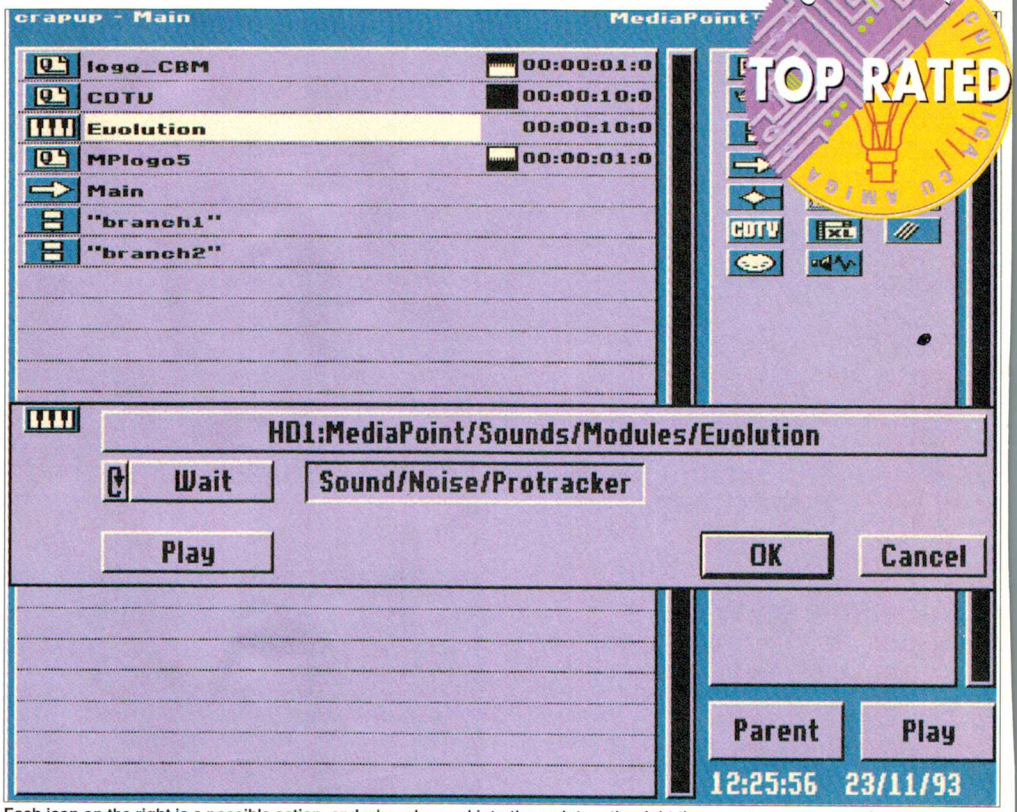
MediaPoint

Ever wondered what the makers of *Real 3D* do on their day off? John Kennedy discovers that rather than lie around the house all day they have entered the interactive world of multimedia.



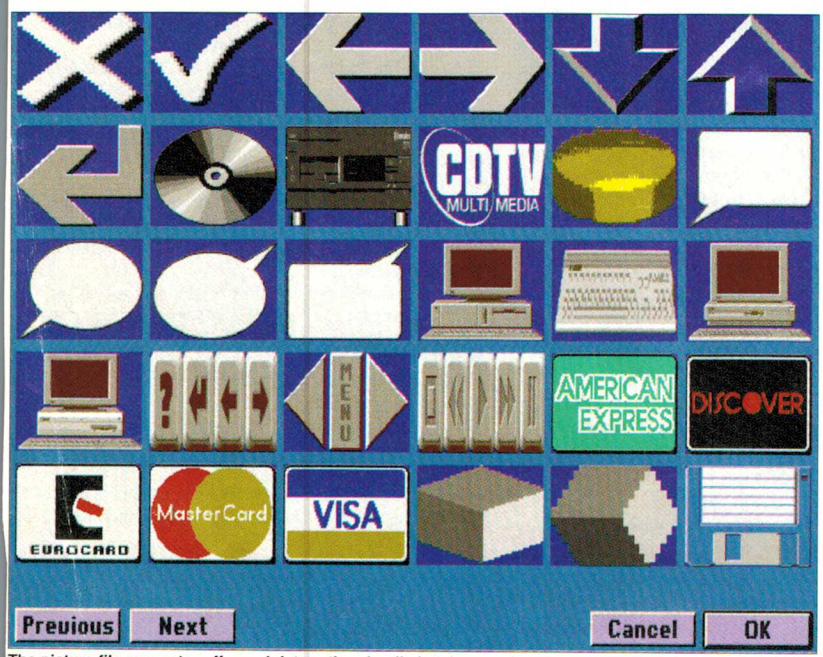
Each icon on the right is a possible action, and when dragged into the script on the right they create a sequence of events. Here the soundtrack for the presentation is being selected.

