

# Natural caustics in backward path tracing

Shawn Halayka\*

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2023 12:40

## Abstract

In this paper we introduce a natural method for producing both refraction and reflection caustics in backward path tracing (e.g. bouncing around an eye ray in the scene until a light is found). These caustics do not rely on a light location, and as such, do not rely on bidirectional or forward path tracing. As such, these caustics allow for as many light sources as one would care for; the shapes and positions of the lights are completely arbitrary (can be bunny shaped, etc). We use the standard Cornell box for testing the backward path tracer.

## 1 Rasterizer versus ray tracer versus backward path tracer

The three main visualization algorithms in contemporary graphics programming are the rasterizer [1, 2], ray tracing [3, 4], and path tracing [5, 6].

The rasterizer literally converts vector graphics (generally, triangles, lines, and points) into raster graphics (pixels, also known as fragments). Generally, a depth buffer (Z-buffer) [7] is used to discern which simplices to draw, and which to discard, depending on distance to the eye. This depth testing algorithm does the job, but it is just simply not as programmable as a ray tracer or backward path tracer.

The ray tracer does a similar job, insomuch that it converts triangles into pixels. Rather than using a depth buffer though, one generally uses a bounding volume hierarchy (BVH) [8] to determine eye ray / triangle intersection.

The backward path tracer is identical to the ray tracer, except that it also takes global illumination into account. The backward path tracer uses the exact same BVH setup as the ray tracer. It's worth noting that the construction of the BVH is handled for you by the Vulkan / Direct3D driver, which adds to the naturalness of the caustics discussed in this paper.

Here we rate the three main visualization algorithms. We rate them in terms of what is relatively easy, or naturally occurring, in each of the visualization algorithms.

Algorithm	Reflections	Shadows	Refraction caustics	Reflection caustics
Rasterizer	No	No	No	No
Ray tracer	Yes	Sharp	No	No
Backward path tracer	Yes	Sharp / soft	Yes	Yes

Clearly, the most suitable visualization algorithm for now (and in the future) is the backward path tracer. This not to say that, for instance in the case of the rasterizer, there is no such thing as shadows. It's just that the implementation of shadows is a kludgy affair, or not naturally occurring.

Although caustics can be produced using bidirectional or forward path tracing, they suffer from convergence (or lack thereof) problems. These issues do not plague the backward path tracer.

Comparing this backward path tracer to photon mapping [9] is like comparing apples and oranges. For one, path tracing has a future – that is to say that, on an NVIDIA 3060 laptop GPU, the backward path tracer is still at best only an offline renderer. In essence, photon mapping is a kludge when compared to the ease and naturalness of the caustics, etc. in the backward path tracer.

---

\*sjhalayka@gmail.com

## 2 Acknowledgement

The code for this paper is based off of Sascha Willems' and NVIDIA's work [10–12].

The various Cornell boxes were developed by Rob Rau.

The code and various Cornell boxes can be found at:

[https://github.com/sjhalayka/cornell\\_box\\_textured](https://github.com/sjhalayka/cornell_box_textured)

## References

- [1] Noll. Scanned-display computer graphics.
- [2] Wikipedia. Rasterisation.
- [3] Appel. Some techniques for shading machine renderings of solids.
- [4] Wikipedia. Ray tracing.
- [5] Kajiya. The rendering equation.
- [6] Wikipedia. Path tracing.
- [7] Wikipedia. Depth buffering (Z-buffering).
- [8] Wikipedia. Bounding volume hierarchy.
- [9] John. Focus on photon mapping.
- [10] Willems. Vulkan path tracer.
- [11] Willems. Vulkan examples and demos.
- [12] NVIDIA. Vulkan mini path tracer.

