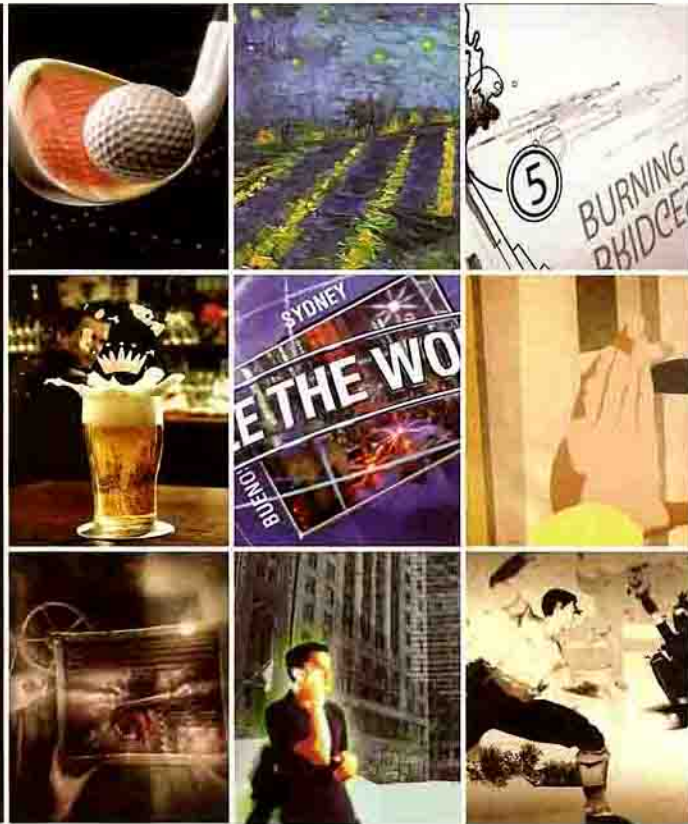


MOTION GRAPHICS

PICTURES THAT MOVE IN CHICAGO

Words: Kay Daly

Design: Sharon Bending



Take 1: The mobster's face glares as the words "The Sopranos" drift before him.

Take 2: Two houseflies engage in lifelike fisticuffs.

Take 3: As a man anticipates a frosty beer, the foam bursts up to form the signature Budweiser's crown-shaped logo.

These three wonders were all created by motion graphics, a hybrid field that brings together animation, video and text to create everything from the majestic fields of Middle Earth to the opening credits of your favorite television show.

Once a high-budget rarity, motion graphics are now almost common in every creative project. "It used to be that these kind of visual effects were only done in Hollywood for big sci-fi films," explains Andrew Dillon, director of the Visual Effects and Motion Graphics program at the Illinois Institute of Arts. "Today you see them in everyday television commercials."

But while these effects are ubiquitous, the work itself is far from mundane. "Only people in the industry understand how much talent, sweat and energy are involved," says Mason Dixon, principal of Design After Next (DFX) and founder of Motion Graphics Chicago, a motion graphics professional association. As Dixon explains, creating these effects is a tremendously time-intensive process: a six-minute video can take 14 months to produce.





ILIC students shooting green screen elements in the school's studio



Brian McCauley composited commercial project for ILIC
All images courtesy of the Illinois Institute of Art



Nick Campbell broadcast promo project for ILIC



Composing project for ILIC

It's an effort creative professionals are increasingly willing to make, as the motion graphics field explodes in terms of size and capability. Technological advances have driven the field, but it's the commitment to creative communication that is allowing Chicago's motion graphics industry to challenge the heavy hitters on the coasts.

ANYONE WITH A LAPTOP

Dillon's motion graphics program at IIA, now in its third year, is one indicator of the increased demand for this kind of work in the Chicago professional market. More and more motion

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graphics companies are looking to hire workers with specific skills. But it's also a result of advances that have revolutionized the field. "In the last five to 10 years, new powerful technology has emerged so that we can create in the classroom what was previously done only in Hollywood," Dillon explains. "Not long ago you'd need machines that cost \$50,000 to \$100,000 in order to do the layering of effects. In the last five years, it's all become much more accessible."

