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Software Review

A sharp Blade!

Software Review:
Product Category: NLE
Publisher:		In-Sync [www.in-sync.com]
Price:			USD 499 [INR price unavailable]

Many of us would be familiar with or at least must have heard of 'Speed Razor' - In-Sync's primary NLE product that had caught the fancy of many, even in India, some years back. I should say that nothing much has been heard of it since - at least not in this part of the world - though the company has recently released its HD version and an upgrade on it standard product.

'Blade' is the latest NLE offering from In-Sync, much in the lines of 'Speed Razor' with some substantial differences in their basic architecture. Since In-Sync didn't have much of a presence in India, I was in fact wondering if it would be a great idea to carry its review - but once I tested the software, it definitely looked worthy of a fair review. If you would like to have a look at our 'software review guidelines', please download its PDF version by clicking here.

Blade 2.2 Blade has been around for couple of years and the latest upgrade, version 2.2 boasts of some substantial improvements and new features. While it has been optimized for DV editing, it can go all the way up to HD and 2K resolution with the addition of appropriate hardware - In-Sync website [www.in-sync.com] recommends Matrox DigiSuite or NewTek Video Toaster [its now called VT3] or Pinnacle ReelTime Nitro to get it up to working with broadcast quality and uncompressed video files.

1. Installation

I downloaded the software from In-Sync website - pretty much possible even on a dial-up connection with the zipped-file size at about 23 MB.

After downloading the software, I received a pleasant e-mail from Jerry Hergenreder of In-Sync. When I described our test system, he wrote - "We have never tested AMD processors. Also check to make sure the NEC FireWire card is OHCI compliant. Blade does not support QuickTime. Our developers instead had focused on new Windows Media 9 and new direct X".

To run Blade, In-Sync recommends at least a single processor Intel P-IV 1.8 GHz with 512 MB RAM or higher. The OS should be Windows 2000 with service pack 2 or 3, or Windows XP service pack 1 only. Also installed must be DirectX 8.1 or higher. And to capture and output, an OHCI 1394 compatible FireWire card is necessary.

But I decided to go ahead and test it on my system which is an AMD Athlon 1700 with 512 MB RAM and Windows 2000 with the latest SP installed. This machine has an NEC OHCI Compliant IEEE-1394 Host controller easily available in Mumbai for about Rs. 2500. The card talks nicely to Avid Xpress DV according to some who use it.

The installation process is pretty straight forward. There's a little utility, bundled with the package, called 'Druid' which checks for system compatibility before you install the software - make sure you turn off the anti-virus software before you run 'Druid' - I had mine, hollering 'murder' the first time it was run ☺

The installation took about 2-3 minutes and wow, I was on! The documentation seems sufficient. But since I had selected **c:\program files\Blade** as the destination folder [instead of the default **c:\Blade**], whenever I start up the application, an annoying message pops up, warning the user of 'starting up the software from a folder with spaces' - though this doesn't affect the performance as far as I could see.

2. Interface Design & Lay-out

The interface is what's fashionably called a "modeless interface" It's also fashionably dark grey, but you can change the colors and even go to town doing it up in pastels - in other words, the interface design can be customized and is 'skinnable'. I even played around with blood red background! Coming back to modeless interface, this means there's no separate trim window or effects window. You can adjust anything anytime in the main interface itself. If you are familiar with 'Combustion', you would know what I am talking of.

For a hardcore Avid or FCP user, the interface may not look too intuitive - leave alone familiar. It does take some getting used to, before one can work efficiently on this. But once this is done, it's pretty much a smooth journey through capturing to editing to effects & compositing and finally to out put.
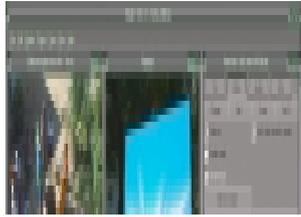
One gets a feeling that the workspace is essentially customized to do compositing jobs than editing. There are two monitor windows like in any other NLE, but there's no fixed source-recorder window set as such. This pair of monitor windows can show you the effect result, play back the clip, source 1 and source 2, depending on your choice. 'Ctl + right-click' on any of these will enlarge the canvass to actual size. In fact, I have never seen any NLE that employs 'right-click' mode so extensively!