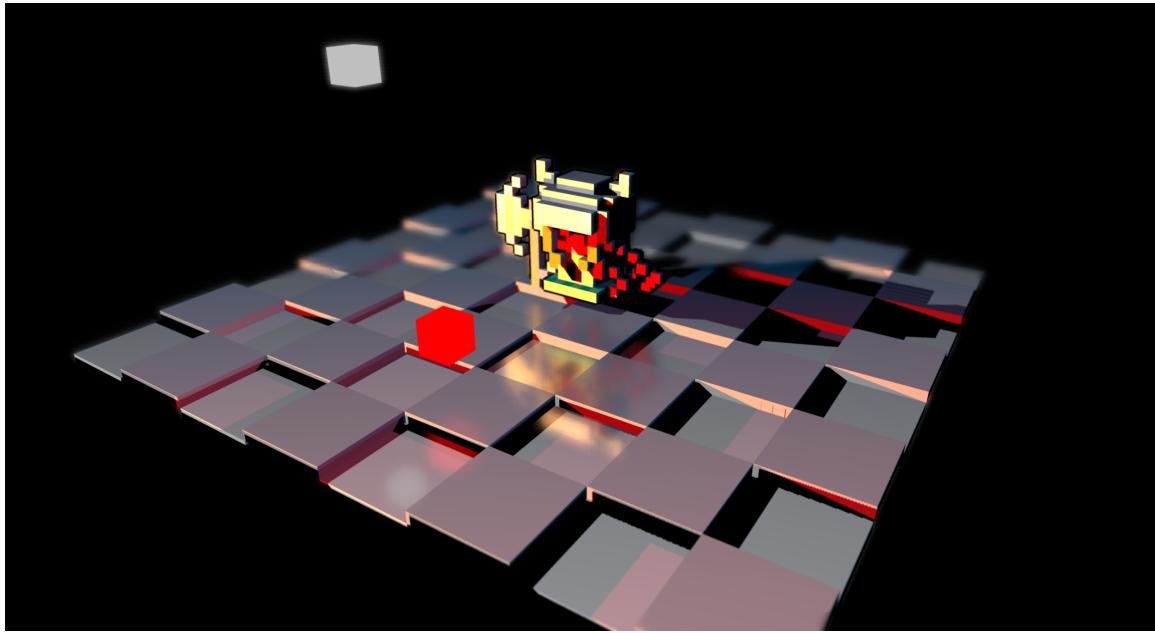


Figure 1: Rasterizer. The surface is lit using Phong shading and omnidirectional shadow maps. The reflections are faked – the camera is flipped upside down, and reflected things masked and drawn. In other words, reflections and shadows are not naturally occurring. Global illumination is not taken into account. This knight model was made by the Twitter user @ephtracy.

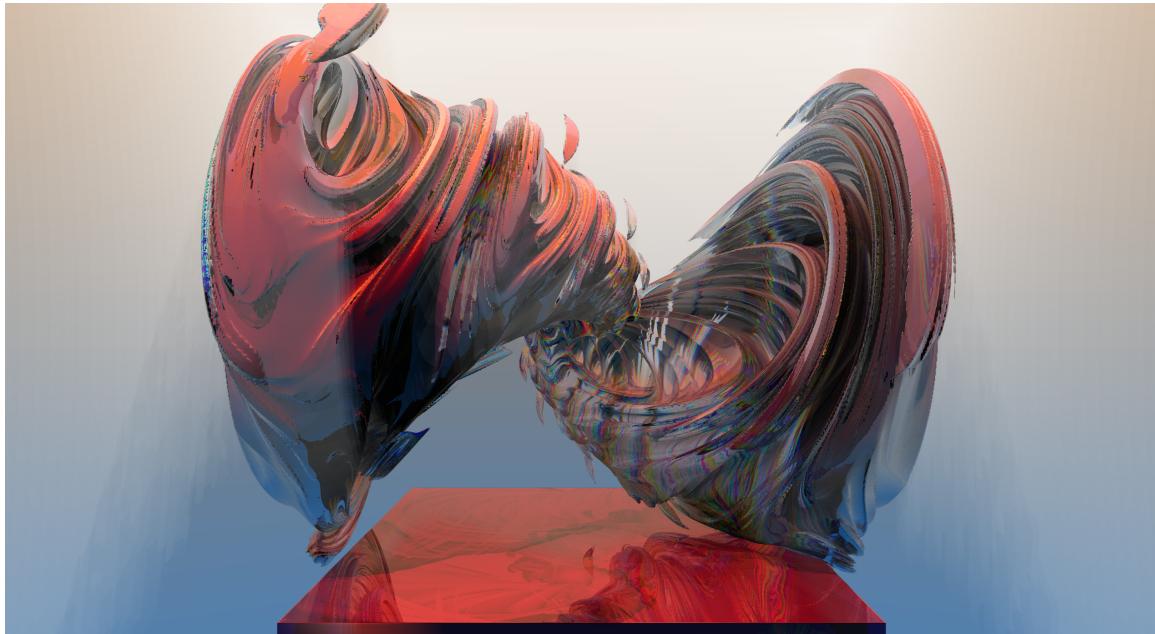


Figure 2: Ray tracer, taking into account transparency. The surface is lit using Phong shading and sharp shadows. In other words, reflections and shadows are naturally occurring. Global illumination is not taken into account.

```

o = hitPos + rayPayload.normal * 0.01;
d = cosWeightedRandomHemisphereDirection(rayPayload.normal, prng_state);

