

Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS)

Creativity and quality are key values for Australia's premier training institution for film, broadcast and digital media, the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS). At the epicentre is the Digital Media Department which provides visual effects, animation, titles and broadcast design for all student productions. Providing the digital firepower for high-demand, high-performance computing are 10 HP xw6000 Workstations, working 24/7. Their reliability, performance and ease-of-use helps AFTRS students to test and explore their creative ideas in one of the nation's most demanding and exciting training environments. The success of the Australian Film Television and Radio School is built on two things: providing professional training to experienced industry professionals and full-time courses that combine exceptional talent, mentoring by established industry players and the very best in high-end technology. Teams of full-time students produce award-winning films in a 'hothouse' environment designed to develop storytelling, collaboration and practical filmmaking skills. As well as working as part of the production team on all AFTRS productions, each year the Digital Media Department also initiates four creative works of its own. These works are designed to push the boundaries of technology and ideas in the competitive and fast-moving areas of 3D animation and computer graphics, including hybrid works layering live action with computer-generated imagery. Central to the success of the Digital Media Department's projects are 10 HP xw6000 Workstations. Teaming with HP reseller Storm FX, solution specialists in the field of visual effects and computer graphics, AFTRS has created a high-performing, robust and environmentally-efficient digital media lab that helps students solve both technical and storytelling problems.

How HP helped

During peak pre- and post-production periods, the AFTRS digital media lab works 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If all HP workstations aren't being used by students working on individual or team productions, the remaining HP workstations are employed 'rendering' images around the clock to meet deadlines. Computing equipment reliability and performance are crucial factors in the intense and deadline driven environment of student film production.

The AFTRS digital media lab has deployed 10 HP xw6000 Workstations with Dual 3.06 Gigahertz Xeon processors. The machines are set up with both Microsoft® Windows® XP and Linux operating systems to enable users to switch between key graphic and animation software platforms. With 160 gigabytes of local storage in each workstation and another terabyte available on a file server, the HP workstations are networked together to optimise processing power. Such is the high-intensity, power computing requirements of this work, it can sometimes take an hour to 'render' a single film frame, particularly for sophisticated 3D animation.

Environmental factors were a vital consideration in the decision to invest in the HP workstations, as Peter Giles, AFTRS Head of Digital Media explained.

"Our HP workstations are an integral part of the planning, creative and finishing process for student productions. In busy production times it is not unusual for directors and production teams to work long, uninterrupted stints on their creative works. Noise and size of the machines was a significant consideration in our choice of a technology platform. The HP

workstations are nicely compact and quiet. That makes a difference to the comfort and ease-of-use, and allows students in the lab to focus on being creative and productive," he said.

For director and digital media student Phil Smith, the HP workstations have been an essential component in all stages of creation for his children's film "Crooked Mick", which combines a 3D animated landscape with live action characters.

"The workstations enabled a month of fast turnaround pre-visualisation work which helped communicate the creative vision, and helped solve technical problems of camera angles and positioning of actors and sets before we began shooting in the studio," he said.

"Now we are in post-production and, because these workstations are so powerful and fast, we don't have to spend time worrying about technical limitations: I feel virtually unrestricted in what I am trying to realise creatively in the scenes."

"Crooked Mick" is a film that explores early Australian storytelling and mythology. Its larger-than-life bush characters take a journey through a surreal, exaggerated Australian landscape searching for their place in the world. Creating the hybrid of an imaginary landscape with live action characters requires complex compositing of the many layers for each scene, which has been done almost entirely on the HP machines.

"The HP workstations are handling the workload exceptionally well. For some complex compositing we are managing to render frames in about 10 minutes," said Phil Smith.

Value delivered

AFTRS chose to commit to the HP technology platform after researching and canvassing the technology successes of commercial counterparts in the film industry. HP offered a proven platform for the specialised industry of film, graphics and visual effects. Together with solution specialist and HP reseller, Storm FX, the School felt secure working with vendors who could provide reliable servicing and support and deliver solutions unique to its creative needs.

"Reliable service and support, and the fact that it was proven technology, were important factors in deciding to invest in the HP workstations. Also, working with a specialist solutions partner like Storm FX, who knows our industry and provides us with the unique software and accessories we require for this kind of computing, creates a solid foundation for our evolving needs," said Mr Giles.

"Our approach and philosophy was to tailor the technology to serve the ideas and creative direction of our students and, with our partnership with Storm FX and the HP technologies, we feel we are achieving this".

Summary

Industry: The Australian Film Television and Radio School is the national centre for professional education and advanced training in film, broadcast and digital media production.

Solution: 10 HP xw6000 Workstations customised with sophisticated 3D animation and visual effects software to create a high performance and reliable film and media lab.

Hardware: 10 HP xw6000 high performance, dual processor 3D workstations.

Software: Dual-boot Windows XP and Linux environments, Maya Alias Systems, Apple Shake, Adobe After Effects and Illustrator, and Photoshop.

Challenge: To provide a reliable, robust and environmentally comfortable lab for creative and powerful computing.

Benefits: The AFTRS digital media lab now has low noise, small footprint, powerful workstations that keep on performing. Partnering with HP reseller, Storm FX provides reliable support and tailored solutions for the high-end computer graphics.

About Australian Film, Television and Radio School

The Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) is the national centre for professional education and advanced training in film, broadcast and digital media production. More information about AFTRS is available at www.aftrs.edu.au

About Storm FX

Storm FX is Australia's leading supplier of solutions for 3D, compositing, effects and editing. Our office is based in Sydney – the hub of Australia's digital content production. Storm FX was founded in 1995 by a group of 3D production experts – all with a strong history of 3D and graphics production experience. With this expertise, Storm FX is well placed to better understand the needs of its clients, and provide help solutions to their individual requirements.