There are 'Bins' you can create, to capture & organize your clips. The timeline is called a 'composition' - the first question that all editors ask if there can be more than one sequence in a project seems irrelevant here! Anyways, I couldn't create more than one composition in a project. There is an 'Item Information' window on the right, which has tabbed windows to give you video, audio and other info of the clip. While 'Blade 2.2' doesn't officially support dual-monitor, I hear of cases where the users have successfully customized the software and the video card to work seamlessly with two monitors.

One interesting aspect is, video layers are labeled **ulta** - compared to most other NLEs that is! This means, V1 is the topmost layer and V2, V3, V4 etc. come below V1! Visibility is bottom to top. This again takes some getting used to. I couldn't find any 'toggle visibility' option for layers either - that is, I couldn't switch on or off the visibility of any single layer! Of course, you can click on the clip in the composition window [double-click to play or its favourite 'alt + right-click' to show the clip on the left window] and view it separately. Just that it is a little confusing for a new user.

3.Features

Blade has some interesting, if quirky features. The 'bottoms-up' video layering in the composition window is one of them, as mentioned above!

It's got all the regular features of a well-finished 'post-proprietary era' NLE - Open File support, resolution independence, EDL support, batch capturing, compositing, key-framable effects, scalability using third-party hardware support, image sequence import, alpha channel support, real time audio mixing, project consolidation etc. It also supports PAL, NTSC, HD, 24p, though no support for film cut-list!

You can capture media via FireWire or a capture card, or you can import media. Works without any problem… But no QuickTime movies! Though the feature list does mention support for 'uncompressed' QT files, even this didn't work when I tried to import an uncompressed MOV file. You'll need to convert them to AVI first. Since I didn't have any capture card to try the analogue or SDI capture, can't say anything about it - but should work since most of these cards are certified by In-Sync. You can import an EDL and batch capture it.

Another missing feature [that's there in the feature list] is Photoshop file [PSD] import with layers. This feature is a part of the effects set and you apparently have to deploy the effect before importing the Photoshop layers. I did a little research and found a small mention about 'this feature being disabled in this release due to some compatibility issues while batch capturing'.

Clips can be dragged and dropped in the timeline and moved around by drag and drop. Trimming can be done frame by frame in the 'info' window. You can also copy and paste in the timeline itself.

And the timeline can be scrolled with the right-click 'n drag - see, the 'right-click' is again at work! You can even shuttle-play in the timeline at various speeds just like Avid's 'JKL'. Except that in Blade you do this with the arrow-keys. Right arrow key plays till held down and left plays backwards till held down while up and down increases or decreases shuttle speeds. It's hard to describe but useful if one gets used to it.

Effects handling is a bit different (though somewhat easier) than most NLEs. For instance, when you open a new project, no effects are available. You have to import whichever effect that you need, into your bin. You can then drag and drop them into the timeline or select the video clip in the timeline and 'alt + right-click' to apply it and adjust the parameters in the 'info' window. You can key-frame individual parameters and make complex effects. You can place effects and play the timeline if your system is fast enough. Or set it to "force render" whatever won't play in real time. Rendering is reasonably fast, though I didn't make any side-by side comparison with other software. It just "felt" fast enough.

There are quite a few effects available, thanks to the bundling of Boris FX and Boris Graffiti with the NLE. To list …

Transitions - Dissolve, wipe, clock, Black & White, double wipe, field cut, iris, luma dissolve, luma fade, page curl, and transitions plus a set of many pushes reveals and wipes.

Effects - 2D DVE, 3D DVE, Add, Adjust Brightness-contrast, tint, Alpha channel glow, arrows, Background generator, border, CG, Chroma key, circle blur, color correction, crop, displace repeat, displace warp, emboss, emboss without, fast blur, freeze frame, from black, from white, gamma, garbage matte, Gaussian blur, glass texture, glow, grads, grey scale, image filter, invert, lens flare, looping, matte, noise, PIP, pixelate, Raindrop image, Repeat even field, Repeat odd field, Reverse frame, Ripple image, Scale image, Stabilize image, Strobing1, Strobing2, Titles, To black, To White, Transparency, Twirl image… Whew!!

I didn't try every one of them, of course. But of the ones I did, I found the Chroma key to be quite good, the blurs take a tad long to render. Colour correction is rather basic. Grey scale is very interesting, as is glow. Stabilizer works remarkably well but I couldn't figure how to set a target. Probably does it by itself. There are enough effects to keep one occupied for days if not weeks. And this effects interface grows on you.

