

Conference call to the city of angels

Siggraph is THE conference for those who want to learn what's new in the world of cg. This year it will see the final unveiling of the long-promised Sumatra, reports Rob Buckley, but it's the smaller software releases (and the parties) that are enticing the Brits to Los Angeles this year

Could this be the year when the industry's most notorious vapourware becomes a reality? First, NAB has Play finally unveiling its long-touted Trinity "studio-in-a-box," after years of promising it was just about to ship. Now, Softimage's Sumatra (the company's first decent 3D product, according to some detractors) might at last see the light of day.

In contrast to the unabashed, in-your-face capitalism of Las Vegas and NAB, Siggraph is seen as a show for connoisseurs - although this is changing, not the least because this year's venue is once more Los Angeles, home of Hollywood. In fact, over the last few years, the show has become very much busier, with attendees now numbering about 50,000. But, despite this increase, exciting product launches have become

less and less frequent, as NAB has started to steal its sibling's thunder.

For those who work with 3D graphics, particularly if they're Softimage customers, a demo of Sumatra will probably be near the top of their must-do lists, if only because it's been promised for so long - though word has it that the demo hasn't changed in the last six months.

Smoke and Mirrors 3D's Andrew Howes, a veteran of several Siggraphs, says the interest is usually to be found in the smaller software releases that can get overlooked in the bustle. He'll be looking at pieces of software priced at under \$1000. "Hopefully, the show will be more software-based. There haven't been any inspiring products lately, like there were in the old days."

Glassworks' head of 3D Alastair

Hearsum, who's leading a party of five to LA, agrees. "We're Softimage users so we want to see what Sumatra's like, what they've done to Twister and so on. But we're also going to see what all these smaller guys, like 3D Studio Max and Lightwave, are doing."

Sally Goldberg, a freelance editor working at CFC, will also be frequenting the 3D stands because, with the gap between the high-end and low-end packages disappearing, in her opinion Lightwave and its ilk will be worth keeping an eye on. Another task for Goldberg will be checking on the film compositing software to see what fills the void left by Cineon.

SVC's head of visual effects, Tom Horton, won't be going this year. But he will be sending several of his staff to check out various Sparks, to look at Sumatra (naturally) and to see how Discreet's NT port of Flame is progressing. They've also been briefed to keep an eye on 2D/3D integration, which - Horton believes - will be the Next Big Thing.

But, Softimage apart, there are few companies that didn't bust their bolt at NAB. Side Effects will have a beta of Houdini 4.0 on display. UK facility Pepper's Ghost ventures into the realm of production management with PG Studio. And Right Hemisphere's Deep Paint could appeal to those who need a cheap 2D paint package.

Siggraph is not just an exhibition of new products, though. For many, the conference, user-groups and courses are a big draw. Hearsum rates the exhibition's associated conference as something definitely worth attending. "In the past, I'd only gone for the exhibition and hadn't thought the conference worth going to. But last year I went, and found it interesting: people talking

about what they'd done on *Antz*, research on hair rendering and so on." Still, Visualizing Quaternions and From Fourier Analysis to Wavelets won't be everyone's cup of tea.

And neither will the user-groups, a staple of software-oriented conferences the world over. Hearsum, for one, maintains they come across more as sales pitches to the thousands of users gathered in the hall. Howes believes the Softimage group worth going to, though, and Goldberg has also found them good additions to the itinerary.

As is traditional with big, overseas conferences, the Brits will head to as many parties as possible. For some, it's a chance to meet up with former work colleagues who have moved to the States (such as those from Rushes who have legged it to fellow Virgin company 525). For others, a priority at the show will be blagging tickets to parties hosted by the big US facilities (not as good as they used to be, grumble the old guard, because they're so much bigger and you have to pay for your drinks and crisps these days...).

Not everyone succumbs to such lures - some for less obvious reasons than others. One major post-house is said not to send any of its staff for fear of getting them poached. Says Hearsum, "all the big companies there hold private interviews, and it's an ideal opportunity to give them your show-reel." He wishes to point out that *he's* very happy in his job and is going purely for education. Others just don't see Siggraph as relevant to their business; some have barely heard of it.

Siggraph remains something for those who *really* want to know what's on the cutting-edge of cg. It's a chance to learn, show off your work, have a good time - or even find a new job. ■