I don't particularly want to review Activa's latest baby, and I'll tell you why: I'd rather no one else knew about it. I'm hoping that you won't notice the rather attractive screen shots on this page, and my carefully-crafted text will entirely pass you by. In fact, I demand that you skip this review completely and move on to the Back Chat page, which is rather good, as I'm in it this month.

MULTIMEDIA MAGIC

Now that I'm alone, I'm at liberty to waffle on to myself about *MediaPoint*, safe in the knowledge that no one else is going to steal my ideas, because after playing around with *MediaPoint*, I've got lots of new ideas. Now I know how I can use the Amiga to actually do something useful for a change.

Once upon a time, someone thought of 'multimedia' and it's still the magic word in computer land, mainly because it can mean exactly what you want it to mean. To me, multimedia is an interactive and informative blend of text, pictures, animations and sound, and Activa International Inc seem to agree with me because that's exactly what *MediaPoint* creates. The easiest way to describe this program is to think of an incredibly easy-to-understand programming language. Think of a language that will load and display a picture in any mode without fuss, add text anywhere on the screen and play a sound tracker module in the background whilst waiting for the user to press a key or click on a gadget. Even better, think of a language that offers all this in an intuitive point and click environment and also supports a huge array of extra hardware. Now you have a good grasp as to what *MediaPoint* is all about.



The picture file requester offers miniature thumbnail sketches to give you an idea as to what each file looks like. Very handy.

SCRIPTING EXAMPLE

Here's a simple example where *MediaPoint* would be very useful. Now remember, I'm talking to myself here so don't run off and do this – it's my idea. Imagine you run an estate agent, and you want a useful window display, something a little more eye-catching than bland photographs of suburban nightmares.Using a still-video camera, you take lots of photographs inside and around your houses. Then you digitise them with V-Lab or some such, and store the pictures on a hard drive. Also on the drive you put *MediaPoint* running a script which displays the houses in a main window, their features down the side and finally the price. Your easy-to-pay, budget plan, low-finance mortgage rates also flash up on screen occasionally.

Using a touch screen device, and an *ARexx* driver, you then offer passers-by the ability to select a house and even take a little guided tour (with soundtrack) by means of the keypad. If they choose, they can enter their telephone number and in the morning you can call them to make an appointment.

It would take an hour or so to write the script using *MediaPoint*, and the system would pay for itself in one sale. That's exactly what multimedia is all about.

