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Softimage|3D 3.8 steps onto the stage

By: Sean Wagstaff
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By **Sean Wagstaff**

With dozens of films and countless video games and television spots to its credit, Avid's Softimage|3D 3.8 for Windows NT and Silicon Graphics Irix is at the cutting edge of 3D animation. Avid, already well established in broadcast and film circles, recently purchased Softimage Inc. from Microsoft Corp., which can only improve the application's status.

Softimage|3D 3.8, which is available in either a \$7,995 Base version or a \$13,995 Extreme version, is a stopgap release prior to the company's debut of the Sumatra animation environment with its Twister rendering engine. Sumatra is aimed at keeping Softimage in stride with Alias|Wavefront's Maya, which costs \$7,500 for the Core version and \$6,000 for any one of the five additional modules. We tested the Extreme version of Softimage|3D for Windows NT, which fixes bugs and adds a few new features.

Softimage|3D's rendering ranges from an unremarkable scan-line renderer that comes with the Base version to the outstanding ray tracing and procedural rendering capabilities of the Extreme version's mental ray renderer. Although neither is as fast as Play's ElectricImage Animation System, mental ray's rendering quality makes up for its sluggishness.

Users of the Base version will miss motion blur, depth of field and customizable shaders, such as the excellent Toon cel shader, that work with mental ray. Softimage|3D provides additional mental ray rendering engines priced on a site-by-site basis (typically \$1,000 to \$2,500); these are often used to farm out renderings to idle machines. You'll need an extra license to render on both processors of dual-processor systems.

Particle, a separate application that comes with the Extreme version, provides flames, smoke, explosions, rain and other natural phenomena effects. Although it's very realistic, it's poorly integrated with the main application, forcing users to

exit Softimage|3D to use the standalone application.



Softimage|3D extensively supports plug-ins and custom shaders, and many are available from third-party vendors such as Phoenix Tools.

Softimage|3D is hard to surpass for high-end character animation. It boasts so many features for creating and animating lifelike characters -- even enabling subtle facial expressions -- that experienced animators can animate virtually anything. The Extreme version includes Meta-Clay, a variation on metaballs, and both versions feature excellent inverse kinematics (IK), deformations, shape animation, relational modeling, motion capture handling and extensive NURBS (nonuniform rational B-spline) support, as well as many other tools and effects.

The powerful NURBS modeling in Softimage|3D provides a great deal of flexibility and control for creating complex organic surfaces. As with all modeling operations, you can build NURBS surfaces with relational links to constructive curves. For example, you can modify a face profile to change the related model. You can selectively add resolution to a model for creating detail, and you can precisely define weights of control curves.

To animate a character, you can add an IK chain, weight the bones of the chain to deform the skin and use a variety of envelopes to control how the skin and muscles move.

Softimage|3D excels at visual feedback. We ran it on an Intergraph TDZ 2000 GX1 ViZual workstation, which provided outstanding real-time rendering of character animations.

Softimage|3D is no slouch for mechanical-style animation, either. Collision detection, dynamics (including physics) and support for mathematical expressions in both versions dramatically reduce the frustration of animating machines and objects in flight.

Softimage|3D does have some weaknesses. The program lacks the depth of features for mechanical-style and architectural modeling found in Autodesk's form-Z 3.0. Softimage|3D's dynamics engine, particle systems and mathematical expressions also have a lot of catching up to do with Maya.

More importantly, Softimage|3D uses an arcane, mostly gray-and-white interface that doesn't conform to Windows NT. The project file system, a huge number of keyboard shortcuts and just about everything else in the interface are unique. The tools are not hard to master, but switching between Softimage|3D and Windows applications is a schizophrenic experience. Incredibly, the 20 pounds of manuals include few useful tutorials.

Other problems are more directly production-oriented. For example, you can't place multiple cameras in a scene without a third-party plug-in, and you can only constrain lights to objects, rather than attach them directly. The only way to manage a project's hierarchy is with the Schematic flowchart diagram, which is a visual and organizational headache.

Softimage|3D's superb technical support is on a maintenance contract basis, so you'll pay handsomely to get it -- typically 20 percent of the software purchase price per year. Mercifully, the support contract includes free upgrades.

Softimage|3D is a state-of-the-art, high-cost tool for animating 3D characters and effects. It has rough edges that users should expect to see repaired in the

next major release, and it has stiff competition from the even costlier Maya. But if you can afford it, this production tool is well worth the investment.

Win NT; Unix

Hits: Strong character animation; advanced visual effects such as particles and physics; NURBS modeling and Meta-Clay; high-quality mental ray rendering and shaders; plug-in architecture.

Misses: Outdated interface; slow rendering time; single camera placement; costly software and maintenance contract.

Price: \$13,995*

Softimage Inc. of Montreal, a division of Avid Technology Inc., is at (514) 845-2199 or (800) 387-2559; www.softimage.com.

*Base version, \$7,995. **Sean Wagstaff** is a digital handyman at ImpactImages.net.

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