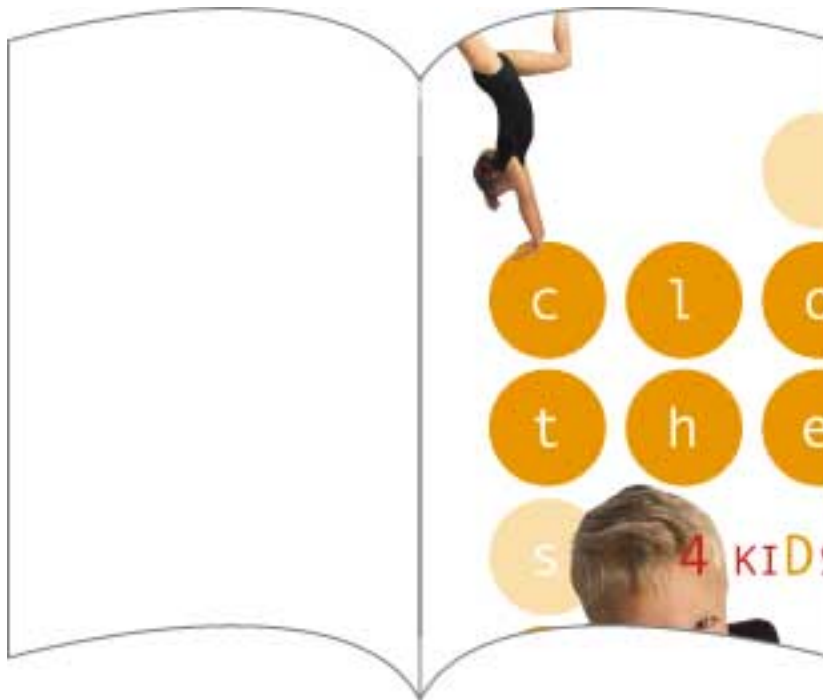


How-to

BY BARBARA VRANA



So You Wanna Be in Pictures?

Turn your printed ad into a spot for television or the Web with After Effects

You've spent hours designing an advertisement that looks great in magazines—the concept is brilliant and provocative. In fact, the piece looks so good, the client wants to put it on TV. You'll be famous—you'll be able to brag at cocktail parties! But just as soon as your directing dreams appear, the project is out of your hands. A video-compositing “specialist” has taken over, using big complicated machines to mangle your concept into a 30-second spot you can't even recognize as your own. You don't watch television anymore, afraid that you'll see the awful thing. One day, you promise yourself, you'll have the equipment and knowledge to do it yourself.

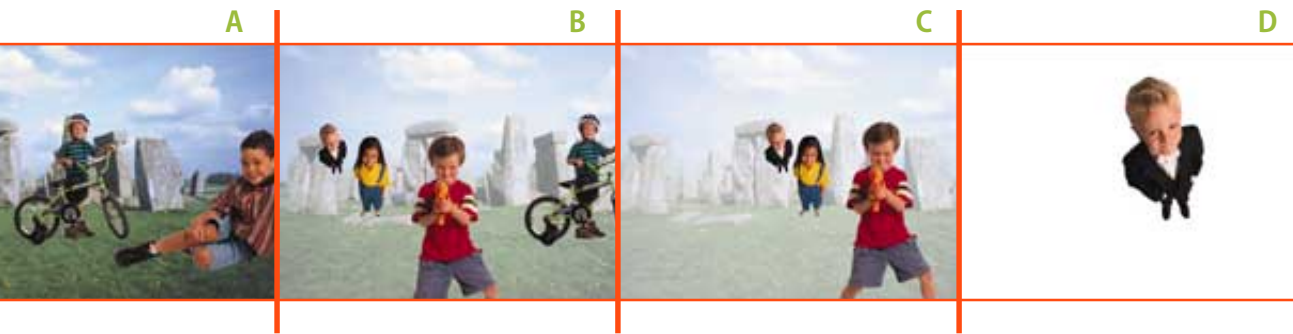
Well, the truth is, you don't need a lot of expensive gear or production assistance to turn your ideas into moving imagery for broadcast or the Web. You don't even need a camera. Using Adobe After Effects to apply a few standard camera and transition techniques to the elements from the original ad, you can give it motion and drama—and make that concept just as good (or better) for television.

There's a story behind it

At the heart of every good movie—whether it's an epic or a 30-second spot—is a well-planned story. Compare the process of designing a 15-second television spot

Separate the elements of your original magazine ad (above) and move them into the frame of your movie over time, giving your concept action, drama, and—most important—a story.

with that of creating a full-page ad in a magazine: Instead of coming up with a concept to fill a single page, you now have to work with 450 “pages” (frames). Static images rely on compositional principles to force the viewer's eye to move, but movies reveal elements over time, creating tension through anticipation. And while you don't have to design different compositions for every single frame (thanks to automation and the fact that 30 frames flash by every second), you do need to choreograph your graphic elements in a way that appeals to the eye and communicates a message with some drama. Add to that a narrative and some music and you've got a sizable project. Advance planning is essential.