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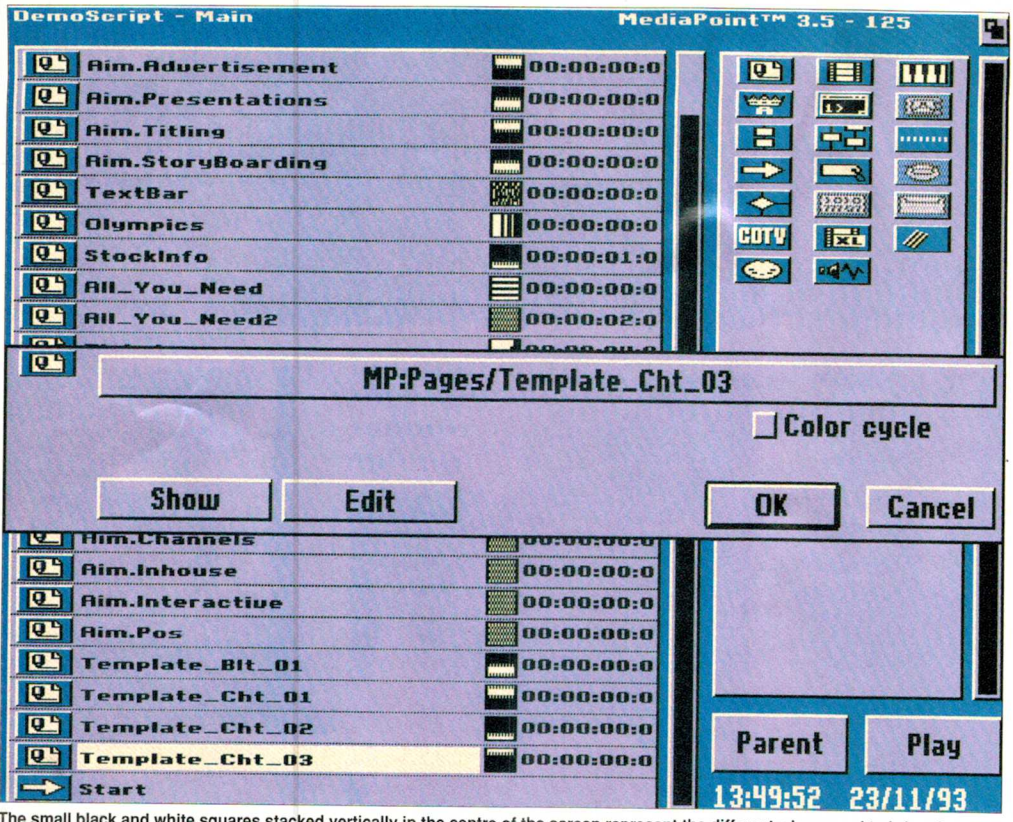


The small black and white squares stacked vertically in the centre of the screen represent the different wipes used to bring the new image to the screen.

SO WHAT'S NEW?

Activa certainly haven't come up with something astonishingly new with *MediaPoint*, instead they have looked at the previous efforts and improved them beyond measure.

Most other authoring programs offer limited support for animations and sound, but *MediaPoint* covers just about everything. All normal Amiga ANIM file formats are covered, including the new and improved ANIM7 format which wipes the floor with the older versions when used with 68020 and better processors. As the AGA chipset permits some exceptionally detailed animations, ANIM7 is essential for decent frame rates. *MediaPoint* will spool anims directly from hard disk and if you lower the frame rate slightly, it can do it without any sudden jerks as well. I'd give the editor's right arm to get a chance to play with a SCSI2 drive, as the results would be very impressive indeed. *[Thanks John, I'll remember those kind words whne it comes to pay day. – Ed.]* Sound samples can also be spooled directly which means your host system doesn't need to be crammed to the gills with expensive RAM chips in order to play back lengthy samples, such as general greetings or narrations. What marks *MediaPoint* out from the crowd is its support of external hardware by means of its unique Xapps (eXternal APPlicationS) protocol. A Xapp is a code module which can be used to control any extra piece of kit, the idea presumably being that manufacturers will include Xapp files themselves.

For example, the CDTV Xapp allows control over the playback of audio CDs. The CDTV player can either be part of the host hardware (that is, the *MediaPoint* program is running on a CDTV or A500 with A570) or connect via a serial link. For example, my A4000 is linked to a CDTV, and with *MediaPoint* I can use my Pink Floyd collection to add a synchronised soundtrack to my animations. *As MediaPoint* works in its own time system or in SMPTE/EBU or MIDI time, synchronisation is frame accurate. The scheduling system also allows specific actions to be carried out at certain dates or times. The estate agent's window display could display a half price sale for half an hour every alternative Thursday at 2am if desired.

