3D for sale

Benjamin Woolley ponders MetaCreations' surprise change of tack, as well as NeMo's behaviours.

MetaCreations, one of the most innovative companies in the 3D market, has announced an act that might seem to some more like metadestruction. It has closed its European offices and decided to change its 'corporate strategy'. The old strategy was to produce some really neat graphics applications, such as Bryce, Painter and the fledgling Canoma. Now the aim is to 'focus on ecommerce visualisation solutions' (ugh).

The reason for the change seems fairly obvious, if you look at the press release issued by the company late last year announcing the new strategy. The release was full of warnings about losses, lower revenues and redundancies. Clearly, MetaCreations was finding life tough in what it called the 'professional' graphics market, and it is not alone in that.

Does this mean that users of the company's 3D authoring products, such as Ray Dream, have wasted their money? In an open letter to its 'valued customers, shareholders, distributors and followers', the company promised that it 'plans to continue supporting its existing software'. That statement offers some reassurance, but 'planning' to continue with support hardly amounts to a commitment. Also, the company intends to sell off 'products that do not directly correspond to this strategic goal', and it is quite possible that they will be snapped up by competitors looking to reduce the amount of competition.

Screenshot 1: This is the sort of thing that MetaCreations is after. Sony has just started to use MetaStream for its Vaio online store, which allows potential customers to take a close-up look at some of the products. The model of the camcorder in the main window can be swivelled, and you can zoom in close enough to inspect details such as button labels

Another problem is knowing exactly which products are due to be jettisoned. The company is vague on the subject, as it basically says it will get rid of any that do not fit in with its new strategy. You might think this must mean 3D-authoring software.

However, two of the company's most recent releases are aimed exactly at that market: Canoma (which can be used to turn 2D images into 3D models) and Carrara (a 'synthesis' of its two previous 3D offerings, Ray Dream and Infini-D). See Reviews section.

What apparently distinguishes products that fit in with its new strategy and products that do not, is whether or not they can output 3D models in the company's MetaStream 3D file format.

MetaStream is at the heart of the new MetaCreations. A company called MetaStream.com has been set up to license the technology, and MetaCreations will concentrate on developing tools that will create the content it distributes. The idea is that ecommerce sites will increasingly use 3D models in their catalogues, that they will choose MetaStream to do this, and that they will use products such as Carrara and Canoma to create those models.

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By this definition, the company's 2D products (such as Painter), and in particular its consumer applications (Soap and SuperGOO), must look vulnerable. It is much harder to see how two of its most significant products (from a 3D perspective), Poser and Bryce, will fare. Both have been 'web-enabled', which means both output to the MetaStream format, and in the case of Bryce, links can be embedded within scenes. However, it is hard to imagine the sorts of monster models produced by these packages being widely used in 'ecommerce visualisation solutions'.

From a user's perspective, then, MetaCreations' products should probably be approached with some caution, at least until the picture becomes clearer. The company is trying to turn itself into the Macromedia of the 3D market, with MetaStream being its equivalent of Flash. It has some way to go to achieve this, but it has started to make a few notable inroads in the ecommerce world (see screenshot 1), and shows determination to go much further.

Captain NeMo

As every sci-fi fan will know, NeMo was the name of the captain of the submarine in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, by the French writer Jules Verne. A French company, formerly called Virtools, has now picked up on the name for the development of a set of tools for adding 'behaviour' to 3D objects.

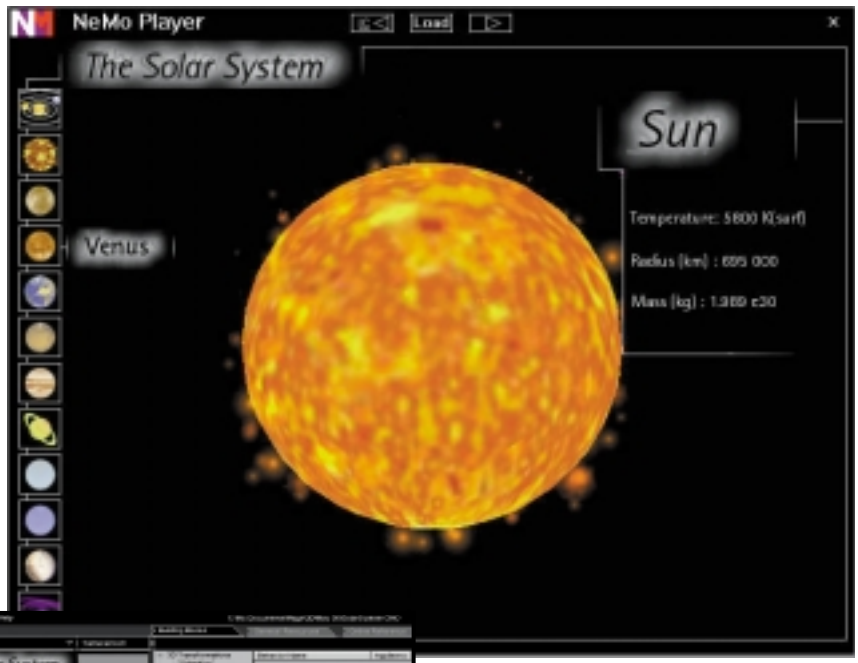
The idea, neatly and simply explored through a demo available on the company's website (www.nemo.com), is that you have a selection of pre-packed component behaviours like Lego blocks.