Titling is very functional for an NLE, but way too basic for compositing jobs. It allows you to scroll, apply shadow, blur shadow, change size etc. - and all key-framable.

The garbage matte is pretty neat and easy to figure out - as long as one remembers the right-click / left-click fundamentals. All the effects can be adjusted using the wire frame feature on the monitor window - didn't I tell you that this felt more like a compositing software than a mere editing one!

There's an extensive list of key-board short cuts available in the help file - but they can't be mapped to the user's preferences unlike the case with many other popular NLEs.

There's a lot to discover in Blade 2.2 - I get a feeling that there is more to it than meets the 'Blade'! Over all, vastly different and sometimes, improved ways of handling routine editing & compositing tasks.

4.Stability & Speed

I ran Blade on the earlier mentioned 'Athlon' system for about 3 days - off and on. During all my clumsy maneuvers, it didn't falter or hang even once. So in the stability department Blade shines bright. During most of my testing I had the help file running, a Word document (this review) open, a PhotoShop window (for screenshots), an Outlook Express window open as well as a browser window. So the computer was pretty much maxed out. And Blade still ran and ran. Occasionally I lost display in the small, video windows, but it came back eventually. I even 'force quit' Blade once to see what happens. It started normally when I ran it again and warned me about the 'abnormal' termination at the previous instance ☺. Cool!

I ran Task manager and checked out the resources. Blade used up about 200 MB on long timelines or during renders and stayed near 150 MB otherwise. So a 512 MB system will do fine but a 1 GB RAM system will rock.

5.Pricing & Support

Blade is priced at $ 499 - means, it should be about Rs 25000/- in India, unless In-Sync has a special India pricing. They really should… this Dollar-Rupee difference is unfair!

'Blade 2.2' ships in boxes with installation CD, but no printed Manual! Could be a bother for the electronically-disoriented lot☺.

But you can download a completely functional trial version from the In-Sync's web site. This has no limitations except that it works for a stipulated trial period. In fact they even say you can download it, use it for a proper commercial project, make money on it, then think of buying it. Of course, the trial period doesn't last long enough to recover Rs 25,000/-

Someone needs to tell them that this offer is skewed for India. In the US an editor can make $ 500 in a day sometimes, but most Indian editors will huff and puff to make this in a week, maybe even a month. Que sera sera.

The help document is good enough, but I wish there were more screen shots in it. As for the support, there's a 24/7 support phone no. available on the site - this is the international number, of course! The Indian sales contact, given to us by In-Sync, is that of Quality Cine Labs - but strangely the phone no. doesn't work and the reseller's website doesn't have any information on the products they are supposed to be selling. We give up!

Who is Blade for?

Many capture cards are now shipping with basic editing software like Ulead Video Studio or Media Studio Pro. But none of this entry-level software I've seen matches up to Blade. So it is definitely the entry level king. It does more, goes all the way up to Broadcast and even HD with the right hardware combination. The price seems steep, if you are going to use it for DV-only projects - but you get your money's worth, definitely. Best of all, the trial version is fully functional and is free.

So, you should go for Blade ---
>If you're in the market for simple but feature-rich edit software that works on PCs
>If you have a system lying around that meets specs needed for Blade.
>If you feel guilty about using pirated editing software which abound for the PC.

If you use too many QT files in your work, then forget this one! Or else, download and try it out. Who knows… You might even like it enough to pay Rs 25000/-. It's a good buy for this money - on the PC front.

Misenscene Score: ● ● ● ◐ ○ **[Value for Money]**

Neil Sadwelkar

About Neil Sadwelkar

` Neil Sadwelkar has little formal training so he just about makes a living in the film & TV industry in India. His profession is a higher form of meditation through which one can deny hunger and sleep - it's called editing. In his spare time thinks hard and writes stuff like this piece above. And in whatever time is left over, he does his own accounts and chases clients for money.

He builds and tinkers with computers, so some people get conned into believing that he knows a lot about computers and editing software, so they even pay him as a consultant. Really!

If you love what he's written you can drop him a line at neil@misenscene.net and tell him he's the greatest. He even has a web site dedicated to Final Cut Pro where you can take in more of his writings.

If you're a budding editor you can make him feel good by asking for advice. But if you're looking for work, don't bother because he doesn't have contacts.

And if you really hate his writings, write to him and give him some work, so he has no time to write stuff like this. But don't make him chase you for money; else he'll go back to writing.