

Note: "Unlike traditional Artbeats clips and mattes, the Reticles clips use embedded alpha channels. Some clips have multiple masks to use in layers."

A Heads-Up on Using Reticles

Tricks and tips on getting the most out of this collection of data displays with alpha channels.

by Chris & Trish Meyer

Stock footage continues to evolve beyond scenes and backgrounds into the realm of graphic design. A great example of this is the Artbeats Reticles collection, which contains nearly 30 full-screen data displays with alpha channels for you to place over your own footage, plus a number of useful graphic elements to mix in or use on their own. As employing this product isn't quite as simple as cutting it into your timeline, we thought we'd share a few ideas on how to get the most out of it.

Alpha Channels

As mentioned, all of the clips in this collection are intended to be layered on top of other footage. Therefore, large areas of these clips are transparent to allow the other footage to peek through. In the past, some collections provided separate image and matte clips that you had to combine to get transparency; in Reticles, all of the clips have their mattes embedded as alpha channels within the same clips.

Alpha channels in QuickTime movies can be a source of consternation. Although the example and thumbnail movies supplied with Reticles look fine, when you open the full size Reticles elements themselves in QuickTime Player, you'll see ugly fringes around the edges, numbers, and other areas surrounded by transparency (see Figure 1). This is an artifact of what is known as a Straight Alpha type.

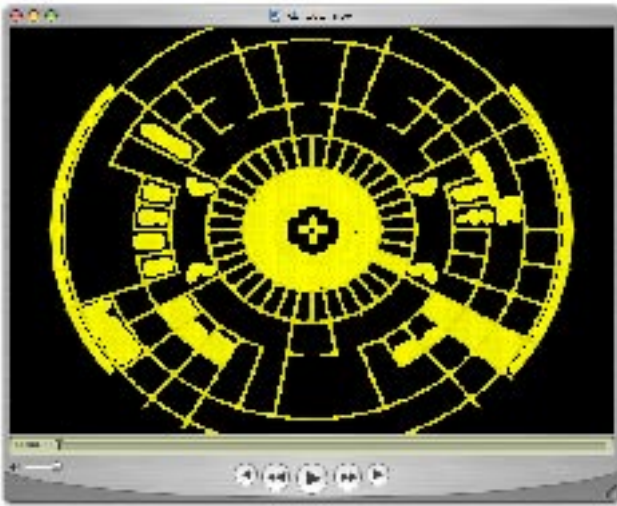


Figure 1a

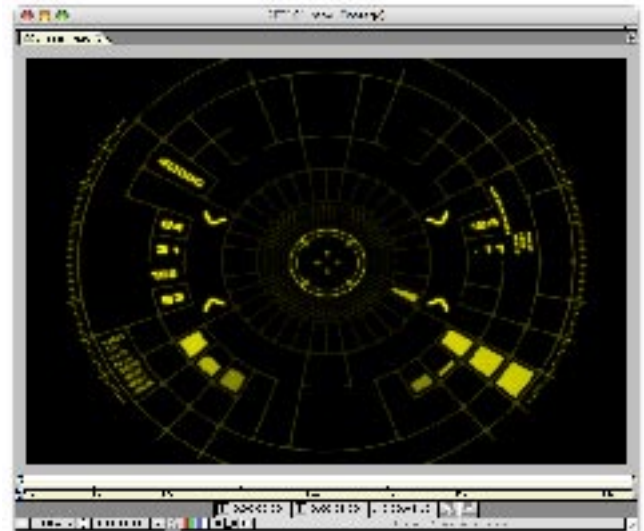


Figure 1b

Clips with alpha channels – such as those in Reticles – display with fringes in QuickTime Player (a). This is because QuickTime Player is not factoring in the matte created by the alpha channel. Import them into any program that recognizes an alpha, such as Adobe After Effects, and they will look fine (b).

