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The pros and cons of DIY vs facilities editing

DIY editing systems like Final Cut Pro present an exciting alternative for post-production on a low-budget feature. They also offer the producer the possibility of owning some capital that can be used as an equity investment in their projects. But is there more to consider when deciding whether to edit in your office/home, or whether to use a facilities house? Are there hidden traps, or is DIY the future?

US indie writer/director/actor Ed Burns and Australian editor Jason Ballantine put up their cases for opposing sides of the argument.

Ed Burns' first feature, *The Brothers McMullen*, was made for US\$25,000, won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize and went on to gross more than US\$10 million in the US alone. He has gone on to make nine features (including *She's the One* and *Sidewalks of New York*), but still has to bring the budgets down as low as possible to get his films up. On his recent feature *The Groomsmen*, starring himself and Brittany Murphy, he was faced with the reality of bringing his \$6m budget down to around \$3m. He did that in part by choosing to go the DIY route for post-production. "The big change is that on previous films we needed to go to an editing facility, where you pay to rent an Avid. But on this production we owned the Final Cut Pro station. You eliminate a big cost right there," he says.

Read the article *Ed Burns: Risky Business* by Joe Cellini on the [Apple website](#) (link permission courtesy Apple). It includes a full list of the equipment used to cut *The Groomsmen*.

Now read Jason's case...

Australian editor Jason Ballantine is one of the most experienced Avid practitioners in the country, having worked on some of the first Australian features cut on Avid. He has recently edited three low-budget features this way - *Wolf Creek*, *The Caterpillar Wish* and *The Bet* - in professional post houses. Here Jason outlines the benefits of cutting on a fully supported system in a professional facility, and warns of some of the traps to beware of in the DIY 'prosumer' set-ups.

Given the decreasing price of some prosumer editing software packages, Ed Burns' experience raises an important question: is it better to buy your own or rent from a post-production facility? Of course with every argument there is a 'for and against', generally heavily informed by financial considerations, especially when making a feature film in Australia. However, the decision is not clean cut and requires some careful consideration.

There was certainly a day, not too long ago, when the only option was to dry hire editing equipment from a post-production facility. The equipment outlay was equivalent to a home mortgage, whereas now it is more like the cost of a nice car. Of course the introduction of software such as Premiere and Final Cut Pro has made the experience of editing accessible to many in their own home. Yet there is always a gap between expectation and ability. Avid has also recently released Media Composer software-only packages, minus some professional features, to combat the prosumer market share. But these come with limitations of usability and reliability and this is why the high-end film editing systems remain in the marketplace. Yes they carry a price tag for their dedication to professional filmmaking, but I guess you get what you pay for. Some of the prosumer editing software overlooks the needs of professional environments such as media creation efficiencies (sharing files between picture, VFX and sound departments), multi-seat editing with shared storage, real time playback over rendering requirements, media management, future-proof upgrades and of course technical support - the responsibility for software and hardware not being spread over multiple third-party companies.

So here is what I would consider the benefits to buying your own, from an editor's point of view.

- The equipment becomes an additional income source in these trying times.
- It is possible to operate professionally outside of a facility nowadays given access to phone and email for communication, an ftp site for transfer of large files and built in DVD burners for the creation of sync rushes.
- It takes time to creatively discover your film within the rushes. You are not on 'the money clock'.
- Best of all, if at home you can edit in your pyjamas!

Now the negatives, and I do believe this list is longer.

- You have the added cost of decks such as SP or miniDV and DAT, which can easily double your investment right there.
- You'll need large amounts of storage which again could triple your investment, particularly if you want the storage to be shared between editor and assistant editor.
- You lose the power of a facility 'package deal' which may be required for telecine or HD downconvert transfers, conform, grade, titling and/or film out.
- You are not developing a creative relationship with the facility who may handle the project after your picture lock.
- No access to a machine room to help with odd requests that always seem to arise, such as an NTSC dub or multiple DVD duplications.
- No access to a sizeable screening room for test screenings.
- Missing the environment for socialising with peers in the corridor of other productions - whether it is the comfort in knowing you're not alone after 10pm or keeping your ear to the employment grapevine.
- The biggest negative, however, would have to be that you are responsible for the technical success of the project and equipment on top of the massive creative responsibilities. Therefore if you are not proficient in the technical stuff, concentrate on your area of creative expertise. Leave that equipment worry to the facility.

As a producer making these purchase decisions, further questions need to be asked.

- Who will maintain the upkeep of the editing system from project to project?
- Does your editor really want to use your chosen system?
- Technology is a rat race. Is your system current enough to handle the next project's requirements?

Now to give examples of my experiences...

Wolf Creek was heavily indebted to the efforts of Oasis Post and Frameworks. The facilities combined to provide the technical advice and equipment required for handling one of Australia's first HD feature films. Oasis' package deal made the low-budget film a reality, from downconverting HD rushes during the shoot to the compositing of VFX, HD conform and grade.

The Bet benefited from Frameworks' facility supplying not only a room with Avid Film Composer and decks, but an in-house assistant editor with second Avid Film Composer and the use of a test screening room during the offline process.

The Caterpillar Wish was fortunate enough to be serviced by the one-stop-shop Digital Pictures, Melbourne - everything from supply of offline editing suite on the shooting location, daily telecine transfers, collaboration with in-house VFX house Illoura, and use of digital projection theatre during fine cut. The facility then went on to provide services beyond picture lock such as HD conform and grade.

Rogue was a successful mix of varying components. The offline editing equipment was supplied by Oasis Post, AvToGo and myself. Oasis Post are the umbrella facility overseeing the technical processes and will also provide the HD conform, some VFX compositing, the grade and titling beyond picture lock. During the shoot Oasis Post completed the HD downconverters with detailed technical reports. Due to location requirements interstate, rooms were not used at the Oasis Post facility. The editing department was set up in the production office and moved to rented rooms after shoot, independent of the post-house facilities right through to picture lock.

The bottom line understandably rules the decision making at times, but remember the software and computer alone are not enough to edit a film. Careful consideration and preparation needs to be given to each project's individual post path. This is why the post-production facilities must be seen as a friend, not the enemy. My vote goes to the facilities.



Writer/director/actor Ed Burns favours owning his own editing suite. Photo: Apple website.



Editor Jason Ballantine, in the cutting room of *Rogue*, is a fan of post-production facilities.