The best way to plan a movie is with the traditional storyboard—a sequence of sketches that illustrates important moments in your story. A storyboard helps you keep track of all your elements, the flow of movement, and the overall pacing of the story so that you can balance drama with the message you’re conveying.

To create a storyboard, you can use paper or a graphics program. Since you probably won’t be using any of your sketches in the movie itself, your choice of medium doesn’t really matter too much. Create a series of boxes (frames), all the same size (3 inches by 3 inches works well), like those in a comic strip. Although you’re obviously working within a definite time constraint, don’t worry too much about time—you’ll get to that later. For now, sketch enough detail into each frame to communicate the scene. Make it clear when your graphic elements (including text) make their entrances and exits. Write the words to any voiceover or dialogue that accompanies each scene below the appropriate frame.

Casting call

Once your storyboard is complete, you need to collect the graphic elements for your story. Since After Effects can import a broad range of file formats, you can probably use the same graphics, logos, and stock photography you’ve already invested time and money in for the printed material. But there are few points you should bear in mind.

Layers. Layered files from either Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator actually provide you with even more source material; you can import the layers separately and animate each one in your movie. With layers, you’re able to change different parts of your original image over time, using qualities such as light, shadow, color, transparency, and texture. You might want to import both the merged file and the separate layers, to give you a chance to experiment a little to find what works best. If the images were originally in CMYK be sure to convert them to RGB before importing.

Dimensions. When using a raster image, import the file at the largest dimensions you’re using in the movie. That way, you avoid those jaggy edges if you increase the image’s size in After Effects. (Note that you *can* increase the size beyond 100 percent if the file’s resolution is greater than 72 ppi.)

On the other hand, if you’re working with vector-based art (from Adobe Illustrator, for example), you can import the images at any size, and resize them to

your heart’s content. For vector art, After Effects provides a continuous rasterization feature, meaning that the images are automatically drawn on the fly (rasterized) at any size.

Stock Images. To spice up the images you’ve used from the printed ad, you might want to add some stock video or photography. Such images (crashing ocean waves, for example) can be used alone to provide a background for your animated elements or can be blended with other images to create interesting textures. A number of companies offer packages of stock footage on CD-ROM or provide one-time-use footage for minimal fees. For more information, see technical document 322058, “Stock Footage Companies: General Information,” on Adobe’s Web site (www.adobe.com/supportservice/custsupport/database.html).

Before you start choreographing your images, make sure you’ve got all the specifications from your client about the movie: Is it for television, the Web, or both? How many seconds long? What size? When you’ve got the necessary information, you can choose the appropriate settings for your composition and its eventual rendering. The client may also be able to provide technical postproduction help for the fine details, such as compression, frame rate, or interlacing.

Illusions of grandeur

The essence of movie-making is the creation of illusions. What you see is rarely what actually happened in front of the camera. Techniques to fool the eye (and the mind) often involve fairly simple manipulation of the camera or the background. And even though you may not be using

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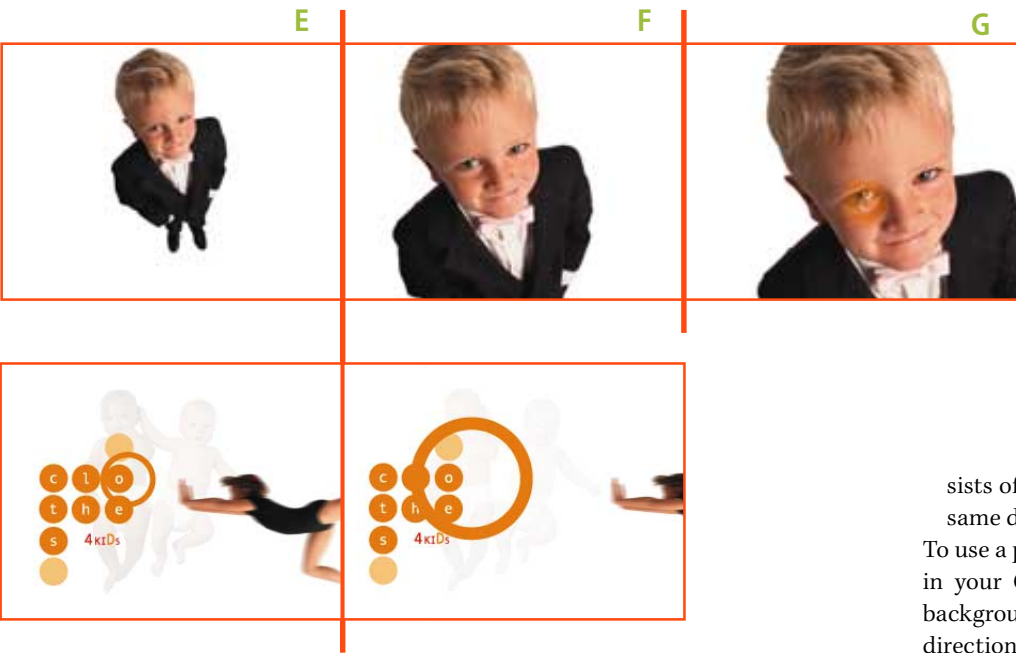


