



At Zero VFX, Blue Arc Storage Helps Turns Visions Into Reality

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Sean Devereaux
Co-founder, Zero VFX



Summary

Zero VFX is one of the big success stories in the digital visual effects industry. Founded by three veteran artists and producers, the company has grown to more than 30 people in less than two years and has built an impressive resume of work on feature films and advertising for some of the world’s biggest brands. And it has accomplished all of this even though it is not based in one of the industry’s traditional hubs. As the company quickly took on more work—and more complex work—it realized it needed to upgrade its storage infrastructure so that it could deliver on the promise of quality demanded by its founders. For sheer performance and simple scalability, Zero VFX chose a Mercury solution from BlueArc. As a result, the company is not only setting new quality standards, it has in place a solution that is helping to deliver eye-opening video effects to its customers and peace of mind to its founders.

The Company

In the beginning of 2010, Zero VFX was a dream in the eyes of its founders, three of the leading artists and producers in the digital video effects industry. The dream was to build a world-class visual effects studio based in Boston, doing breakthrough work in advertising and feature films. At the time, Boston was not exactly a hotbed of activity for visual digital effects, certainly not compared to traditional digital media centers in Los Angeles, San Francisco or New York. Nevertheless, in January of that year the start up team set up shop in the basement of one of the founders, armed with the dream and enough of a technology base to get started, including a \$4,000 Netgear network attached storage system.

Now, less than two years later, the dream has not only turned into reality, it has blossomed even beyond the most optimistic expectations of founders Sean Devereaux, Brian Dewes and Marc Sadeghi. Since it’s humble beginnings, Zero VFX has done commercial work for major brands such as Ocean Spray, Bank of America, McDonalds, Subway and the Boston Red Sox, among others: it has done video effects and high-end compositing work for major feature films from studios such as Warner Brothers, Sony Pictures and Columbia; and Zero VFX has set up a separate sister company—ZYNC—that specializes in cloud rendering.

Meanwhile, Zero VFX now has more than 30 employees—and growing—and occupies approximately 8,000 square feet in one of the most elite buildings in Boston. Not bad for three guys with a vision, a dream and a \$4,000 NAS. Of course, the Netgear NAS is long gone, and Zero VFX now uses a Mercury network attached storage solution from BlueArc, which is giving the company the stability, performance and scalability to take on exciting new projects and continue to expand its business.

The Challenge

With three founders who were established veterans in the world of digital video effects, the Zero VFX team was well aware of BlueArc’s solutions right from the beginning. The biggest challenge was in building the business to the point where it made economic sense to

utilize BlueArc. After starting with Netgear, the company invested in a more powerful server when it moved to its first office on Newbury Street, about three months after beginning operations in Devereaux's basement. At that point, with only six artists, the BlueArc solution, while attractive, wouldn't have been cost-effective. But then the business started building, says Devereaux, whose film credits include Transformers, X-Men, Live Free or Die Hard, Cinderella Man and many others, and whose official title at Zero VFX is VFX Supervisor. "We went from two-to-three commercials, to seven-to-eight and then we started booking features," Devereaux recalls. "We knew we needed to upgrade."

The Solution

Zero VFX carefully evaluated solutions from two vendors before deciding to go with BlueArc. "It was a game-time decision to go with BlueArc," Devereaux says. "We liked the technology better. Two of the big things for us were throughput and the ability to upgrade quickly and easily. One of the great things about the BlueArc solution is that if a faster disk comes out next year, you can easily get an automatic performance upgrade. That's what set BlueArc apart from the competition."

Zero VFX now uses a BlueArc Mercury solution with 48 TB of raw data. Performance has been absolutely critical for the company because of the way in which the creation and rendering of digital visual effects put pressure on the storage solution. Cloud rendering, for example, and 3D creation drive unprecedented demands on bandwidth and storage performance. "One of the reasons ZYNC, our cloud rendering service, is becoming popular is that it renders NUKE," Devereaux says. NUKE is probably the most popular and powerful compositing product in the industry.

"Our own 3D artists are also heavy NUKE users: It is a core tool, every artist touches it," Devereaux adds. "When you open NUKE you could have just shy of a terabyte on a single frame. You have tiles, geometry, plates – it's a massive thing and if 30 artists are working on it at once, everyone at the same time, you are talking about gigabytes and gigabytes. The BlueArc Mercury stores meta-data separately, so that helps with throughput. Also, the Mercury can provide throughput of up to 1,100 gigabytes per second. That provides us with the ability to throw a huge amount of capacity at a single user. We're able to provide that huge amount of throughput so that we can deliver the performance we need for some of the huge jobs we receive."

Another major value of the BlueArc solution, says Devereaux, is its scalability, which is important for a digital video effects studio since the workload can be variable depending upon the types of jobs that come in. "Although we plan ahead and we try to project what we'll need, we don't always know if projects are going to hit," Devereaux says. "If another film project comes in, for instance, we would need

new disk space right away. With BlueArc, we would just ask them to send us another set of disks: We could be up and running in a matter of a few days. The other great thing about the BlueArc, in terms of scalability, is that the performance actually gets faster as you add new rows of disks. So you not only get more capacity, you get faster. For me, it's amazing that the performance doesn't drop. I came in on Labor Day and I was working on my own and the speed was amazing. Then Tuesday, people came in and everyone was working and I was still seeing the same speeds — I didn't notice any difference at all."

The Results

The BlueArc Mercury network storage solution now touches every commercial, every feature film, all production work, all rendering and even all software development at Zero VFX. It is the storage foundation for every piece of revenue the company generates. "If you ask me what the BlueArc means to us, as an artist and producer I would normally say performance, but as a business owner I have to say stability is the number one answer," Devereaux says. "Two days of production loss could end a business. As a supervisor, the performance delivered by the BlueArc means we get more iterations out of our artists than ever before. This really allows us to push the quality — if you can be working on version 13 versus version three, you can really separate yourself from the competition. We will often fix things because we can. Most jobs have a finite time horizon: If we can do more iterations in the same amount of time that translates into better quality work. We're getting 20-30 percent more iterations than ever before. Having to compromise much less on quality is really a key for me."

The Conclusion

For a young company such as Zero VFX the BlueArc solution means added credibility in the industry, "Having BlueArc helps to show that we are not a mom and pop shop, that we are professionals," Devereaux says. "Our customers know about it and they want to hear about our experience. It backs up the credibility we bring as professionals. We certainly didn't tell anybody we were using Netgear before." The credibility and performance delivered by BlueArc are especially helpful to Zero VFX, since it is not based in one of the traditional hubs for digital visual effects creation and production. "One of the things I'm most proud of," Devereaux says, "is that we've done this outside of the typical industry locale. Boston is not known for this and there's a lot of talent here graduating from schools such as MIT that would normally go to New York or LA. Now they can stay here — we're offering the opportunity to do great work and stay in Boston. We want to put Boston on the map for digital effects and we're very much on the stairwell going up there." And, with the BlueArc solution in place, the path up the stairwell will be much smoother and easier to navigate.



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