

Pictured is 3Dpro's main interface. The main modeling window has been split into four standard views, and a camera window is visible on the right.

3Dpro 3.6

3D Modeling and Animation Tool • Strata, \$895 • By Chris Manners

It should come as no real surprise to anyone that the recent economic downturn hit software companies as hard as any segment of the high-tech industry. 3D software companies, fighting for users in an already saturated market, found it more difficult than most application developers. As a result, companies tried a variety of different strategies to weather the storm. Some companies formed alliances, some were bought by bigger companies, and others divested themselves of their product lines entirely.

Strata (www.strata.com) was one of the companies that was purchased by a third party—C-3D Digital Inc., which offers 3D programming to satellite and cable television subscribers, and has the ability to convert two-dimensional programming into realtime 3D. Strata merged with C-3D Digital in late 1999, and the acquisition provided additional financing. However, the partnership wasn't advantageous, and dissolved in early 2001.

During the time Strata was a subsidiary of C-3D, there was little product development and some decisions were made that don't make sense in hindsight, most notably the

decision to port Strata's software line over to BeOS.

Strata's old flagship product, StudioPro, was one of the earliest 3D products on the market, and gained notoriety for its use as the design program for the first edition of *Myst* and for feature films such as *Wild Wild West* and *The Fifth Element*. After the merger, it seemed as if the program was slowly dying, but now the company is privately owned again and the products are being upgraded and developed.

Back in Z-space

Given Strata's difficulties, it's no surprise that 3Dpro hasn't changed that much from the program's previous iteration, Strata StudioPro 2.5.3 (reviewed Feb. '99 DV). Before Strata merged with C-3D, the company was enhancing its standard 3D product by providing a series of plug-ins called the Power Module series, which included the Model Master, ProShaders, and ProCreator extensions. Since then, the company's strategy has changed and Strata is now offering three packaging options: 3Dpro, 3Dplus, and a save-disabled demo version of 3Dpro 3.7. The difference between the packages is

simply which extensions are bundled with the application. In the case of 3Dpro, it's all of them.

3Dpro is a fairly standard 3D modeling, animating, and rendering package. When you create a new file, a standard isometric view of an empty scene opens. This window can be split to provide up to four windows, each with a different view and display style. The controls for the program consist of a series of floating palettes for resources (textures, shapes, gels, backgrounds, and effects), environmental effects, modeling extensions, object properties, and the Project window. The Project window provides a keyframe-based animation timeline that's similar in many respects to the animation timeline in After Effects. Each object has a twirl-down arrow that provides access to all of the object's properties, and scrubbing along the timeline and changing one of these properties (e.g., scale) automatically creates a keyframe.

The program is robust in terms of capabilities. For modeling, it features lathing, extrusions, and mirroring; Boolean operations; and Metaball, fillet, hull, and skinning tools. The program's

Score: ◆◆◆◆

Pros

Robust and intuitive application with an animation paradigm that's easy to learn. Excellent texturing and rendering capabilities. New Flash output features.

Cons

Weak character animation tools. Poor audio capabilities. No sync tools.