In these files, the image in the color channels extend beyond the edges of where they are supposed to be displayed, akin to overspray when painting or "bleed" when printing. The alpha channel is a stencil that then comes and punches a perfect hole through this image. Since the color information extends beyond the stencil, you can be assured that the edges are perfectly clean. This is the preferred alpha type both in compositing programs like Adobe After Effects, and editing programs such

as Apple Final Cut Pro or the Avid. Import the Reticles clips into any of these programs, and the edges will look fine.

(The other common alpha channel type is known as Premultiplied or Prematted. Here, the color image extends only to the very edges of the alpha channel, where it blends with a background color. It looks better in QuickTime Player, but often results in fringing around the edges when actually put to use.)

Bezels & Vignettes

Reticles was created to simulate viewing a scene through a heads-up display, viewfinder, or other sighting device. In reality, most of these devices have very simple masks. However, there are times when you may want to enhance the appearance of these overlays for stylistic purposes.

For example, adding a drop shadow or “behind” glow to the Reticles layer can help separate it from the footage seen through it. The first image in Figure 2 shows Reticles RET105 layered on top of a shot from the Artbeats Canyon Textures collection. The second image adds a drop shadow to RET105 to make the display appear more like a physical bezel in front of a monitor.



Figure 2a



Figure 2b

Although realistic, overlays can sometimes be hard to read when composited directly over footage (a). To enhance visibility and add a more dimensional, stylized look, add a drop shadow or glow to the Reticles layer (b).

There are a couple of tricks to making this shadow work. Most drop shadows are offset in a user-defined direction; here, we want the shadow to be centered. To do this, drop the “distance” parameter down to zero, and increase the “softness” parameter to create the shadow or glow. Smaller softness values give tighter results; larger values give more of a vignette effect.

Secondly, some drop shadow plug-ins – such as the one that comes with After Effects – appear to lose opacity as you crank up softness. Sometimes increasing the shadow opacity to 100% isn’t even enough. We often duplicate the drop shadow effect, with the second copy set to 50% opacity.

Another idea to try on some of the Reticles clips is adding an effect such as Bevel Alpha with a low “edge thickness” setting to add a raised lip or impression of a bezel to the edge of the opening. If you use this in conjunction with a drop shadow, place the shadow after the bevel.

Enhancing Readability

Several Reticles clips – such as RET108 – have numbers that are transparent rather than a specific color. This is a nice touch when the footage underneath is bright, but can be hard to read if the footage is dark – especially since most the “surrounds” in the Reticles clips are black. This is simple to cure: Just place another layer between the Reticles clip and the footage you are viewing, and mask it

to fill in the area just behind the numbers in question. This is shown in Figure 3.

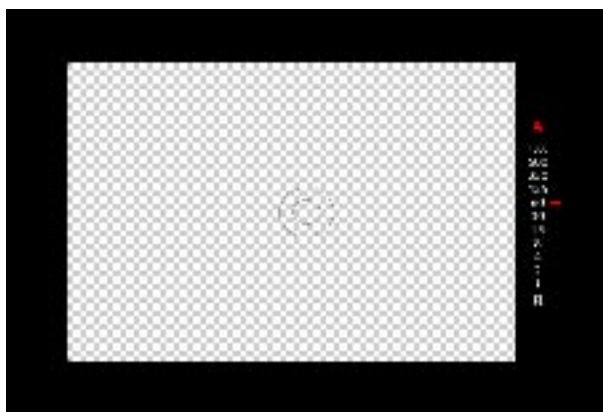


Figure 3a



Figure 3b



Figure 3c



Figure 3d

The central viewfinder and the numbers along the right side are transparent in Reticles clip RET108, as shown by the checkerboard pattern (a). What happens if you place this over a dark clip, such as this shot from Family Scenarios (b)? The numbers may be hard to read (c). This is easily cured by placing a colored solid or "slug" behind the numbers (d). The yellow outline shows where we have masked the solid to appear just behind the numbers, and not the viewfinder.