```

Figure 3: Old code, always using a pseudorandom cosine-weighted direction vector (e.g. scattering). Here the o variable is the ray origin, and d is the ray direction.

```

vec3 o_reflect = hitPos + rayPayload.normal * 0.01;
vec3 d_reflect = reflect(d, rayPayload.normal);

vec3 temp_o = o_reflect;
vec3 temp_d = d_reflect;

if(rayPayload.reflector < 1.0) // if less than fully reflective, do scattering
{
    vec3 o_scatter = hitPos + rayPayload.normal * 0.01;
    vec3 d_scatter = cosWeightedRandomHemisphereDirection(rayPayload.normal, prng_state);

    temp_o = mix(temp_o, o_scatter, 1.0 - rayPayload.reflector);
    temp_d = mix(temp_d, d_scatter, 1.0 - rayPayload.reflector);
}

if(rayPayload.opacity < 1.0) // if partially transparent, do refraction
{
    vec3 o_transparent = vec3(0.0);
    vec3 d_transparent = vec3(0.0);

    // Incoming
    if(dot(d, rayPayload.normal) <= 0.0)
    {
        o_transparent = hitPos.xyz - rayPayload.normal * 0.01f;
        d_transparent = refract(d, rayPayload.normal, eta);
    }
    else // Outgoing
    {
        vec3 temp_dir = refract(d, -rayPayload.normal, 1.0 / eta);

        if(temp_dir != vec3(0.0))
        {
            o_transparent = hitPos.xyz + rayPayload.normal * 0.01f;
            d_transparent = temp_dir;
        }
        else
        {
            // total internal reflection
            o_transparent = hitPos.xyz - rayPayload.normal * 0.01f;
            d_transparent = reflect(d, -rayPayload.normal);
        }
    }
}

temp_o = mix(temp_o, o_transparent, 1.0 - rayPayload.opacity);
temp_d = mix(temp_d, d_transparent, 1.0 - rayPayload.opacity);

o = temp_o;
d = normalize(temp_d);

```

Figure 4: New code, taking reflective and transparent objects into consideration. This solution for caustics performs well on modern graphics processing units – disabling caustics causes a practically imperceptible gain in frame rate.

