THE MACWORLD WINNERS

BY CHRIS ALLAIN

Drum roll ...the envelope, please... Well, maybe the Chris Allain's Choice Awards aren't as big an affair as some other major competitions, but if you're interested in what this VIDEOGRAPHY Contributing Editor felt were winning products at MacWorld San Francisco last month read on—and get a bit of analysis, too.

We all view products from our own perspective, and I am no different. I wear a few different hats, writer, occasional technologist and consultant, and—in the final analysis—video producer and facility owner. The products that most interest me are those that I can put to use, those that fit my model of working. The following list of products fits that description, but I also kept in mind the industry as a whole, and what's relevant to others with different work models.

DveousFX

As a high-profile MacWorld sponsor, Scitex Digital Video (SDV) showed one of the most significant products at the show for digital video users. The DveousFX option to the MicroSphere uses the chip sets from SDV's Abekas 8150 switcher and Dveous DVE to provide the most comprehensive set of effects available on a desktop editing system. The DveousFX PCI card, scheduled to ship in March, connects to the Truevision Targa 2000 RTX with a ribbon cable. AdvancedFX, an optional mezzanine board for the DveousFX card, completes the feature set. Although the DveousFX doesn't offer multiple channels or quite as many handles on the effects, it performs otherwise like an Abekas Dveous DVE.

Abekas, which was acquired by SDV in 1995, was widely respected as the maker of high-end switchers and DVEs. Drawing from that portion of its technnology arsenal, SDV provided the DveousFX with the wipe generator, luma and chroma-keyer, and picture and color-correction controls from the Abekas ASWR 8150 switcher. The 3D DVE, UltraWarp, light source, and SurfaceFX texturing capabilities came from the Abekas Dveous DVE. The ASWR 8150 and the Dveous are top-of-the-line products.

The base DveousFX's long list of effects includes 3D perspective and rotation with drop shadows, page turns, loads of wipes, luminance keys, blurs, and mosaics. The AdvancedFX option adds chroma-keying and dozens of complex warp shapes such as cylinder, ripple, and paper fold. It's advanced lighting effects offer variable positions, color and intensity, and light types including spot, flood, and bar. The AdvancedFX option also brings SurfaceFX, a feature that lets textures interact with lighting in 3D space.

The base DveousFX lists for $5,500 and the AdvancedFX option for $2,995. The bundled price is $8,495 but SDV offered a MacWorld special bundle for $6,195. That's a lot of horsepower for the buck.

SphereOUS Version 1.2

SDV's SphereOUS editing software deserves independent praise. This is something of a "most improved" award, because by most accounts the version 1.2 revision moves the software into the realm of a stable, reliable workhorse. Stability problems and missing features marred earlier versions, but SDV has made noteworthy progress with this release.

The emphasis on real-time performance, described as "Think-Do" by SDV's Mike Piper, requires a different approach to editing than the render models used by most other systems. Performance is a clear benefit to their real-time approach.

One of the strongest features of the SphereOUS editing package is that the same software runs on SDV's entire Sphere line of products —the MicroSphere VideoSphere, and StrataSphere. Each of the Spheres features full-performance software, lacking only the functions not supported by the hardware. All of these products

(A) Scitex Digital Video's DveousFX and AdvancedFX options win praise as the most comprehensive set of effects (B) available on a desktop editing system. Siemens Nixdorf/Pathlight's SSA solutions (C) offer amazing data transfer speeds. Media 100's new product line (D) combines lower pricing with one of the best nonlinear editing systems available.

also write files that are compatible at the bit stream level. Consistent user interface and media files allow a facility to easily integrate different solutions from the product line.

SphereOUS with the RTX alone offers two real-time streams of video at 3:1 compression — about a 225 KB data rate, along with 2D DVE moves, fades, dissolves, wipes, and four CD-quality stereo audio pairs.