To track any problems, keep a log of all the files you’re using in the project, recording their format, resolution, and whether they required conversion to RGB.

any live action in your project, you can simulate different kinds of film techniques and motion for your images. Here are a few ideas to get you started with your illusions.

Pan. A pan—taken from “panorama”—is a shot in which the camera turns horizontally on an axis to follow movement (such as a traveling car) or to sweep over inanimate subject matter (such as lush scenery). You can use the pan in a similar way for your project, following one of your elements (a logo, perhaps) as it moves across the screen, or revealing an object (text, for example) in your background.

In After Effects, the “camera” is the composition window, but for any of these camera techniques, you’re not going to move the window, of course; instead, you’re going to fool the eye by moving the layers.



In the example, an advertisement for a children's clothing store, five different layers (four children and the background) move from left to right, using Position keyframes, to create a right-to-left pan (A, B, C, and D on opposite page and in Time Layout window below). The blond boy (bowtie.psd) seems to approach the viewer, but the layer is actually just getting bigger as the value of its Scale property increases over time (E, F, and G). To make the girl's quick backward motion look more realistic, motion blur was added to the handstand.psd layer (H).

For a pan, you simply move the background from one side of the composition to the other. So that the background layer can accommodate the panning without revealing its edges, make it wider than your composition.

1. Move the time marker to the point where you want to start the pan. In the Composition window, position your background layer so that the image that begins the pan is showing. In the Time Lay-

out window, click the stopwatch icon for the background layer's Position property to set the first keyframe.

2. Move the time marker to the point where the pan ends, and then move the background layer in the direction opposite to how you want the camera to move. In other words, moving the background to the left makes it look as though the camera is panning to the right. If your background con-

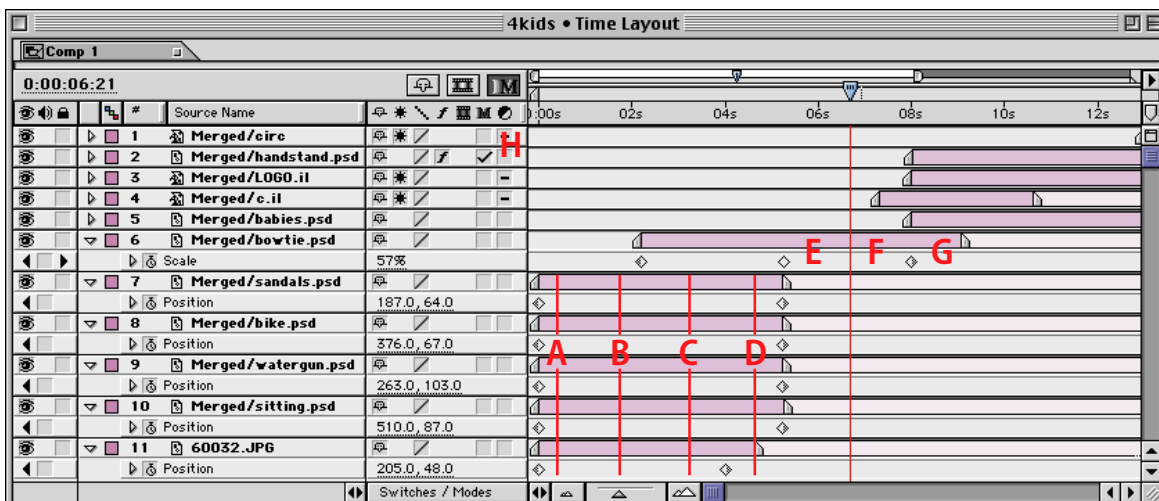
sists of several layers, you need to move them all the same distance, at the same time.

To use a pan to follow a moving object, place the object in your Composition window on top of the moving background layer. The object will appear to move in the direction opposite to the motion of the background.

If you have two or more layers that create a background with a depth of field—the layers are at different distances from the viewer—then you need to move the layers at different rates of speed. This is called motion parallax. For example, if you are panning a background that consists of an image of foothills and an image of mountains behind it, you need to move the mountains at a slower rate than the foothills. For a nice example, see www.artisthouse.com/_exhibits/perception.

