



# Walking to New Orleans

The Siggraph cg show is here again but, with IBC just round the corner and NAB just gone, Rob Buckley asks who now needs to go to the conference that post forgot

Siggraph ain't what it used to be. Gone are the days when the graphics élite would shun April's NAB convention, because "of course, all the really interesting work is at Siggraph. NAB is just about products." Now, the computer graphics conference gets hardly a look-in when travel-budget allocations are decided.

Many software and hardware companies have noticed this and are acting accordingly. After all, when a lot of equipment is being touted at NAB even though it may not be available for a year, what's the point of putting off the announcement a few months to Siggraph? And, for the Europeans, there's always IBC in September.

Compared to NAB's 1600 exhibitors, this year's Siggraph list comes to only 300; so few that those actually bothering may well be doing so because they have a better chance of being noticed than at jam-packed rivals. Look through the list of wares they're showing and you'll be hard-pushed to find much new and exciting.

There are some exceptions. Softimage is already showing off version 1.5 of XSI, after version 1.0 was announced NAB (it makes you wonder why they took so long to get the original out in the first place). But it's also making version 4.0 of Softimage 3D available for a look.

Silicon Grail, developer of Chalice, is showing a 2D compositing tool called Rayz, which it reckons will be "accessible to traditional visual effects artists and general 3D animators" instead of

just the usual crowd of compositors.

And DPS is revisiting NAB's hi-def imperative and unveiling its DPSReality HD, a post-production tool it promises can be used across hi-def, DVD and internet distribution by "a much wider range of content creators."

After that, it's just variations on the familiar NAB theme. Nothing Real's Tremor compositing software, already shown at NAB, will be shown... running on a completely different workstation! And Alias is trundling out Maya 3 again, as well as "its popular, free Paint Effects screen saver..."

But that's about it. Meanwhile, every company under the sun is putting its IBC T-shirt on (the show already has 800 exhibitors lined up), hiring the models, testing the stand shells and filling the bowls of sweets in preparation for its Amsterdam excursion - IBC knows that hard-pushed facilities can't afford to send valuable staff to three exhibitions a year.

And why should they? It's only the big catch-all facilities that can afford the staff, time and money to send someone to the US. If they're going to do that, they might as well get everything in one go: workstations, graphics, storage, the lot. And if you can do all that at NAB (or more cheaply at IBC) why go to Siggraph?

Which is a shame, because Siggraph is usually held in the best location of the three. This year, rotation between locations has brought it back to New Orleans - the Big Easy, home of jazz, Mardi Gras, voodoo, cajun food

(as well as chronic poverty, the greatest in the US). Nevertheless, it should please the hard-core aesthetes of the graphics world which will make up the majority of the European attendees. And - because Siggraph's not about software or kit, but mainly a discussion of techniques and the latest developments - that means largely people at the pit-face, rather than their managers and facility bosses.

These happy few are going for the conference. If they visit the exhibition at all, it's for a break between sessions. And they're going to need them: this year's exciting choice of sessions includes everyone's favourite virtual reality primer, *Visualizing Quaternions* (back again after a not-quite-sold-out session last year); a brief sketch on *A Believable Avatar Surrogate for both Scripted and On-the-Fly Pen-Based Control in a Presentation Environment*; and not forgetting *Haptics...*

Good news for animators is that one of the keynotes will attempt to explain *The Human-Machine Merger: Why we Will Spend most of our Time in Virtual Reality in the 21st Century*. And *Stuart Little: A Tale of Fur, Costumes, Performances, and Integration: Breathing Real Life into a Digital Character* will at least help those animators with kids explain

how their soon-to-be-favourite film was made and how it's the sort of thing mummy/daddy does at work every day.

The cg festival should also prove a draw. Highlights include the "brain flythrough" from *Fight Club* by Digital Domain's Bob Hoffman; and Don Levy's work at Sony Pictures' ImageWorks on the forthcoming invisibility movie, *The Hollow Man*.

But if only the select few will be watching, another reason may be that bosses have started to rumble the fact that the conference is just one long careers fair. Anyone presenting a paper is more or less explaining, in public, exactly why the listeners should poach him from his current job. Attendees are also known to bring along showreels and CVs for prospective employers. The conference organisers have even been brazen enough to set up Career Centers for the convenience of those who can't afford to splurge for lunch while they're schmoozing the boss of some giant American graphics house.

Siggraph is still a "worthy" event to attend - almost a test of post machismo: "are you hard enough to survive Siggraph?" And if you are really anoraky about animation, there's nothing quite like it. So go. ■