THE XAPPS

MediaPoint interfaces with other pieces of hardware by means of Xapps (or eXternal APPlications) code modules. Each peripheral requires its own Xapp, which provides control over the various features.

Active supply several Xapps as standard, and will happily provide details on how to write your own should the need arise.

XAPPS ARE PROVIDED FOR:
CDTV – provides control for playback of audio CD disks.
CDXL – plays sound and animation files in CDXL (AGA) format
ION – controls the Canon RV321 Still Video Player
IV24 – extensive control over the GVP 24bit graphics system.
MIDI – plays standard MIDI files
Studio 16 – when used with the SunRize AD516 or AD1012, provides CD quality sound from hard disk.
VideoDisc/VCR – interfaces the Amiga with several compatible video disk and tape players.

SLICK AND SMOOTH

Using *MediaPoint* is a pleasure, and the software has a tremendously solid feel about it. Some programs simply inspire confidence with their sensible menu layouts and clear displays, and this is one of them. The slickness permeates throughout the software. Each new screen image or object can be displayed through 50 different transitions or wipes. Pictures can melt, split and bounce onto the screen whilst logos can spin and dissolve.

Creating flashy business presentations is ridiculously easy, and it's hard not to get carried away and turn the entire episode into a fully fledged news program. For low-level control, the scripts generated as you click and drag icons can be edited, or even created, with a standard text editor. In this way you can ensure your presentation hasn't a pixel out of place, and making full use of an AGA chipset means the pixels look stunning. You don't need an AGA A1200 or A4000 to use *MediaPoint*, but you will need lots of memory and hard disk space. The barest of minimum systems will have 2Mb of Chip RAM or 1Mb of Chip RAM and 2Mb of Fast RAM, with Kickstart 2. But any program which depends heavily on graphics and sound will work best with a hard drive and 6Mb of memory. The ideal system would be a well-equipped A4000 used for authoring the systems, and a A1200 with a hard drive used for displaying them.

COOL STUFF

Some particularly cool features which I couldn't forgive myself for not mentioning include support for CDXL, the animation and sound format originally developed for the CDTV player. Now we have the AGA chipset, CDXL is going to become even more important, and this is one of the few programs to support it. CDXL offers very reasonable live video playback without the need for an MPEG chip, and if used properly I firmly believe it will revolutionise Amiga software.

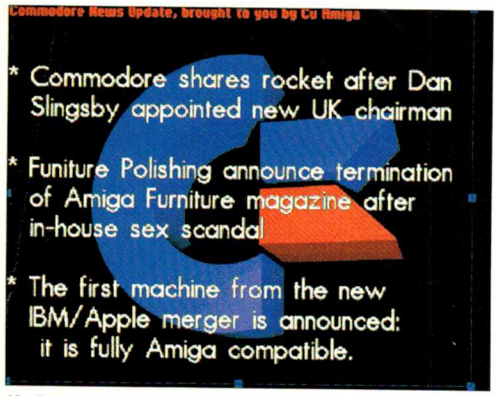
I successfully played back some CDXL files pinched from a passing CDTV disk, and enjoyed the option to quadruple the screen size. But of course CDXL support isn't for everyone – and it won't be until there is an inexpensive method of capturing the necessary video and sound data. However, the fact that it is supported is good news for the Amiga community as a whole. If you create a standalone multimedia terminal using *MediaPoint* (another one of my ideas, so don't bother) you'll be delighted to know that there is an optional comms link feature. This means that as long as the terminal is connected to a standard telephone line via a modem, you can completely revise and update the presentation from the other side of the world. *MediaPoint* comes with a free playback module, which means you don't need to worry about any license arrangements.

TOO PERFECT?

