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Luma Pictures streamlines workflow with Small Tree Communications

BY CHRIS SAGE

The mission if you choose to accept it: Produce six 15-second television commercial spots for Nike using limited stock footage manipulated with complicated visual effects sequences. Oh, and do all of this in five-and-a-half weeks.

That was the charge given to us at Luma Pictures, a visual effects studio based in Santa Monica, CA, by production company Notorious 24/7. Crazy as it sounds, we accepted the mission, I mean project, and successfully completed the task.

Known primarily for our visual effects work on major motion pictures such as "Underworld," "Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow" and "The Cave," we were eager to tackle this challenging project.

From fantasy to reality

The "Nike vs. Nature" campaign, created by Wieden + Kennedy, compares top-flight NBA players with forces of nature. Out of a tornado viciously spinning across land comes Phoenix Suns' guard Steve Nash using a spin move to leave a defender in his wake. As fire winds its way through the paint, hot-headed Detroit Pistons' forward Rasheed Wallace fires a monster dunk home. From the plains of Africa, a lion steps onto the court and hurls into the lane, picking up speed, leaping as the Cleveland Cavaliers' forward LeBron James sends in a tomahawk jam.

Because we couldn't set the court on fire, bottle a tornado and unleash it on the court or take the time to train a lion to run down the court and leap at the appropriate point, we were directed to mold the real with the unreal ... and fast. With less than a month and a half to complete the spots, we needed every

ounce of bandwidth necessary so that multiple members of the team could work on the spots simultaneously.

We are an all-Mac facility, working on off-the-shelf Apple G5 workstations and Xserves. These are ideal for producing creative content, but they're limiting with regard to supplying the throughput needed for this project. The solution was the installation of multi-port Gigabit Ethernet (GbE) cards and an 802.3ad link aggregation system, both of which were provided by Small Tree Communications.

Gearing up

Small Tree's multi-port cards support jumbo frames, which offer higher data transfer rates. The dual-, quad- and six-port Gigabit over copper Ethernet adapters are 64-bit/133MHz PCI-X network interface cards containing two, four or six independent 10/100/1000 megabit ports on one PCI-X adapter. When used in conjunction with Small Tree's 802.3ad link aggregation, which bonds multiple Ethernet ports into one virtual interface, bandwidth levels increased to provide a more streamlined workflow, enabling Luma to meet the tight deadline. With the Small Tree gear, we often times reach 15 percent to 20 percent beyond what we were previously achieving.

Our biggest challenges were the time frame and finding and manipulating the footage. When you're on such a tight schedule, tasks have to occur simultaneously. Therefore, people are working on the elements as they're being composed at the same time. As artists continue to refine the elements, everybody moves in tandem in a parallel, nonlinear way. All the sequences



Luma Pictures produced six 15-second television commercial spots for Nike using limited stock footage manipulated with complicated visual effects sequences. To meet the tight deadline and increase server throughput, the company used multi-port Gigabit Ethernet cards and an 802.3ad link aggregation system from Small Tree Communications.

run in parallel as well. We scheduled the more difficult sequences towards the end of the delivery, in order to give them the greatest amount of development time.

The GbE adapters eased network congestion, simplified network management and provided increased server throughput available while minimizing CPU use. The cards offered an instant performance boost over Cat-5 UTP copper cabling and are ideal for implementing multiple network segment environments within high-performance servers.

By installing the GbE cards and 802.3ad link aggregation, we were able to meet the client's deadline. Without them, it would have been extremely difficult. Our options would have been limited and cost-prohibitive. We probably would have had to hire additional staff, increasing our budget and turnaround time to the point where our client would have explored other options. **BE**

Chris Sage is vice president of operations for Luma Pictures.