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# Running on NT: High-end 3-D Mac programs need some gas

By: Sean Wagstaff  
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**MacWEEK**

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By **Sean Wagstaff**

Three-dimensional software has come a long way on the Macintosh in the past two years. We now have real-time preview rendering provided by QuickDraw 3D in nearly every major 3-D application. NURBS modeling is available in form\*Z from Autodesk Inc. of Columbus, Ohio; Amapi from Yonowat Inc. of San Francisco; Neoform from Formation Design Systems Inc. of Scotts Valley, Calif.; PixelPutty from the Valis Group Inc. of Tiburon, Calif.; and the newest player on the Mac, LightWave 3D from NewTek Inc. of Topeka, Kan.

A number of programs offer inverse kinematics. LightWave 3D has bones. Electric Image Inc. has shown one of the coolest new animation-oriented modelers I've seen. Fractal Design Corp. introduced the best-ever texture painting program in the form of Detailer. In fact, virtually every Mac 3-D package has better modeling, animation and rendering tools. For print and multimedia, the Mac is positively teeming with new and improved 3-D tools.

Slowly but surely, every high-end Mac 3-D developer is building a Windows or Windows NT version of its software, but as far as I can see Mac users in the video and film world stand little to gain. For one, the pace of important releases has slowed to a crawl on the Mac side. It's taking longer and longer for key applications, such as form\*Z and ElectricImage Animation System, to gain upgrades as developers rewrite their code to go both ways and slip deeper into the marketing, engineering and attention-sapping bog of multiple platforms.

In all fairness, Apple shares the blame. Vendors have waited too long for QuickDraw 3D to come up to expectations, and they've invested a lot of time adapting to the new technology. I hope the investment will pay off in future release schedules.



On the bright side, the PowerPC chip, with its fast floating-point math, is a killer processor for 3D - probably as good as any available. NewTek told me LightWave 3D renders faster on a 200-MHz PowerPC-based Mac than on a 333-MHz Digital Equipment Corp. Alpha under Windows NT, and that form\*Z runs about the same on PowerPC and Pentium Pro machines of equal clock speeds. Add multithreading and multiprocessing to the OS and the Mac looks pretty trick.

Nevertheless, the killer apps aren't being ported to the Mac; they're being ported to NT, which leaves high-end Mac users looking enviously over the fence at Microsoft Corp.'s green grass: Softimage from Softimage Inc. (a subsidiary of Microsoft) of Montreal; 3D Studio Max from Kinetix of San Francisco; and Lightscape from Lightscape Technologies Inc. of San Jose, Calif., to name a few blades. And, most surprisingly, Silicon Graphics Inc.'s CEO Ed McCracken said in the keynote speech at January's Moving Worlds conference that SGI is "moving into the software business, including Alias/Wavefront on Windows NT." If Electric Image or somebody doesn't step up right now, users who are hungry for high-end 3-D effects will have no choice but to drive their power mowers over to CEO Bill Gates' sprawlingly verdant Microsoft lawn.

NewTek blew its chance to play the hero with the first release of LightWave 3D for the Mac. It is a powerful, full-featured modeling and animation system. But before I'll give in to its outdated, inconsistent and downright ugly interface, I'll look for something that feels more like Mac software, even if it does work only under Windows NT. The first developer to get this right is going to win the hearts and minds of a lot of Mac users. (For the record, my money is on Electric Image.)

A stomach-turning moment came at January's Macworld Expo in San Francisco when Vertigo Technology Inc. handed out beta copies of 3D Dizzy. It's a cotton-candy treat for Adobe Photoshop users, based almost exclusively on Apple's QuickDraw 3D. But I went to the show expecting a meaty Mac release of Vertigo's animation system, not fluff on a widget. Vertigo told me that Mac users aren't ready for its workstation software's level of sophistication. The truth is that some Mac users have been ready, and waiting, far too long. **Sean Wagstaff** is a free-lance 3-D artist and writer living in Bend, Ore. You can reach him at wag@bendnet.com.

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