Is this the first item of Amiga software to get 100 per cent overall? You might have got that impression from the previous text, but so as not to insult

JARGON BUSTERS

- **AGA: The new Amigas (the A1200, A4000 and CD32) feature the 'advanced graphics architecture' chipset, which means more colours and higher resolutions**
- **ANIM7: The Amiga's IFF standard file format allows for internal variations, and that's exactly what ANIM7 is. Normally animations are saved using the ANIM5 format, but with the advent of more powerful 32-bit processors (68020 and above), the new ANIM7 format goes a lot faster.**
- **CDXL: The file format used to package up sound and 'live' video for playback on the CDTV. Although only a quarter screen, the quality was acceptable and now, with AGA, CDXL is even better.**
- **CDTV: Commodore's Dynamic Total Vision was a flop, which now means you can pick it up for a song and connect them to your Amiga as a CD-ROM drive.**
- **MED: The only Amiga program Tony Horgan could not live without. MED is a music editor which allows songs to be constructed from Amiga samples.**
- **MIDI: The Musical Instrument Digital Interface allows an Amiga to record, edit and play back sounds from a home or studio keyboard.**
- **MPEG: The Motion Pictures Expert Group decided that this was the standard used to compress full mbtion video onto CD-ROMs.**
- **Multimedia: Anything you want.**
- **SMPTE: Society of motion picture and television engineers – another standard put together by an 'expert group'.**
- **Xapps: MediaPoint uses Xapp (external application) modules to interface with extra hardware.**



MediaPoint is very good at quickly generating displays. The text and background are completely separate, and each can be moved by itself.

Interactive shop window displays are only the beginning... Just wait until writeable CD-ROMS and CDXL start to take over.

THE COMPETITION

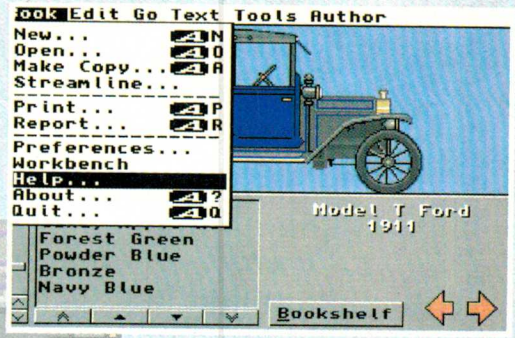
Multimedia on the Amiga is nothing new, in fact it started several years ago with a program called *Deluxe Video*.

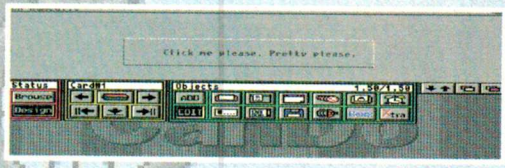
Since then we've had *CanDo*, *Hyperbook*, *AmigaVision*, *Scala* and *Helm* which had met with varying degrees of success.

CanDo and *Hyperbook* are geared more towards generating application software than presentation systems, although the new AGA compatible *CanDo* might redress that.

Scala and *AmigaVision* are both good multimedia systems (a new version of *Scala* is imminent, and will be mosy viciously fought over in this office), and Helm falls somewhere in between.

In my opinion, *MediaPoint* is the slickest of all the packages available allowing some extremely attractive and powerful displays to be created within minutes.





ARexx, there are ways around this of course. Unfortunately, the MIDI file support is also a little suspect – basically it didn't. Certainly any MIDI file that I created with *Bars and Pipes* got the thumbs down.

Animation support was also slightly ropy, as one of my large animations consistently crashed the entire system, as did pressing escape at the wrong time whilst previewing a screen. I did seem to hit the old Recoverable Alert followed by Software Failure screen rather too much for a finished program of this price. And why can't the mouse pointed on my A4000 reach more than half way across the screen?