3D motion. Although After Effects is not a 3D application, you can create the illusion of an object coming toward or going away from the camera by changing the size of the object over time. The illusion works best if there are other objects in the composition to give a sense of depth. Here are steps for making an object look as though it's coming toward you from far away.

1. Place your raster or vector-based layer in the Composition window. Before importing a raster image, make



To view the QuickTime movie, point your Web browser to www.adobe.com/publications/adobemag/archive/99aubv1.html.

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sure that it's at the maximum size you'll be using in the project.

2. In the Time Layout window, move the time marker to the point where the object starts moving, click the percent value for the Scale property, set the value to something small (10 percent works well), and click OK. Click the stopwatch for the Scale property to set the first keyframe.
3. Move the time marker to the point where the object will be at its maximum size. Click the percent value for the Scale property, set the value to 100 percent, and click OK to set the second keyframe.
4. If there are other smaller objects in your movie, position them in the composition so that the object that has gotten bigger now partially covers one or more of the other objects (select the big object and choose Bring Layer To Front from the Layer menu). This overlap gives a sense of depth, making it look as if the object you scaled has moved past the others.
5. If the object is vector-based art, click the Continuously Rasterize column in the Time Layout window next to the layer to keep the object's edges sharp as it gets bigger.

Fades and dissolves

Two of the most common techniques you'll see in film are a *fade*, in which a scene makes a gradual transition to black or white, and a *dissolve*, in which one scene gradually disappears as it's replaced by another. The fade is frequently used to end a scene (or make a distinct separation between scenes), while the dissolve can provide a softer transition.

In After Effects, you can fade or dissolve any type of file by changing its opacity over time, revealing an underlying background or scene. Here's how.

1. If you're creating a fade into black or white (or another color), place the layer you're fading in the Composition window on top of a black or white solid layer (choose New Solid from the Layer menu to create it) that's the size of the composition. If you're doing just one fade in your project, you can use the background color of your composition rather than a separate solid layer. If you're creating a dissolve, place the layer you're dissolving in the Composition window, keeping it on top of the layers that form the next scene.
2. In the Time Layout window, move the time marker to where you want the effect to begin.
3. For the layer you're fading or dissolving, make sure the percentage for the Opacity property is set to 100 in the Time Layout window, and click the stopwatch to set the first keyframe. Move the time marker to where the fade or dissolve ends, click the opacity percentage, set the value to zero, and click OK to set a second keyframe.

If you created a fade to black or white, you can fade from

the same solid layer back to a scene. Place the next scene (or layers) underneath the solid layer, and change the opacity of the solid layer from 100 to 0 percent.

Speed skills

One of the more difficult things to master in After Effects is making your graphic images move at the right speed. Unlike actors, who move realistically (of course), the speed of graphics is what you assign to them. Faster speeds may create drama, but you don't want an important element moving too fast, losing your message. Though a well-designed storyboard can help immensely with timing, the only way to get things fine-tuned is by trial and error, which involves making extensive use of either the RAM or Wireframe preview. If the motion is too consistent and predictable, you can change the velocity of your keyframes to vary their speed at key points in the animation. For help on speed adjustments, see Chapter 7, "Fine-tuning Animation," in the *After Effects 4.0 User Guide*.

After you've got everything moving the way you want, you still might notice that your flying logo is missing something essential, but you can't quite put your finger on it. When you view a moving object from your front porch, or in a film or video, it often appears blurred; that's because it's moving faster than what your eye or the camera can register. Although blurring is a result of both human and mechanical constraints, it will make your motion look more realistic—and it may be what your logo is missing.

To add motion blur to a moving layer, click the Motion Blur switch in the Time Layout window for that layer. To be able to preview motion blur, you need to enable it by clicking the Enable Motion blur button at the top of the Time Layout window.

You can adjust the blurring by changing the shutter angle, which simulates an exposure allowed by a camera's rotating shutter. To produce any blur, your layer has to be moving fast enough; speed it up if you aren't seeing any. For more information,

see "About Motion Blur" on page 192 of the *After Effects 4.0 User Guide*.

On your way

This article hasn't even touched on all of the special effects that are available in After Effects and through third-party developers. But while special effects can give your project that polished and professional appearance, motion and opacity settings are the building blocks for combining elements into effective scenes. Once you've made a few movies using some of these basic techniques, you'll be prepared to make your debut into the world of moving pictures. ♦

Barbara Vrana is an Adobe After Effects support engineer who several years ago made the transition from graphic design into motion graphics.

For an in-depth reference on film terms, check out Ira Konigsberg's *Complete Film Dictionary* (Penguin).

