."

In *The Long Game*, featuring actress Zoe Richards as Jennifer.
“When you form your own style, whether good or bad, people need to compare it to something, especially if it’s a short film. They can’t go online, read reviews and see how many stars a film has received or go to the rating on Rotten Tomatoes.”

Therefore, finding the right audience is important.

“Without an audience, a film is incomplete. So you have to find out whom your film is made for. I have been told my films are for people who like to think, and I would like to agree with them. I focus on an audience that wants to be intellectually stimulated, perhaps because I like to be intellectually stimulated.”

Stressing on the importance of evolving with time, Abbas believes it’s the desire to never stop learning that makes an artist grow and improve.

“I believe in the saying that your best work is always ahead of you, never behind you. When a person thinks that they’ve become the best version of themselves, that is when they’re in trouble. There is always room for improvement. As long as we give you something that you will take home with you, it is worthwhile. That’s how I look at it.”

Whether Abbas heads a large business empire or not, funding for films and making money remains a challenge. For Sunset State, he secured funding from Creative Lab, part of twofour54 Abu Dhabi. For The Long Game, he dipped into his own wallet.

Making money from short films is equally challenging.

“Some platforms will give some sort of an income for short films, others don’t. In most cases, short films are made to get your foot in the door, whether it’s for film festivals or connections or producers.

“The industry here is still in its formative phase. It is not yet in a place, where we can see 10 or 20 feature films coming out of the UAE ... But it’s an exciting time for the industry – a lot of short films!”

Mustafa Abbas, filmmaker

the UAE. We do see some feature films from the UAE on a yearly basis, but you can’t compare it to other industries. But it’s an exciting time for the industry – a lot of short films!”

Mustafa Abbas has been fortunate on several fronts. With the ability to tell good stories and win awards at festivals, he has done his country proud. More importantly, he has an edge over other filmmakers, with funding coming from both external and internal sources.

“I am not the kind of filmmaker who wants to make 100 films in his life. That is not me. Quality has to be the utmost priority, and if I happen to make at least 10 feature films which are good, I’ll be happy,” says Abbas.

Driven by his passion for filmmaking, this promising Emirati writer and director has a lot more stories to tell. After making a mark on the international platform with his work, it’s only a matter of time before Abbas sets his own stage for his films. #

The festival for corporate films, online media productions and documentaries

The Cannes Corporate Media & TV Awards honor every year the world’s best corporate films online media and documentaries in one of the most important film centres in the world: Cannes, France.

The festival warmly invites film producers, agencies, client companies and students from all over the world to submit their productions to this year’s competition.

www.cannescorporate.com
Canon ME makes its mark with new C300 camera

Hitachi Kokusai introduces 8K camera

MediaKind ensures transition to IP-based media delivery with Aquila Broadcast

AVIWEST announces new Rack video encoders

Dielectric debuts DCR-Q VHF TV antenna

VSN offers greater efficiency with enhancements
Sony’s new compact 4K cameras support full IP

Sony has introduced two new compact cameras – SRG-X1P (Professional) and SRG-X1BP (Broadcast) – that deliver images at 4K 60p (POV) and SRG-XB25 (BOX) – a compact camera – SRG-XP1. Sony has introduced two new compact cameras – SRG-X1P (Professional) and SRG-X1BP (Broadcast) – that deliver images at 4K 60p (POV) and SRG-XB25 (BOX) – a compact camera – SRG-XP1. The cameras allow playback of 4K video at up to 1,000 frames per second for live broadcast applications. One of the key features of the FT-ONE is its brightness. When equipped with a Big Bogen lens, the camera shoots footage up to four times brighter than models with a PL lens. The camera shoots up to 1,000 fps in 4K, offering simultaneous record and playback with internal memory, and features independent real-time 4K or HD output. Other features include 24-wells colour correction and compatibility with Canon’s OLED viewfinder. The camera can also be used with FOR-A’s ZE-ONE 4K zoom extractor, which can frame and extract specified HD scenes from 4K sources using an intuitive touch-screen interface.

Bridge Technologies partners with Appear TV to provide advanced IP-based production and distribution

Bridge Technologies has collaborated with Appear TV to create an advanced IP-based production and distribution setup, which facilitates built-in delivery and monitoring of data, unencoded, compressed or uncompressed, from production to end-user. This development from Bridge Technologies’ recently announced Integrated Services Monitoring (ISM) model, which brings together the company’s portfolio of products into aturkey, easy-to-install media monitoring system.

The advanced IP-based production and distribution setup, which would have also been demonstrated at NAB this year, is a successfully tested walk of technology for a full-length monitoring solution from production to end-user, using SDI, SPTS, MPTS and OTT standards. The setup has been fully tested with four cameras with SDI outputs feeding an IP network’s processor to bridge SDI and IP networks. The encapsulated SDI-IP signal is forwarded to the Appear VX that encodes SDI into SPTS multicast and to the Appear ABR transcoder for conversion to HLS OTT and distribution. The Appear XCP1000 carrier-grade platform with built-in automatic routing and color-accurate video display allows for full-motion, color-accurate 4K ultra-low-latency video to be made available from any source to any application in the cloud, from a fixed studio, remote OB van or head-end environment, such that a geographically-separated team can work together on the same project.

Ross Video announces V2 of Gator Toolbox

As part of the Ross Live I 2020 programme, Ross Video has announced the latest iteration of Gator Toolbox – the 4K UHD signal conversion problem solver. To be available at NAB Show 2019, Gator Toolbox offers all-in-one UHD up/down/cross, HDR conversion, standards conversion and frame synchronisation for UHD workflows over 12G-SDI, all in a modular open-source form factor. Gator Toolbox addresses signal conversion needs in broadcast, production and live event workflows where low latency and quality UHD, HDR and 4K are required. New for 2020, V2 is a free software update which sees the addition of SDI (baseband in or out) and user-defined conversion to quickly recall common configurations – extremely useful in situations where customers have very dynamic workflows. V2 also supports new hardware, which includes discrete AES audio embedding-deembedding and support for fibre, mirroring the increase in popularity of fibre-based systems. V2 of Gator Toolbox is scheduled to be released in June 2020.

NAGRA offers content protection with NexGuard

NAGRA has launched NexGuard ClipMark forensic watermarking technology to detect the source of pre-release content leaks on very short video clips, down to thirty-seconds. NexGuard content owners and post-production houses can supplement NexGuard watermarking technologies for pre-release workflows and extend those capabilities to high-value pre-release assets.

Share and Q5X unveil new wireless transmitters

Wireless mic developer OEX and professional audio specialist Share have collaborated to develop specialised Avant Digital-Enabled OEX Wireless Transmitters to deliver wireless digital technology with RF stability, encryption, and spectral efficiency. The new transmitters are designed to directly address ongoing technical challenges plaguing major sports organisations. OEX has three form factor models that feature the latest Avant Digital technology, including the CoachMic, PlayerMic, and AquaMic, which is designed for wet environments such as outdoor functions or water sports. The transmitters will be available this summer 2020.

www.shure.eu / www.q5x.com
Getting to grips with the AV-over-IP stack

“When migrating to AV-over-IP, the control layer is one of the most crucial aspects to consider, as it affects nearly everybody who interacts with the system on a daily basis.”

Brad Price is Senior Product Marketing Manager at Audinate.
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