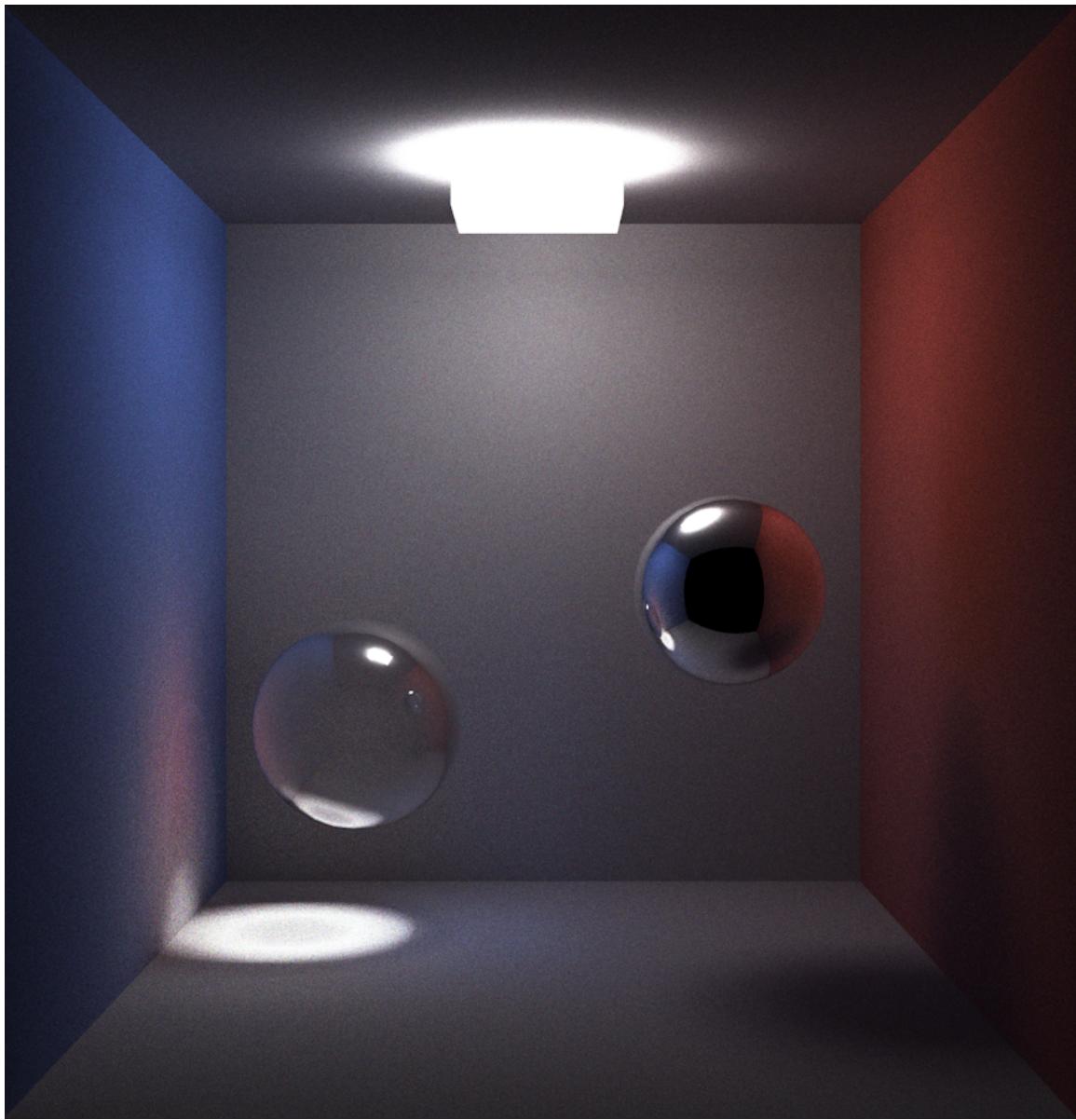


Figure 5: Backward path tracer, taking transparent objects into consideration. Note the naturally occurring refraction caustic. Note the soft shadows. Global illumination (e.g. colour bleeding / indirect lighting) is taken into account.

