ASK THE ARTISTS: OLIVER GRIMM

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Oliver Grimm, CEO of Munich based Rayd GmbH, was part of the first production team to ever work with Ventuz and has been an essential member of the Ventuz circus for almost 15 years. He spoke to us about the evolution of the software, the difference between designers and operators, and why it is important to be a lazy coward.

Ventuz:
Tell us how you became a member of the first Ventuz production team.

Oliver:
It all started with an internship at a company called Second Unit Services – that must have been over 20 years ago. I came out of university and was looking for something interesting to do. Second Unit back then created virtual studios and real-time graphics for a number of German TV channels and industry customers. I had never before worked with computer graphics, but I really enjoyed the work.

That was before Ventuz, so we used Vizrt. I realized projects for N24, Pro 7, Sat.1, Sky, ZDF - like the on-air graphics for the FIFA WM World Championship in Japan 2002. Then Jens Lange, the CEO of Second Unit, who had since then founded the company Stereolize, called me because he needed real-time operators for a very specific endeavor: He wanted to use a real-time graphics software to create the Microsoft presentations at CeBIT, a task which had before been realized with classical pre-rendered 3D graphics. That is how I became head of production at Stereolize.

Ventuz:
But that was still before Ventuz.

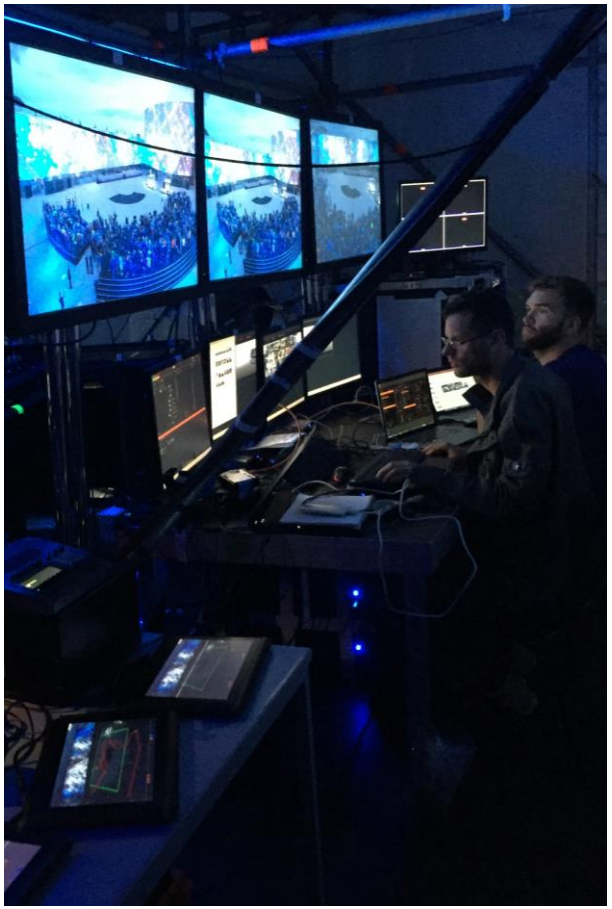
Oliver:
The first year, yes. We used Vizrt. It worked out fine, although the tool wasn't aimed at this market. The benefit of being able to quickly change content on site was enormous. The downside was that rental licenses were very expensive. That is why Jens' friend Ralf decided to program his own tool for us to use in these projects. That is how Ventuz was born. And only a year later, Ventuz powered the Microsoft presentations at CeBIT.

Ventuz:
This means that the programming of the software and production ran side by side. How was that?

Oliver:
It was crazy. I could tell a bunch of stories. Like how we had an alarm clock in the office that rang every ten minutes to remind us to save our projects, because in the beginning Ventuz wouldn't auto-save. Or how Ralf was present at the events to quickly program around bottlenecks that we encountered. Those were very dynamic times. Whenever we saw something we missed, we just spoke to Ralf, and the next morning we had our update. We did pioneering work, developed from scratch, but every event ran flawlessly.

Ventuz:
That must be great, to have such an influence on the development of a product.

Oliver:
We certainly let our experience with other software tools play into it. Of course, in the beginning a lot of functionalities that you were used to simply were not there, but then again many things were implemented that other tools didn't offer. A great example for this are all the little value-givers, like the Mover Node. The possibility to tell an object to repeatedly move from value A to value B in a certain amount of time required extensive programming work in other tools. Just making a logo rotate was a hassle. Not so in Ventuz. Plus, the possibility to bind all kinds of values to each other, colors to numbers to text, that was revolutionary. Every aspect of the software made our work easier and quicker.



Ventuz:
Did you function as both designer and operator?

Oliver:
I have always been an operator. I get suspicious when people claim to be very good operators and great designers at the same time. There might be a few candidates in the world who are both, but generally, these are two separate tasks. This is not to say that Ventuz operators know nothing about design. You need an understanding of proportions, colors and certainly animations when you work with Ventuz. But design is its own job, and an important one. The creation of really unique and fitting designs for a project requires training and a keen sense of what looks good. No Ventuz operator should be ashamed to say that they are not a designer, and vice versa. Operators can be creative enough when they animate objects, textures and breathe life into the graphics. Because there is a difference between just having something fly in from the right - and letting it tell a story. Like the story of the material. An asset with a stone texture should move differently from something made of paper. An operator needs to understand this; it is how you sort the sheep from the goats.

