

# Visual-effects firms get a boost from video games

July 30 2013, by Richard Verrier

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In a bombed-out section of a futuristic downtown Los Angeles, a man sits on a tire next to an overturned car, staring at a computer-controlled screen fastened to his wrist, oblivious to the machine gun fire and bomb blasts around him.

The camera pans out to show an aerial view of a [war zone](#), where jet pilot Robert Downey Jr. swoops in on French actor Omar Sy, who is trying to thwart a rooftop sniper.

Directed by Guy Ritchie, the star-studded, 60-second trailer for the video game "Call of Duty: Black Ops 2" took 12 weeks to produce and involved a team of 58 people, including 34 computer graphics artists, to render a destroyed downtown L.A., complete with burned-out buildings, wrecked cars, soldiers, zombies and plenty of fire, explosions and smoke.

The trailer helped make "Call of Duty: Black Ops 2" a big hit for Activision Blizzard Inc., the Santa Monica, Calif., [game publisher](#). The game notched a staggering \$1 billion in worldwide retail sales within 15 days of its debut in November. But it was also a boon to the Mill, the visual-effects house that worked with the production company Reset and ad agency 72andSunny to create the effects for the commercial. Such projects have fueled the rapid growth of the Mill, which has 145 employees in its L.A. office, up from 30 in 2007.

"It's complex work, which our guys love doing, and it involves big teams

over long periods of time," said Ben Hampshire, managing director of the Mill Los Angeles. The Mill also has offices in London and New York. "It's a huge and vibrant part of our business, and it's flourishing as games get more complex."

Even as major studios cut back on the number of movies they release, the growth of the video games sector has been a welcome reprieve for California's visual effects industry, which has been hit hard by outsourcing and [global competition](#). Two of California's most prominent visual-effects companies filed for [bankruptcy protection](#) from creditors in the past year, at least in part because of reductions in work from the major studios.

But the fast-growing video-game industry has been picking up some of the slack, creating new growth opportunities for local effects houses. Their services are increasingly in demand as game companies look to create more realistic, movie-like images in response to consumer demand.

Some of the work involves so-called in-game cinematics - the effects that are embedded in the games - as well as 30- to 60-second commercials, with budgets of \$250,000 to \$500,000, that play a key role in promoting games.

The trend has been partly fueled by technology, with new and more powerful game consoles that have the horsepower to handle the large data files required by elaborate visual effects. At the same time, game players increasingly expect more sophisticated characters and scenes that blend live action with computer-generated images.

"We view this as a big growth sector," said Rich Flier, vice president and executive producer of advertising and games for Digital Domain in Venice. "We've seen a huge increase in the amount of work that we do"

for the video-games sector."

Digital Domain, co-founded by "Titanic" and "Avatar" filmmaker James Cameron, was acquired last year by China's Galloping Horse and India's Reliance MediaWorks in a bankruptcy auction. It creates effects to promote high-profile games, including a trailer for an upcoming "Mad Max" video game from Warner Bros. Interactive; and "Ghost Recon: Future Soldier," a shooter video game from Ubisoft Entertainment.

Another recent project was a trailer for Activision and Bungie Inc.'s "Destiny," directed by "Iron Man" director Jon Favreau, which blended live action with high-end CGI.

Digital Domain and other effects houses now commonly use performance capture - the technology that Cameron used in "Avatar" - to create increasingly realistic-looking human faces and scenes in video games.

"Everyone's trying to crack that nut to see who can build the most realistic faces and have their characters react and emote and look like their human counterparts," Flier said.

Giant Studios, which operates virtual production studios in Manhattan Beach, Calif., and Atlanta, is known for its performance capture work on such movies as "Avatar" and "The Adventures of Tintin." But the company now gets about half of its business from the video-game industry.

Giant Studios produced about 60 minutes of content for Microsoft Corp.'s recent "Halo 4" game. As with the "Avatar" movies, actors performed on a virtual stage wearing suits that digitally captured their movements and facial expressions in a process that lasted six weeks.

The firm's video-game business has increased 50 percent over the last four years, said Candice Alger, chief executive of Giant Studios.

"It has become much more lucrative over the years," Alger said. "Now they're doing these very elaborate cinematics, which are almost little films."

Another major player in the-visual effects industry also sees opportunity in the games sector.

Digital Domain rival Rhythm & Hues of El Segundo, Calif., stopped doing games work this year when it closed its commercial division as part of a cost-cutting move. But the Oscar-winning studio, which did the visual effects for the acclaimed "Life of Pi" and was acquired this year by an affiliate of Prana Studios in a bankruptcy auction, is now eager to get back into the sector.

"R&H plans to aggressively expand into the video-game business," said Lee Berger, president of Rhythm & Hues. "It's a new market and it's the type of work that is conducive to what we're already doing: creating full CG environments with animated characters."

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