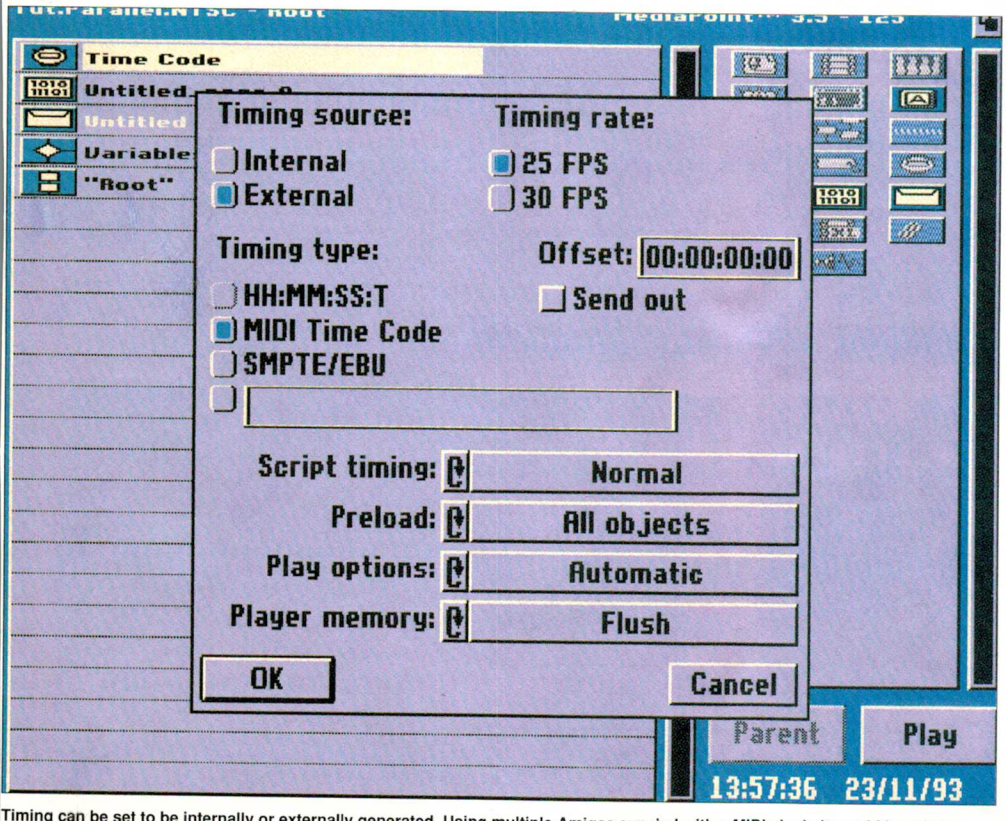
I can forgive these shortcomings because the Xapps system means that it's only a matter of time before these bugs are fixed – hopefully by the time you read this. I can also forgive Activa because of the enormous amount of clip art and sound samples they supply – it takes an hour or so just to look and listen to everything.

CONCLUSION

Just as *Real3Dv2* is the ultimate image rendering program, so *MediaPoint* is the best multimedia authoring program around. The support for every file format under the sun, the easy to use icon-based scripting system, and the excellent stock of clip art mean that this program will take a lot of beating.

It's amazing that one program could appeal to so many users. Demo writers can use *MediaPoint* to create hip and happenin' demos, graphics freaks can use the animation spool system to record directly to video tape with sound effects, and information engineers like myself can use *MediaPoint* to (hopefully) make their fortune.

Multimedia is where the Amiga has a strong hold, and with programs like this, it's only going to grow stronger. CU



Timing can be set to be internally or externally generated. Using multiple Amigas sync'ed with a MIDI clock, it would be relatively straightforward to make a huge video wall of monitors.

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EASE OF USE ♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦ **89%**
Point and click and drag and watch. Script editing isn't fun though.

VALUE FOR MONEY ♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦ **75%**
High price aims it squarely at developers. A cut-down home (cheap) version is definitely required.

EFFECTIVENESS ♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦ **97%**
Excellent. Very slick, very professional results.

FLEXIBILITY ♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦ **96%**
Supports just about anything, including new ANIM formats and CDXL.

INNOVATION ♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦ **86%**
Nothing very new, just better.

'Geat product. This is what multimedia is all about.'

OVERALL 90%