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form*Z RenderZone: Model of 3-D excellence

By: Sean Wagstaff
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By **Sean Wagstaff**

Autodesk Inc. calls its latest release of form*Z RenderZone an incremental upgrade, but Version 2.9 has enough new capabilities to fill a 173-page addendum manual to overflowing. This is no surprise, considering that the \$1,995 3-D modeling and rendering application now has more than 500 features - enough to build almost any object in 3-D.

The new release not only adds many important modeling and rendering features but also offers new ways of customizing the interface and is generally faster.

While form*Z is unsurpassed as a modeler, it does not do animation. However, many professionals are likely to pair it with an equally serious animation product, such as Electric Image Inc.'s ElectricImage Animation System.

At first glance, the program doesn't look much different from Version 2.8. While some palettes and menus have been slightly reorganized, the substantive changes become apparent when you begin to work. Autodesk held back its QuickDraw 3D support until now, and the result is a very useful implementation of Apple's technology, including support for the fast trimesh geometry. Most modeling operations can be viewed through QuickDraw 3D's interactive rendering component. You cannot, however, use QuickDraw 3D in modal-modeling dialog boxes, such as when performing sweeps on a path. QuickDraw 3D really comes into its own with the addition of hardware acceleration. With a RenderPIX PCI/500 accelerator from Newer Technology Inc., for example, we were able to move Metaformz, form*Z's new implicit surfaces, around in QuickDraw 3D's shaded rendered mode to sculpt a face.

Subtle interface improvements include the capability to nudge selections by a preset increment using the arrow keys on the keyboard and to use the Pick tool



to drag and rotate objects. You can now assign a Command key to any form*Z action.

The greatest strength of form*Z has always been its rich set of surface- and solid-modeling features. This release builds on that foundation with better support for organic modeling (for building irregular and nongeometric shapes).

Multipath skinning lets you build shapes that use multiple-source profiles and multiple paths to define precisely controlled fluid hulls, such as airplane bodies, car fenders and boats. While powerful, this tool is finicky about what geometry is acceptable, and we found that source shapes and paths have to be carefully created. It is sometimes necessary to break complex outlines into shorter paths, for example.

The best new feature in form*Z 2.9, however, is Metaformz. Some Mac 3-D vendors have dabbled with metaballs - implicit surfaces that define surface by blending together adjacent shapes, similar to an artist sketching figures by drawing ovals and straight lines. However, form*Z 2.9 sets the standard. While most metaball modelers limit you to spheres, form*Z lets you use any object, such as polygonal solids, surfaces, lines and balls. When you group Metaformz and assign positive or negative weights to each, they are blended smoothly under an organic-looking skin. This feature is ideal for creating shapes such as faces and hands. More important, you can move Metaformz and change parameters as you build a model; form*Z automatically updates the resulting skin as you work.

RenderZone, Autodesk's implementation of LightWork Design Ltd.'s rendering library, increases its importance to form*Z users with this version. RenderZone offers high-quality texture-mapped Phong or ray-traced rendering, which generates renderings comparable to that offered by programs such as Specular International Ltd.'s Infini-D and Strata Inc.'s StudioPro, although the texture definition capabilities are not as rich.

Version 2.9 can generate QuickTime VR movies in panoramic and object formats (see www.macweek.com/mw_1118/rv_formz.html for examples). It can also generate transparent shadows, which carry the color of the glass surfaces that produce them. You can now shine light through a bit-map image, like a slide projector, allowing you to create dramatic gobo and gel effects. Depth cueing and blur, realistic procedural skies and UV texture support are also new. form*Z now imports and exports texture-mapping information with model formats that support it.

This release of form*Z RenderZone makes it the most powerful modeler on the Mac for organic, as well as geometric, forms. form*Z's vast library of tools is well-implemented (although the multipath skinning needs some work), and users now can customize the interface. For those who need a wide range of 3-D modeling and rendering capabilities and a very fine degree of control, form*Z is an excellent choice.

Autodesk Inc. of Columbus, Ohio, can be reached at (614) 488-8838; fax (614) 488-0848; formz.@autodesk.com; www.formz.com.

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