Although I'm fond of the Sphere line, I have some reservations. First, I should mention there are a few features that SDV must implement, and bugs they must fix quickly to smooth out the SphereOUS package. These include a bug that causes an improper H-Phase when digitizing component video, and another that doesn't allow proper control of a source deck without the hardware control panel. SDV should fix these by the time you read this. SDV also plans to quickly add a couple of features that SphereOUS lacks. These include a Build-to-Disk feature for multilayered effects, scheduled for version 1.3 due in early February. A Print-to-Tape with timecode feature will allow insert editing of clips frame-accurately into a tape master. Expect this feature in version 1.4 about one month later. Both of these are fairly fundamental features that should not be delayed.

I'd also like to see a few other things happen with the MicroSphere, some of which are quite likely, while others are not. For best image quality, multilayered effects could be built using a target frame store approach so that the layers don't require multiple passes through the codec. SDV could improve image quality by raising the data rates a bit, although this is technically difficult for a dual-stream system with existing technology. It would also jeopardize compatibility with the rest of the Sphere line. Also, SDV could work to accommodate the render model of editing for users who want the highest data rates and don't mind waiting for effects to render. Are modest rendering times really aren't all that terrible?

SDV sells SphereOUS separately for $4,500 or bundled with the RTX as the MicroSphere for $13,500. A MacWorld bundle offered the MicroSphere with the expanded DveousFX package and the MicroSphere Control Panel for $19,995.

SSA Storage

SSA, or Serial Storage Architecture, represents a quantum leap in available disk-storage solutions. Pathlight Technology, and its partners Siemans Nixdorf and LaCie, are shipping products that eliminate many of the problems of sharing high-data-rate files in digital media workgroups (see Headline News). This amazing technology allows multiple digital video users or clients to each obtain data transfers of up to 80 MBps from the same disk array. These numbers are staggering when you consider the performance that could be practically obtained only months ago. The issue shifts from how much data the drive array can output, to how much the host's PCI bus can handle. At a MacWorld hotel suite, Pathlight and Siemans Nixdorf demonstrated a system with four workstation simultaneously pulling 13 to 14 MB data streams from the same array. A single system can obtain an aggregate bandwidth above 300 MBps.

The Pathlight SSA controller cards use a non-arbitrated loop of inexpensive cable to connect up to eight users to a maximum of 128 storage devices. Their ImageNET II bundles include a card, RAID software, and a special volume-sharing application called MDVS from Mercury Computer Systems Inc. This sharing software allows only one user to write to a volume at a time, while all users can read from any volume at any time.

Siemans Nixdorf brings industrial-strength disk storage solutions into the mix with its CentricStor F-Series line. The products now shipping include a rackmount SSA Disk Drawer that can handle up to 12 slide-in drive mechanism and the Disk Tower, which holds up to 24. You can distribute the drives in the Disk Tower over as many as four different loops within the cabinet and two separate SSA loops within the Disk Drawer. Dividing the array into different loops can help to maximize per-client performance in larger workgroup settings. Both enclosures provide full redundancy of power supplies, and cooling fans, allowing the replacement of failed components without shutting down the array. System monitor boards continuously transmit operation status of drives, power supplies, and cooling fans. The rack-mount unit can accommodate 108 GB of storage and the tower can handle up to 216 GB. Additionally, Siemans Nixdorf expects to soon ship a smaller six-drive rack-mount enclosure with many of the same benefits of the larger units. These are high-end solutions for high-end applications.

LaCie also offers an SSA line of products that use Pathlight cards. Their single external-drive units and five-device towers provide solutions for smaller installations.

The ImageNet bundle cost less than $1,900 per seat and storage devices cost slightly more than UltraWide drives. Although this clearly raises the cost-per-megabyte for media, it's probably an order of magnitude better than individual dedicated arrays. Facility owners with two or more editors working on nonlinear systems should look very closely at these solutions. Although I haven't performed my VIDEOGRAPHY Hands-On Review just yet, I expect SSA disk storage to provide a substantial productivity boost for digital media workgroups.

