

Once you've finished designing an animation, the Render module ray traces the data into a fully rendered, highly realistic animation file you can play with the Display module. As Display is freely distributable, you can share your animations with those without Playmation. (The package also includes a nifty, freely distributable screen blanker that uses Playmation animations.) Rendering an animation is time-consuming: De-tailed sequences sometimes took more

than an hour per frame to process on my 33MHz 486DX system. The complex calculations inherent to ray tracing were more to blame for the slowness, however, than any particular limitation of Playmation.

CLEAN YOUR WINDOWS

Windows purists will probably be annoyed by the program's erratic adherence to Windows standards, a trait stemming from the program's origins in one

of Hash's Amiga programs. The problem is most severe in the Channel displays, which allow for precise adjustment of animations. Instead of icons, the control buttons are marked with completely unintuitive capital letters that make using them impossible without carefully studying the manual. Many of the commands for opening and saving files aren't where you'd expect to find them in a Windows program, either, and this is one of the very few Windows applications that doesn't include on-line help. The rendering module also displays important numbers in boxes that are slightly too small to let you read the information they contain.

More significantly, the package offers no access to the Windows clipboard or any other importing or exporting options, except for the ability to map PCX and IFF format bitmaps onto objects. You can't import 3-D objects in the standard DXF format or 2-D objects, such as a logo you want to extrude into a 3-D shape. It's also impossible to save single frames from a Playmation animation in PCX or alternate formats for use with other programs; you'll need a third-party screen-capture utility.

For serious desktop-video users, the package's most severe limitation is that the rendering module creates animation files in 16 or 256 colors at a resolution of 320 x 200 pixels maximum. The renderer does an excellent job of using anti-aliasing and palette optimization to make images look as smooth as possible, but they're still noticeably jaggy and dithered.

Several of these problems are solved by Render24, a 24-bit rendering program available from the Playmation BBS for \$100. The program, which requires a math coprocessor, is a DOS-based, command-line-driven application that creates TGA (Targa) format still images in 24-bit color and any resolution that your system's RAM can handle. You can import these files into any application that offers Targa support, and, with a 24-bit, high-resolution video card, the image quality is eye-poppingly good.

Render24's speed is also impressive: It can churn out a high-resolution, 24-bit picture in less time than the basic renderer takes for a 320 x 200, 256-color version. The program can also create animations in Playmation's standard low-resolution format, often beating the basic renderer's imaging times by more than half.

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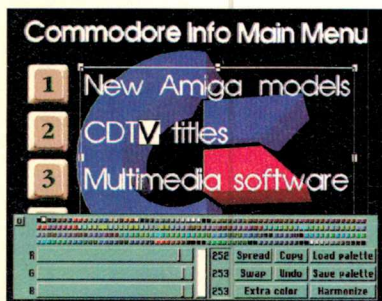
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