SCALA MM300

Scala, $399

MEDIAPOINT

Activa International, $499

BY GEOFFREY WILLIAMS

Multimedia presentation programs come in several flavors. Some programs are designed with an emphasis on kiosk and application development, complete with database, sophisticated math and variable capabilities and flexible freeform button support. Others excel at creating projects for live or videotape presentation and have stronger sequencing, better transitions, SMPTE and MIDI synchronization and better interaction with external devices.

Interactivity in live presentations is important, but it's also useful in video. With the entire presentation coming straight from the computer, you can dump it to tape in one pass and save wear and tear on your video gear. Because all of your testing and previewing is done on the computer, you save a lot of time in the studio as opposed to laying down one sequence at a time.

Scala and MediaPoint are both at their best for creating support graphics for live presentations and sequences for video. Both are European imports with similar features that will appeal even to demanding professionals.

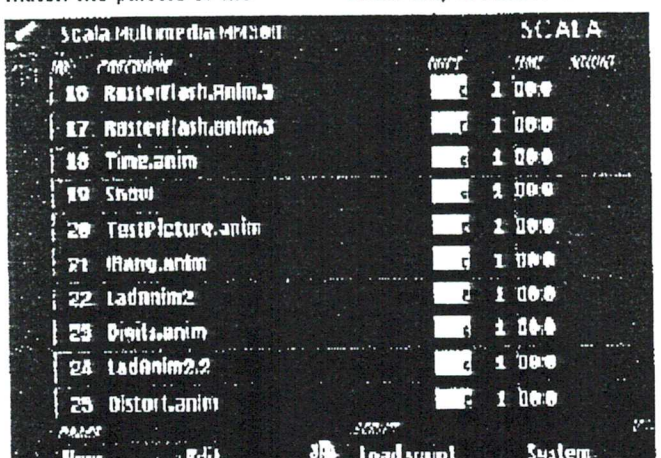
SCALA MM300

Available for several years, Scala may be the most popular Amiga multimedia program. It's a mature program with extensive features and powerful capabilities not found in other software.

The latest release of Scala (v.50.3) adds a number of new features. Of particular note is that importing graphics is now easier. Incoming graphics can be quickly remapped using Floyd-Steinberg dithering to match the palette of the existing image. Brushes and pictures can be resized, you can optimize the palette while remapping all of the on-screen graphics, and there are optional file format loaders for PCX and GIF images. Color cycling is supported, however, not for the DeluxePaint IV (Electronic Arts) extended color cycling modes.

Scala supports ANIM-5 and ANIM-8 formats, but not ANIMBrushes. Also included is AnimLab, a utility that can make, split, resize, add superimposed text and convert ANIM-5 to ANIM-8 animations. It will also convert animations into a format that will play faster from the hard drive. Drawing on-screen graphics has also been made easy, since you can use line, rectangle and circle tools to create structured (movable and scalable) images on the screen with adjustable bevels and shadows. This makes drawing a button very easy.

Button creation has also been simplified. While buttons still remain rectangular, you can click on any screen object and automatically make it a button. Buttons can play sounds and change color when they're clicked on or when you move the pointer over them.



To move you from point to point, Scala boasts more than 100 transitions that you can fine-tune.

Besides allowing interactive buttons to control the presentation, Scala can be controlled through absolute timing (each event will happen at a specific time after the start of the presentation), or you can use external time code if you have Scala's optional Studio 16 EX and SunRize's AD1012 or AD516 digitizing card. Another useful feature is the ability to trigger events manually and have the timing recorded for use in the actual presentation; this is very handy for synchronizing events to music.

Scala has over 100 transitions, with adjustable speed, ease in and out, and a lot of other adjustments based on the wipe. Most of the better wipes require an AGA machine, though. They are spectacular, and you would be hard pressed to find a better and more impressive collection of transitions anywhere. Scala uses color fading to make transitions between different palettes look much better, but it will also automatically convert palettes that use only half the available number of colors to make a seamless transition with a picture with the same number of colors. On an AGA machine, pictures with 128 colors or less will transition perfectly as if they had the same palettes.

A good presentation program should have the capabilities of a good CG, and Scala does. Its antialiasing of bitmapped and scalable fonts is fast and offers up to four levels. It also supports Colorfonts. Type a line of text in any font and you can decide whether you want it to be a button or a structured object, move it where you want, set its in and out transitions and attributes such as a 3-D extruded look, outline or drop shadow. In a couple of minutes you can create a very impressive screen with lines of texts and objects all appearing with different transitions and at separate times. There are also two types of text crawls. It could not be easier, and the results can be spectacular.

Digitized samples of any length can be played directly

from the hard drive, and you can load and digitize samples, using an audio digitizer, directly into the included audio editor (with just zoom and cut editing, it is good only for doing a quick trim). Scala also plays SoundTracker and DSS music modules, as well as SMUS files.