Siena Esposito, an industry veteran who teaches motion graphics at IIA, recalls the once-standard technology. "In the '90s, the work was done in the big production houses using expensive proprietary programs." Discreet's Flame and Inferno programs were costly and required high-power processors to run. That's changed with the development of powerful desktops and more affordable software programs, such as Adobe After Effects, Apple Shake, Apple Motion, and Discreet Combustion.

That also means a more level playing field for aspiring motion graphics professionals. "Anyone with a laptop can now claim they're a motion graphics artist," says one industry insider. The same advances have revolutionized training. "When I'm teaching, I love to open my students' eyes to the fact that they're seeing motion graphics every day — and that this is all technology they can do," says Esposito.

But the most accomplished professionals will tell you that technology is only half the battle. In Dillon's program, teachers like Esposito emphasize the traditional skills of communication arts: artistic skills, messaging and audience. Outside of the classroom, the professionals agree: "Bells and whistles are only the starting point," says Scott Marvel of Daily Planet, a local motion graphics boutique firm.



Images courtesy of Design After Next



Images courtesy of Siena Esposito, Illinois Institute of Art



In a campaign they created for MacGregor Golf, S2 combined motion graphics design with the live action of golf pro Greg Norman. Images courtesy of S2

BOUTIQUES AND BIG BOYS

Even with the creative demands of the field, technological advances have had one result: an explosion in the number of companies offering motion graphics services. The big boys of the industry are post production houses, which supply motion graphics services through a graphics house or department. For example, S2 (formerly known as Swell), one of Chicago's leading post production houses, handles motion graphics via in-house creative directors and designers. The firm's graphics division plays a major role in the production and post of projects ranging from a TV spot for MacGregor Golf to large-scale digital ads for FAO Schwartz exhibited in Times Square.

Avenue, another well-known post house, has a similar relationship with SOMERsault. Originally Avenue's graphics department, SOMERsault now collaborates on Avenue projects while maintaining a separate client list. Like many post houses, SOMERsault claims to offer something newer specialty firms can't. "As 'fast food' motion graphics design sweeps the pop cultural landscape, where everyone and anyone with Flash or After Effects is suddenly a designer, we provide a gourmet alternative for distinctive palates," says Ross Woods, a SOMERsault producer. If you've seen Bernie Mac morph from the 1970s to the present on a TV spot for the Illinois Lottery, you've seen SOMERsault in action.

But post houses are far from the only game in town. Says Dixon, "The trend is toward a lot of smaller boutiques and freelancers" – the kinds of companies that are enabled by affordable, accessible software programs. Dixon's own company, Design After Next, is a key example. Dixon and his two partners started the company because they wanted to explore the possibilities of animation. Since then, they've produced work for IBM, The Mayo Clinic and Sony. Their music video for Indie rock group American Analog Set premiered at the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood as part of Resfest's SIGGRAPH show.

On the other end of the spectrum is Digital Kitchen, one of Chicago's most renowned motion graphics boutiques. With a staff of more than 70 located in three offices, Digital Kitchen specializes in entertainment projects such as opening credits for HBO's "Six Feet Under," FX's "Nip/Tuck" and FOX's "House." Says Don McNeill, president and executive producer, Digital Kitchen attracts clients with its cross-industry capabilities. "Our entertainment clients like that we bring branding expertise, while our advertising clients want our entertainment approach."

Larger firms like Digital Kitchen tend to offer start-to-finish concept-to-campaign services, while smaller firms do a mix of full-service alongside piecework. That's the case for protokulture,



Images courtesy of SOMERsault



Images courtesy of Digital Kitchen

“Chicago’s reputation for motion graphics internationally is a bold, edgy one, decidedly modern though a bit gritty.”

a small motion graphics boutique in Chicago. John Michaels, protokulture’s creative director and owner, says the firm does about 30 to 40 percent of its work “from scratch” from original ideas to design and execution. With four full-time staffers, protokulture specializes in commercial advertising, and has produced work for high-profile clients, including a promotional DVD for Kellogg’s and a concept campaign for Dell Computers.

While many boutiques are fairly new, some long-term companies have evolved to match new demands. That’s the case for Daily Planet, which has a 25-year history in the pre-viz and storyboarding business. In the last two years, Daily Planet has switched its focus to motion graphics and design. According to Marvel, one of Daily Planet’s editors, it’s this background in storyboarding that gives them an edge. Citing a recent project, the pre-game Jumbotron show for the Blackhawks, Marvel notes that Daily Planet beat out six other companies, largely because of their ability for strong storytelling.