To create this in After Effects, add a Layer>New>Solid, and drag it underneath the Reticles clip in the Timeline. You can try to make this solid the size of the area you need to fill, or go ahead and make it full-screen, and then add a mask to cut it down so it doesn't obscure any of the footage you want to see. Change the color of the solid to change the color of the numbers you are filling in.

In Final Cut Pro, add a Matte clip from the clip window, and add it to your sequence behind the Reticles clip. Change its color under Controls, and then use the Crop settings under the Motion tab to restrict it to an area just larger than the numbers you are trying to fill in. If you need a more complex shape, explore the Matte section of the Video Filters; the Mask or one of the Garbage Matte filters should do the job.

Adding Texture

Another useful enhancement is replacing the black background of some of the Reticles clips with a more interesting texture. This texture can be as simple as a still image of, say, brushed metal, or as complex as an Artbeats animated background clip. In either case, the technique is the same; we'll give steps using After Effects – but the general idea can be used in other programs as well.

Figure 4a shows Reticle clip RET128 over a clip from the Artbeats American West collection; note the large black surround, which is representative of what you might see peering through a real scope – but let's make it edgier. Place your desired background underneath or behind the Reticles clip. In After Effects, press F4 to expose the Modes panel, and change the "TrkMat" (track matte) popup for the background to Alpha Matte. This will use the Reticles alpha to cut out the background, and turn off the original Reticles clip.



Figure 4a



Figure 4b

Many Reticles clips – such as RET128 (a) – have black surrounds and backgrounds. To replace this black with a texture, use the Reticles clip as an alpha matte for your desired texture – here, we colorized the Corrugated image from the Artbeats Wood & Paper still image collection (b). To retain any color in the original Reticles clip, duplicate it and blend it on top (c).



Figure 4c

The problem with this approach is that you will lose any colors in the original Reticles clip. That's easy enough to solve: Duplicate the Reticles clip, and turn on the visibility for the copy on top. To drop out the black in the Reticles background, apply an effect such as Knoll Unmult, Walker Premultiply or Alpha Tool set to Unmultiply Black, or the free Xmult from FAN (www.fandev.com/xmult.html). This will sit any colors other than black in the Reticles clip on top of your new background. You could even add a drop shadow if you wanted.

If you want to blend the colors in the Reticles clip with your new background rather than just place them on top, use blending or composite modes instead of an effect. Add or Screen tends to work well over dark backgrounds; try Overlay or Soft Light over lighter backgrounds.

Tracking

One of the best things about Reticles is the inclusion of a number of crosshairs. Most of these can be found in the Stills folder (clips RET130-148); some great animated ones are hidden away in the Bonus Movies folder.

You can use these as-is to focus on the center of an underlying image. But far more interesting to us is the ability to use a motion tracker in your software to follow an area of interest in your footage,

and then apply the results of the track to one of these stills or movies so that the two will truly interact. Remember that you can scale the Reticles images down to create smaller crosshairs; in the case of the full-screen still images, you can mask them down to their centers, or use their corresponding "aperture" files as track mattes to crop down the more interesting inner, outer, or crosshair companion stills.



Figure 5a



Figure 5b



Figure 5c

The Bonus Movies as well as many of the Stills provided with Reticles can be used in conjunction with a motion tracker to follow the action in an underlying clip. Here, Bonus Movie STU19-02 has been tracked to follow a clip from Artbeats Extreme Sports. It has been applied using Overlay mode so that the two clips interact; you can also colorize the Reticles clip.

Zooming Out

Reticles is a nice collection in that it goes beyond standard background imagery, and instead provides clips designed to be combined with other clips so that you can create unique composites. Stills RET 175-186 even contain various "dirt on lens" overlays! As with all stock footage, you should use this variety as a jumping off point to further customize it to your needs and taste. Hopefully some of the tips included here will help you travel down that road.

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