Bottom Line

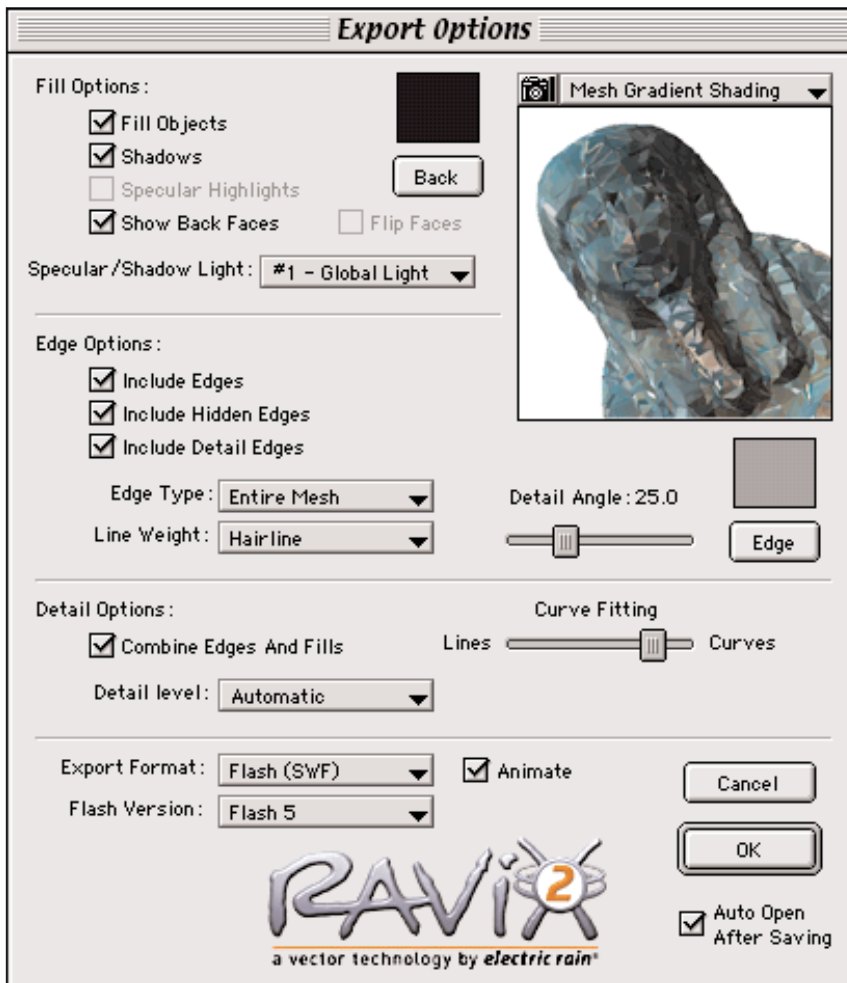
3Dpro could have a strong future if Strata continues to develop the program. This release reestablishes the program as a robust, mid-level option for 3D artists.

System Requirements

Mac: PowerMac with OS 8.6 or higher; Open GL 1.1.2 or higher.

PC: Pentium; Windows 98, Me, XP, NT, 2000; Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher.

Both: 128MB RAM (256MB RAM rec.); 125MB free hard disk space; QuickTime 4.0 or higher; Open GL acceleration card (rec.).



Strata has licensed Electric Rain's RaviX export module for 3Dpro to enable export of 3D objects and animations to the popular Macromedia Flash format.

inverse-kinematic (IK) tools are adequate enough for some complicated animation sequences but they are a little difficult to work with for character modeling. One disappointment is that the company hasn't upgraded its weak sound tools—it's not possible to synchronize an animation to an audio track. Given that the application has decent IK tools, the poor sound tools are something of an oversight.

Procedural texturing and image mapping, including the mapping of QuickTime movies, provide the program with strong surfacing tools. The program's special effects—including auras, fire, smoke, flares, fountains, hair, hotspots, and pixie dust—are all simple to apply and animate. Multiple cameras and multiple camera windows are supported, in addition to multiple lights. 3Dpro's rendering component, although a little on

the slow side, produces high-quality images, something that's especially useful for artists who produce for print purposes. The module includes the ability to render soft shadows and reflections with the program's speedier scanline renderer,

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and also provides batch and suspended rendering modes.

Fine features

The most interesting part of the application remains the Shapes library, a memory management feature that lets

you use a single shape or object multiple times in a scene without increasing file size. These shapes can be opened and altered, and each instance of the object in the scene will be automatically updated. The shapes themselves can either be complete models or EPS files, which the program can import and use for lathes and extrusions.

There are a few new features in this version, the most useful being the ability to export stills and animations as Macromedia Flash (SWF) files, as well as Adobe Illustrator (AI), EPS, and the latest XML-based vector format SVG. Strata has licensed Electric Rain's RaviX II vector rendering technology to achieve this capability, and options for Flash export include exporting in cartoon mode in single, two, four, and full color. Line weights can be varied, and animations can also be exported as gradient meshes.

In addition to a slightly reworked interface, 3Dpro has two other new features—Explode and Shatter. Explode fragments a selected model with parameters for force, gravity, complexity, and time. Shatter provides a similar set of options, with a choice for tumble (how the fragments spin as they fall) instead of force. Both features make it easy to animate the destruction of objects, something all 3D animators are fond of doing. At present, the application only runs under Mac OS X in Classic mode, although it runs under all common Windows operating systems and is an exact, solid duplicate on both platforms. The company plans to release an OS X-native version later in the summer when version 4.0 will be released.

Fans of Strata products will be pleased to see this robust application reentering the market with a few useful upgrades. Although current StudioPro 2.5.3 owners may want to wait to upgrade until version 4.0 comes out, they may be swayed by the fact that 3Dpro 3.6 is Flash enabled and that all the plug-ins are bundled with the top-of-the-line version. Either way, it's great to see one of the old 3D work-horses back on the scene and ready for more enhancements. ■

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