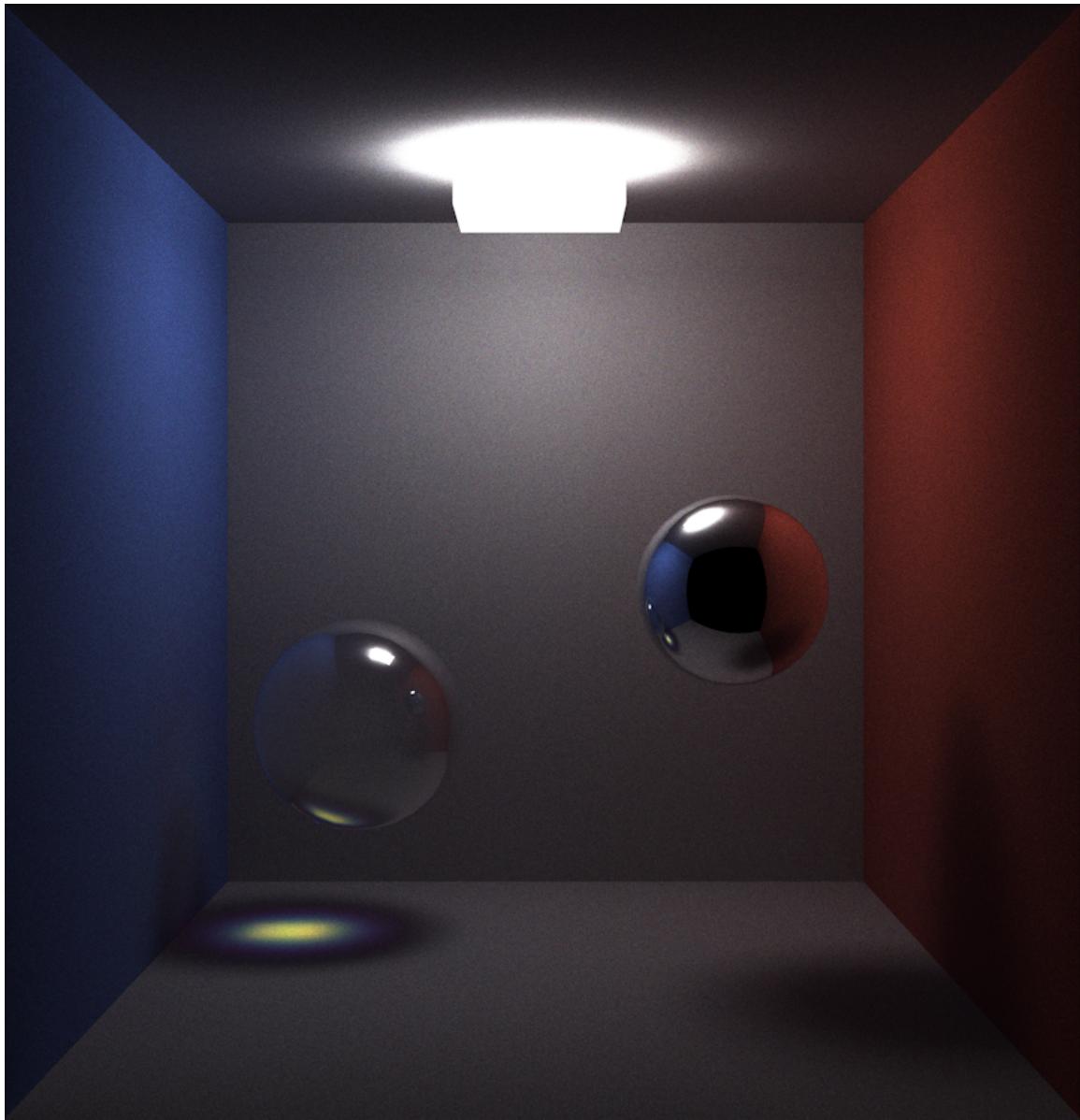


Figure 6: Note the refraction caustic, with 20-channel chromatic aberration.

