Life With A BOXX

Kino Gil is a filmmaker, producer, writer, VFX artist and more! He's also a very satisfied BOXX customer.

Part 1. The ARRIVAL.

Full disclaimer: I am a computer artist—animation, compositing, editing, effects, yes, (and also music and sound) and occasionally I program tools to accomplish specific tasks in my art. Obviously, for all this, you need a computer—just not a garden-variety one, but one of the kind known as a workstation. These are faster, more powerful machines, far bigger in capacity, capabilities and usually, price.

So it stands to reason that one is picky when searching for such a tool. It has more in common with a pricey musical instrument than with a glorified typewriter. And once equipped with appropriate software and specialized peripherals, you are looking at a small investment, say, a second car.

Thus follows that one has to be extremely careful when researching one of these boxes. Get the wrong one or get the wrong people to build it for you, and there's no end to the misery. I know. I've been there.

This time, however, it was different. Very different.

Several years ago, I had the fortune to meet Ms.Gerry Schwartz, a very knowledgeable lady then working as a field rep for BOXX Technologies. For some time, I had heard about the great job her company was doing crafting what I could only call artist-level workstations—machines so powerful that the user can concentrate wholly in his or her art rather than on workarounds to the limitations of the equipment.

So, now that it was time for replacing my main CGI machine, I gave a call to Gerry, who, with the vast experience she has accumulated putting together BOXX workstation tools for some of the best companies and artists in the fledgling CGI art forms, helped me efficiently choose and mix and match until a suitable workstation was suggested based on my taste and needs, even though at the time she had been ascended to take care of large clients for BOXX (something my tiny shop cannot be confused with).

This attention to the client (however tiny), had been mentioned by many people doing business with BOXX. True, Ms. Schwartz is a friend, but the service thing is more of a company culture thing at

BOXX. Gerry had obligations in her new position that required her time, so she asked Joe Matthews from Sales to look after my machine, and I got the same attention from him. I saw that for BOXX, making a workstation is not just plugging parts. They want to know how you plan to use it in order to recommend a configuration that suits you, the artist/user, not some engineer in a warehouse. They build an instrument, not a generic box.

I primarily run three sets of applications: animation and compositing is the first stage, and I use Autodesk Maya, Digital Fusion, the Corel suite, Xfrog, and several other tools to give my work its particular character. Once all is animated and composited, I use editing software to put together the pieces. Then I use audio and music tools. The new setup relies heavily on Lightworks, by EditShare of England (the same used to cut Scorsese's "Hugo"), that I will use to replace Final Cut after its untimely demise at Apple's hands. In audio, SONAR is my drug of choice. All of these apps, plus any auxiliary applications, are to run in this new 3DBOXX, so that had to be factored in the design.

Finally, with Gerry's help, I settled on a machine with two eight-core Xeons, (32 threads!!) 32 Gb of RAM and an NVidia 4000KV 3Gb graphics card, based on their 4920 model workstation.

Finally, with Gerry's help, I settled on a machine with two eight-core Intel Xeons, (32 threads!!) 32 Gb of RAM and an NVIDIA 4000KV 3Gb graphics card, based on their 4920 model workstation.

The price was another surprise, and a nice one. BOXX builds their machines from a careful choice of standard parts, then fine-tunes them and overclocks the beejezus off them. The result is a machine with a very, very decent price (from the

point of view of a single practitioner techie artist) and performance to die for. I'm not kidding. Recently I played with a 16 proc workstation like this one, but built around a Z8000 HP by my colleague Vinicio Musmanni for his Post facility in San Jose, Costa Rica, and a few years ago I bought a top-of-the-line Apple Pro with all the trimmings. These machines are absolute monsters in which it is indecent to type a letter or check your email, but when you run high end apps like Maya or Digital Fusion, they sing.

This 3DBOXX thing, instead...

It sings pretty well too, but, to stretch the metaphor, sings in four part harmony and with an orchestra of angels. I know, I know. I wax rhapsodic. Believe me, it's justified. This thing screams. And it still feels funny to install Office in it.

I'll get to the screaming part in a future article, but until then, I have to share the way this machine arrived—in a padded box with quotation number and name, showing that this is a unique piece, crafted with due care for the end user, and that they give the same level of attention to a single artist as they do to Disney or another larger client. Oh, yes. One is to keep the box in which the BOXX arrives, in the event that it needs to go back to the factory for warranty or another reason.

Inside the box, along with your manuals, system disks (yes! disks! Bravo!) and an USB drive to be used in storing drivers and other perishables, are enough cables and connectors to modify the machine's innards any way you see fit, add drives and tap the ample power supply provided, as well as connect a monitor, in case the DVI or Display Ports of the NVIDIA card are not enough.

I cannot insist enough in regard to the professional feel of the presentation of these materials. BOXX recognizes that you chose them because the machine is a fine instrument, and they make sure you have enough resources to use it the way you need to, just like a high-end camera or a concert piano. A good keyboard and three-button mouse complete the setup (as is more common, the scroll-wheel acts as a center button). There is even a t-shirt with a nice retro design.

There's space to play here. None of that bound-in-a-bucket proprietary stuff, but careful, attentive choice of best-in-class components and a design that is friendly to the user and the environment. Enough connections to satisfy most, with USB2 and USB3, Ethernet, and enough free slots inside to play Frankenstein if you need. I have a Wacom tablet and other devices going into the rear USB connectors, and I will add a video IO card in the near future to an empty slot.

The machine itself is a beautiful beast, and neatly built. Two liquid cooler units take care of the processors in an imposing arrangement that brings to mind farm tractors, but utterly silent. Those and very silent fans make it quieter than the noise level in my studio, and at night the loudest component in my vicinity is... the DSL modem by the wall.

Not that the machine is incapable of sound. The motherboard BOXX chose has a very decent DAC connected to enough outputs that you can connect a 5.1 set directly if you need. The output is powerful and very clean. I currently have its stereo out routed to a pair of AudioEngine2's near-field speakers and I will be adding an audio interface powered through one of the USB ports for editing work. For more delicate audio design, finishing and music composition, my machines connect to a set

of studio Wharfendales through a digital Roland/Edirol mixer, a setup that gives a very transparent audio quality out of any decent editing app.   So far, the BOXX has been running in playback mode, and I have yet to try it at recording and composing, but the dynamic range is outstanding and drives the Audioengine2's with a nice punch.

As I finish my configuration and run initial tests, I am getting ready for the BOXX's first gig. A distinguished member of the Double Reed Association, a group of professional musicians (bassoons, oboes, cor anglais and so forth), has commissioned a twelve minute audiovisual composition to be premiered this summer in New York at the association's convention. The piece will be played by oboist extraordinaire Francisco ("Chisco") Castillo in August of 2014, along with electronic imagery on stage.

I will keep you posted. Now, I've got a machine to play... er... work with.

To consult with a BOXX performance specialist call 1.877.877.BOXX or visit our website **www.boxxtech.com**