IT’S A FREELANCE WORLD

While just about every firm speaks proudly of the teams they’ve assembled, insiders know the industry’s worst-kept secret: it’s freelancers who “fill in the gaps.” Says Dixon, “It’s common to keep a series of freelancers orbiting around a company.” The arrangement can even amount to a kind of “permalance,” in which freelancers are kept on-call pretty much indefinitely, but never hired on permanently.

And while most companies talk about limiting freelancer use, there are advantages to the arrangement. “You need to be able to move with the job,” says Michaels of protokulture. As he explains, a firm may not have enough work to justify keeping a full staff of traditional animators or artists who do 3-D. Freelancers allow companies to customize their teams to handle those special tasks. And from a freelancer’s perspective, Michaels says, there is the freedom to choose the projects that are best suited to one’s skills.

Post houses are less likely to use freelancers since they frequently maintain full graphics departments, but they face staffing challenges of their own. Says O’Brien, “We require an unusual combination of skills, bringing together both the aesthetic sense and the client contact skills. We look for those who can do both, and that can be very hard to find.” What’s more, O’Brien says, there is a strong freelance culture in motion graphics. Freelancers in the field enjoy the freedom as well as the money they can make on their own, so they’re less willing to commit to a single company.

Staffing is so challenging because of the unique blend of skills required of motion graphics talent, especially if that talent needs to fill a customer service role as well. “It’s a personality thing,” explains Michaels. “People who sit all day in front of computers are not going to be as good with clients. You need to find a balance.”



Images courtesy of protokulture



Images courtesy of Daily Planet

BEER AND CHEESE

Finding that balance is even more crucial as Chicago's place in the industry gains recognition. Currently, the work done in Chicago aligns with the city's traditional industries. "Chicago is great, but it's 'beer and cheese,'" says Michaels. Retail heavy, the city mostly offers work in product advertising, while the "sexier" work of entertainment, broadcast design and branding tend to go to Los Angeles and New York.

As a result, Chicago's industry suffers from a dual case of "third-city syndrome" and "coast envy." Says Dixon, "Chicago is seen as the 'test market' in the production community." Companies come here for animatics and to test commercials; then go to the coasts for the finish. Local firms struggle how to contend with the "land locked" nature of the Chicago industry profile, whether they focus on regional Midwest

clients, or ponder the possibility of adding a presence on the coasts, like protokulture.

But ultimately, the market is waking up to the fact that you don't need to be in the same city as your client to do the work. Companies like Digital Kitchen have done well in entertainment, and other firms have found success working remotely. "We used to fight the provincial notion of NY/LA superiority, but we found that good clients go where the good work is, no matter what the address," says Woods. "Unknowing local clients will still hedge their bets and go to the coasts. Chicago's reputation for motion graphics design internationally, however, is a bold, edgy one, decidedly modern though a bit gritty. In contrast to the corporate, mainstream work on the coasts, Chicago motion graphics design emerges as defiantly unconventional and progressive." ■

About the contributor: Kay Daly is a freelance writer/editor who specializes in Web writing and education and arts content. She has served as managing editor for America Online's Local City Guide and manager of editor services for FastWeb.com. As a freelancer, she has worked with industry leaders including Starwood Hotels, Diageo, Crown Royal, and BMG. She's also written articles on a range of topics including local dining, career planning, and arts/leisure. Her work has appeared in *TimeOut Chicago*, *The Chicago Sun-Times Red Streak*, *Chicago Social*, and *Dramatics Magazine*. Her work is available online at www.waylaid.com.

About the designer: Sharon Bending has been designing for as long as she can remember. Whether it was taking orders for posters at the age of 8, or the interior design of her bedroom at age 13, she's always been inspired to create. She's turned that love into a career and started Bending Design, Inc. in 2003. She's worked with a wide variety of clients, from large corporate financial services firms to small businesses in areas including interior design, real estate development, and technology. She offers an array of services from strategy and graphic design to e-communications and multimedia. She can be reached through her Web site at www.bendingdesign.com.