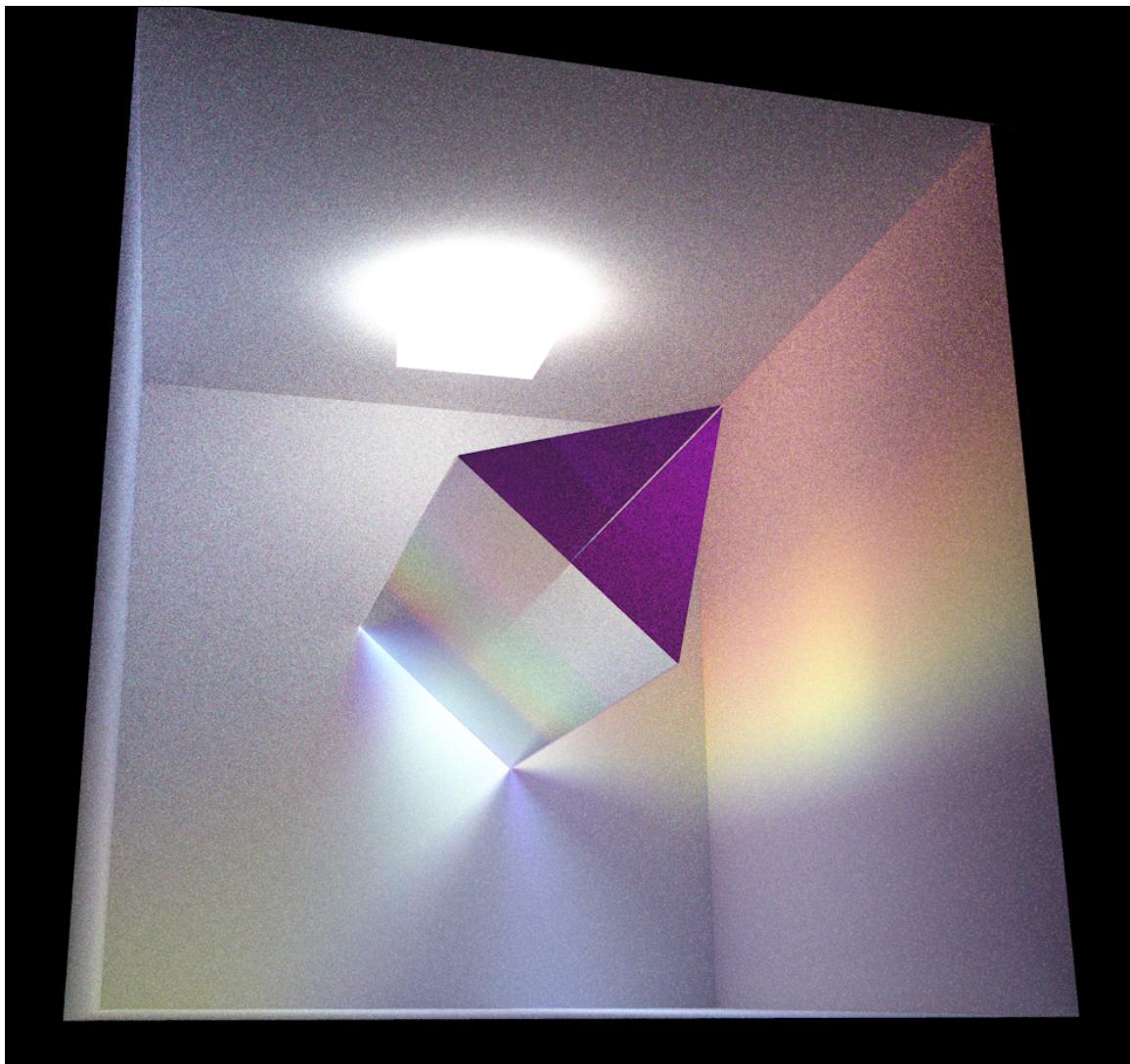


Figure 7: Note the refraction caustic, with 20-channel chromatic aberration.

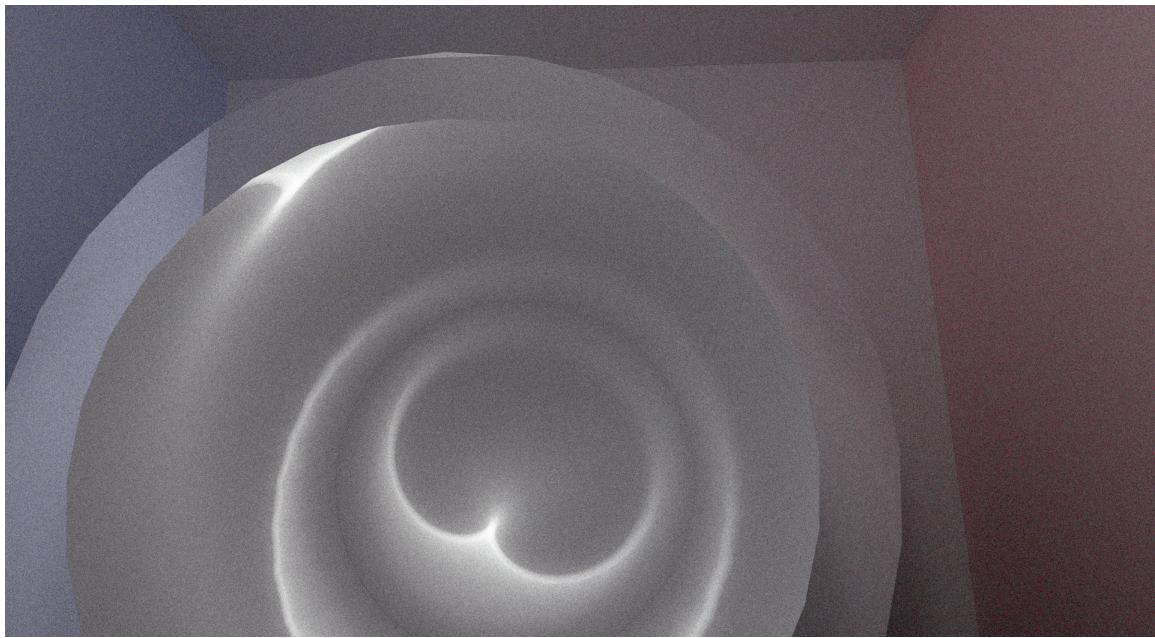


Figure 8: Note the sharp nephroid reflection caustic at the bottom of a hollow cylinder. Note that caustic sharpness is related to the size of the light – smaller light sources produce sharper caustics.