You drag and drop these onto your models (created using other software; 3D Studio MAX is the best-supported package), which then start to display the behaviour.

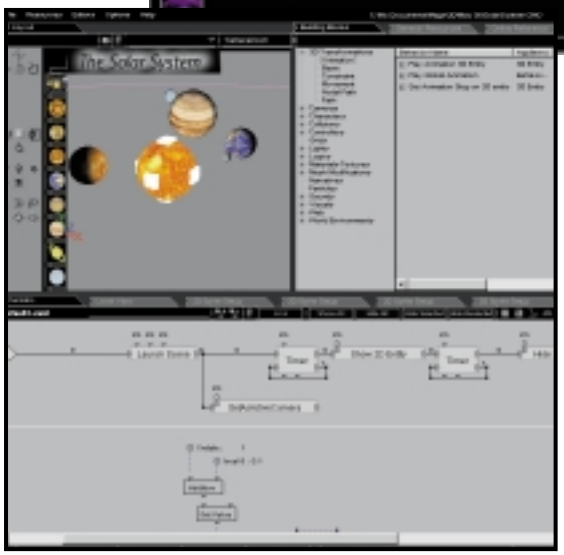
For example, it could be a behaviour that tells the model to rotate when you click on it, or bounce, or explode. However the concept of 'behaviours' (or, more correctly, 'behaviors' – despite being a French company, NeMo cannot resist the dominating influence of the US) – embraces all sorts of less obviously behavioural qualities. For example, they can describe lighting or texture mapping.

NeMo-activated 3D scenes can be viewed using a proprietary browser plug-in (which seemed to work well), a stand-alone player, or integrated into other applications.

The original aim of NeMo was game development, and here it offers clear benefits to 3D artists without C++ programming skills (which presumably means most of us) who wish to 'activate' some of the scenes they build. But NeMo clearly has grander plans, and insists on its website that the technology is of use in all sorts of applications, from design and architectural visualisation to education. The demos of these other applications are impressive (see screenshot 2).



Screenshot 2: The Solar System demo, courtesy of NeMo, currently showing the data sheet for the Sun. The Sun's surface bubbles beautifully



Screenshot 3: The Solar System example loaded into the NeMo Creation authoring software. The models to which behaviours are applied are shown in the top left panel, the behaviours that can be dragged and dropped onto the models in the top right panel and the schematic showing the flow of action in the lower half of the screen

NeMo offers two authoring suites for creating content: NeMo Creation and NeMo Dev. The latter is really aimed at games and multimedia studios that want to integrate NeMo behaviours with more complex applications. NeMo Creation is for the 3D artist, and you can download a 90-day trial version from the company's website. This is a hefty 8.5MB download, plus 2.5MB for the tutorials and support files although, according to the website, you can order it on CD.

The interface (screenshot 3) is distinctive and sometimes confusing, immersing you into the complexities of the software. It took me a couple of days just to find my way around the windows.

It took me a couple of days just to find my way around the various windows

However, with a bit of effort you can at least begin to experiment. The key to success seems to be grappling with the flow-chart style schematic. Each block in the chart represents a particular type of behaviour, showing the 'inputs', various parameters and the outputs. People who have experience of object-oriented programming will grasp the concepts quicker than those who don't, but there is context-sensitive help and a selection of useful tutorials.

I have to say that the Creation software crashed my system a couple of times – once forcing a spontaneous reset, so treat it with care.

NeMo has a special site, called 'Swap Meet' (www.theswapmeet.com), where users can post examples of their work and have online discussions. As an example of an online community for a product, it is among the best – and all of it is in English, which is perhaps surprising given that most of the contributors seem to be French.

CONTACTS

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