Ventuz:
I'm guessing that this is how you set up your workflows at Rayd now as well?

Oliver:
We have had some painful experiences with different setups. It is tempting to think that you can create all designs directly in Ventuz and save the extra step of using a different tool like Photoshop or Maya. But that hasn't worked out at all for us. We have returned to the classic workflow: We have one person who creates all the designs, and our operators translate them into Ventuz after they have been approved by the customer. Turns out: even though you have this extra step of recreating all designs in Ventuz, the workflow is still faster and more efficient.

Ventuz:
Speaking of Rayd, when and why did you decide to found your own company?

Oliver:
What I called pioneering work earlier was not only extremely exciting, it was also equally stressful. Not only was the software still evolving, so were workflows, and everyone had their own ideas about how to set up a well-working structure. I wanted to try and see whether I could create an efficient environment myself. So in 2005 I got together with a partner and we founded Rayd.

Ventuz:
What industry do you focus on at Rayd?

Oliver:
Both my associate partner and I had a lot of experience in the broadcast industry. So it made sense to tap into this market. One of our first projects was a fully automated Chinese TV channel, where viewers could call in and take part in little games via the keys on their phone. Everything was in Chinese, so to this day I am not quite sure what that was all about. Then came German stations, sports graphics and such. Sadly, by 2008 the broadcast market had gone through a lot of changes and wages went down. A lot more money could be made in the event market, so we started doing press conferences and events for brands like Nespresso, Astra and UEFA EM. We still have one partner in the broadcast market, Rawmotion, for whom we create graphics for action sports events.

This is ongoing, we have over 100 of these projects under our belts. But our main area is presentations and press conferences for Audi, VW and the like.

Ventuz:
And you have used Ventuz for all these projects?

Oliver:
When we started out, Ventuz wasn't for sale yet. So we had to use other broadcast graphics tools. We also tried to create certain projects with Flash, we even tried Quest 3D at one point. I was relieved when we could finally buy Ventuz in 2006. Today, whenever we can, we will use Ventuz.

Ventuz:
And when you cannot?

Oliver:
Then we will use Unity. In 2008 we were given a task that clearly required a game engine with physics and shaders that Ventuz couldn't provide. We chose Unity mostly because it was cross-platform. It has proven to be the right choice.

Unity and Ventuz are a good combination, because it allows you to cover the entire real-time spectrum, from presentations to interactive to augmented to VR to apps. There is no project that you cannot take on because of technical requirements, if you have these two tools at your disposal.

Ventuz:
You have been around since the beginning and have seen every incarnation of Ventuz. What do you think about what Ventuz has become?

Oliver:
Well, Ventuz gives you great opportunities to create awesome projects. Huge, interactive scenarios, shows and so on… Nevertheless, I think it's still the best choice for lazy cowards. We are cowards, because we don't implement the newest technology just because it was implemented in the latest update. Instead, we want our projects to run perfectly smooth. When our customers ask about new gadgets, we tell them the truth: we could use this hardware, but there is a five percent chance that it won't work. And customers like Audi are hell-bent on security. One bucking graphic, and the press is all over them. You have to put in a perfect game, and for this, you need to be a coward. And lazy – that is just the story of all humankind – we try to get the greatest effect possible with the least amount of work. And for both, Ventuz is the best choice. It is extremely reliable: we have not once had a project blow up or stall on us. And it allows us to create really beautiful things in incredibly short amounts of time. That is what fascinated me about Ventuz from the very beginning: it was so easy to understand. We also give Ventuz trainings, and I used to say, you need one day of training and a few days of dabbling, and then you understand Ventuz. Then, with Ventuz 3, I used to say, you need three days of training and a little dabbling, and then you know Ventuz. Ever since Ventuz 4, the software has become so complex that we now have to use different trainers in one week of training, because one person knows more about this side of Ventuz, and another about something else. I understand why Ventuz has changed in this manner, the markets require a lot of technologies and functionalities, but I sometimes miss the good old days and Ralf's straightforward and logical way of designing Ventuz. But essentially, Ventuz is still an incredibly efficient tool and without competition in many markets.

To go even further, Ventuz is more and more able to take over every aspect of a project and make the use of other tools obsolete. Media servers are a good example here, especially since Ventuz 4 and the remodeled video handling.

Ventuz:
You've mentioned the many developments on the market. Any technology that your customers are especially interested in?

Oliver:
For us, any technology that we implement needs to be suitable for an exhibition environment, where a hundred people play around with it per hour, where you don't know the lighting situation, where not only one person, but a group of people stands in front of a screen, where you don't have everything under control. Many devices are simply not made for this. We have created our own laser technology for interactivity, that was fun, but other than that we don't jump on every bandwagon. Instead we get excited over software developments. Lately we have been eager to test the new material system in Ventuz, especially because it allows us to import textures from Substance Designer. For the first time we are now able to use photo-realistic materials in Ventuz. This is especially interesting for the automotive industry with car paints, leathers, pavements and so forth. But we are also always looking outside of Ventuz to find new software tools that help us to create more beautiful graphics.

Ventuz:
We like to ask the Artists about new technologies and what they get crazy about. What would be a thrilling development for you?

Oliver:
I am still waiting for a holographic display. In my view, that is the only sensible next step for television: transmitting dynamic, animated 3D data into thin air and creating an image that feels like it is really there. That might take another ten years, but it will be well worth waiting for…

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