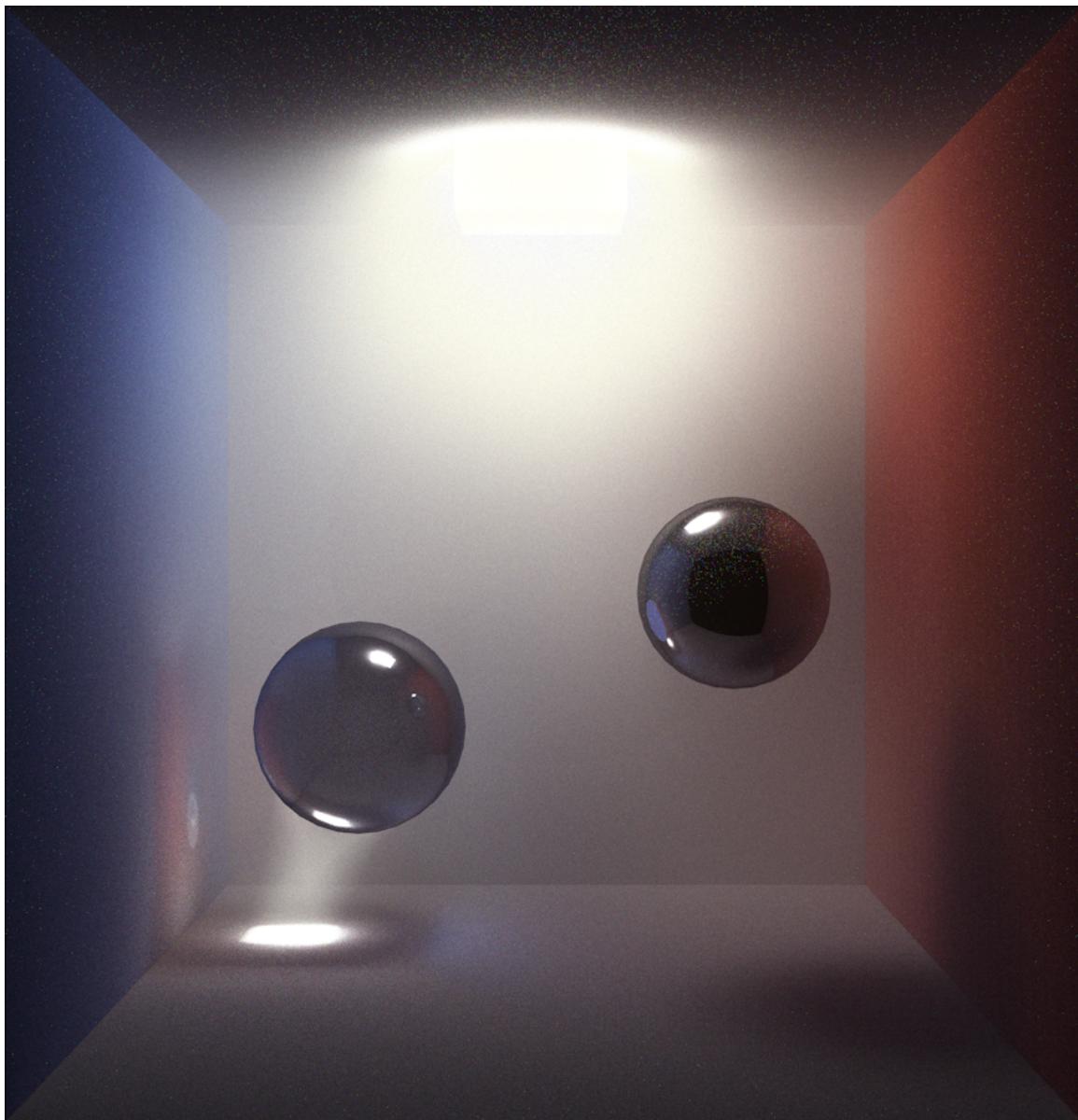


Figure 9: Note that the experimental fog lights up because of the caustic. These images are an homage to Canadian 3-D graphics companies from earlier days, such as Alias, ATI, Matrox, and Softimage.