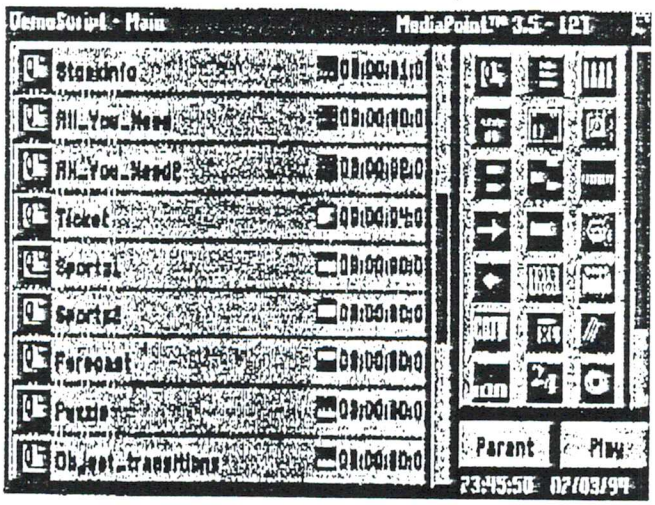
Scala uses an extensible format called EX to make modules to add additional abilities, such as methods to communicate with other devices. Included EX modules support the GVP G-Lock, Canon Xapshot, AVideo/Colormaster, Scala and GVP genlocks, GVP's IV24, MIDI, CDTV and the Sony and Pioneer laserdiscs.

As good as Scala is, its annoying form of copy protection might make you think twice about using it under some circumstances. Scala and its stand-alone player program require a hardware dongle to be inserted into the joystick port. Therefore, you can't use Scala to make distributable presentations. While you can plug a joystick into the dongle, you can't plug another dongle into it. It's so small that on my A2000 I've had to use pliers to remove it. If you lose the dongle, you're sunk. You have to buy a backup copy of the software to get a backup dongle.

MediaPoint

A fairly new program on the scene, MediaPoint 3.5-127 has many features similar to Scala's. MediaPoint uses an Intuition-based interface, as opposed to Scala's strictly button interface, and has pull-down menus and icons for the various events you can drop into the script. It can resize and remap incoming images with its own version of palette optimization. You can choose between Floyd-Steinberg, Burkes, ordered and random dithering. Instead of requiring add-on converters, MediaPoint can use Workbench 3.0's Datatypes to load foreign file formats. One very nice feature is that a drawer of images can be represented as thumbnail images in the file requester. It also lets you tile small brushes to make a background and includes 150 brushes usable as tiles. It also has an NTSC color limiter, making it easier to create presentations for video.

MediaPoint lacks Scala's animation converter utility, but adds support for ANIM-7, CDXL animations and ANIM-Brushes. It will also automatically add looping frames to nonlooping animations. It lacks Scala's handy drawing tools, but you can give any window a drop shadow with adjustable pattern, color and depth. MediaPoint also lacks Scala's ability to load a sound to play when the button is clicked, but buttons can be highlighted just by passing the pointer over them. As in Scala, here conditional variables are supported, but with more effort. MediaPoint's button capabilities are quite basic.



SMPTE time code synchronization is built in to MediaPoint.

MediaPoint comes with SMPTE time code synchronization built in (supporting the Fostex 4010, Nuriyuki YAM-3 and SunRize AD1012/516 TC readers), and you can connect two Amigas via a null modem cable and have MediaPoint control the presentation of a second copy of MediaPoint in the second machine. You can also have events in a presentation happen at a specific date and time.

MediaPoint has only 41 transitions, but there are a couple, such as moving-in on a curved path, that are unique. Like Scala's, these transitions can be used on a page, line of text or brush. They are all smooth and quite useful, but thin on variety.

Unlike in Scala, however, here you can change font, size, color and style attributes of words and letters instead of only entire lines. The single level of antialiasing is acceptable for most purposes. You can control justification, kerning, line spacing, italics angle, shadow weight and direction, and underline weight and offset, but cannot extrude letters. Unfortunately, there is no ColorFont support, and like Scala, it loads fonts only from the fonts directory. MediaPoint does, though, make it easier to insert special characters and variables, such as the date, into text via a pop-up menu.

You can also play sounds directly from the hard drive. Besides those in Scala, additional music formats supported are FutureComposer, JamCracker, MarkII, NoiseTracker, ProTracker and SoundMonitor. MediaPoint has extensible support for CDTV, Canon Xapshot, SunRize's AD516, Macrosystems' 16-bit audio card, GVP's IV24, MIDI, CDTV, NEC's PC-VCR, and Sony, Pioneer and Philips laserdiscs.

Scala is the more mature of the two products, but its dongle is a problem. It also needs MediaPoint's ANIM-Brush support and letter/word attribute editing. Standard features in MediaPoint, such as SMPTE locking and Studio 16 support, cost extra in Scala. While MediaPoint has fewer features, it is a low-cost, dongleless alternative with impressive capabilities. Most importantly, it includes a distributable player.

Both offer their own scripting languages and full two-way ARexx interaction with other programs. The healthy competition between them will ensure even better future versions of both programs. Whichever one you choose, you'll be able to create very impressive presentations with very little effort.

Writers:

Daniel Greenberg (Intro, PC), a Washington, DC-based multimedia author, specializes in infusions of entertainment into educational products and educational material into entertainment products.

Glenn Johnson (Mac), Multimedia Communications Director at the Graphix Zone in Irvine, CA, develops and delivers seminars on multimedia and digital video.

Geoffrey Williams (Amiga) is Executive Producer for Creative Business Communications and head of the Amiga Video-Graphics Guild.