Media 100's New Product Line

Media 100 Inc. announced a rearrangement of it product line with six new Media 100 digital video products. The Media 100 le offers the Media 100 editing environment combined with the Vincent digital video engine at a greatly reduced price point.

The line includes the Media 100 qx ($3,995) for QuickTime applications, and the Media 100 qx with component I/O ($5,795). The Media 100 le ($5,995) provides the lowest cost of entry into the Media 100 editing software. It offers 150 KBpf (per frame) NTSC, real-time preview dissolves, real-time preview motion effects, and real-time color effects and a completely integrated character generator. The Media 100 lx ($9,995) adds component I/O with the rack-mountable junction box, batch redigitizing, and real-time waveform monitor/vectorscope. The Media 100 xe ($14,995) features real-time static titling and keying of PICTs with alpha channel, real-time six-track CD-quality (44.1 kHz and 48 kHz) digital audio mixing, EDL import and export, and 3:1 JPEG compression at 200 KBpf NTSC. The Media 100 xs ($24,995), the top-of-the-line system, delivers real-time eight-track audio mixing and real-time preview transition effects at the highest Media 100 data rates, supporting up to 2:1 compression at 300 KBpf NTSC.

Media 100 will also soon ship Gaudi ($6,995) which uses a Pinnacle DVE card to provide 3D effects and warps, and the Theo Superprocessor (not yet

priced), which will add serial digital input/output and allow a second stream of video. Theo will use a Movie-2 bus connector and will support user-selectable pixel displays including 640 x 480, 720 x 486, 768 x 576, and 720 x 576.

The Media 100 is a great system, generating some of the finest pictures in nonlinear editing. The software is fairly mature and full-featured. The new Media 100 line offers great value at the lower price points, but if you take a long, hard look at the pricing strategy it might give you pause. The lx and the xs model offer the same hardware and essentially the same software with a $15,000 price delta between them, just to turn on features that are built into the system anyway. It's akin to installing a governor on a sports car and charging a substantially higher price to deliver the car with the performance inhibitor removed. I think I'd rather see more value going to the user. But that said, the Media 100 xs is clearly one of the best editing systems available, and as the serial digital and dual-stream products become available it will become an even tougher product to beat.

And Many More...

With space limited I'd like to at least mention a few other products. ElectricImage is showing several new features to their 3D animation software, including an upcoming modeler. If history is an indicator these should be great. A companion product, Tree EIAS Storm, from Onyx Computing, creates brilliant 3D models of trees and animates them blowing in the wind, all from within ElectricImage Animation System. Newtek is now shipping Lightwave for the Macintosh. This is very well-regarded software and it's getting a lot of user interest. Studio Effects, the new set of After Effects plug-ins from MetaTools, is even cooler than their previous offering, Final Effects. All serious Adobe After Effects users will want it. Truevision, at a private suite, showed a serial digital version of their RTX card. The lossless video shown in this demo was quite impressive. Apple's efforts with the QuickTime Media Layer are also very exciting. Rest assured that you'll hear much more about that.

So that's the Chris's Choice roundup. There were other products I would have liked to have covered if there had been time, but these are the winners.

For more information about the products mentioned circle these numbers on the Free Literature Card in the issue:

Apple Computer 40
ElectricImage 41
LaCie 42
Media 100 43
MetaTools 44
New Tek 45
Onyx Computing 46
Pathlight Technology 47
Scitex Digital Video 48
Siemens Nixdorf 49
Truevision 50

VIDEO IMAGE PRODUCTIONS
Excellence in Video Duplication
WHO SEES THE MASTER?
The effectiveness of your video is determined by what the client sees:
THE DUBS!
A recognized leader in video duplication since 1984, VIP delivers and guarantees QUALITY!
Many of the world's most prestigious companies & independent producers rely on VIP to provide efficient, responsive service, great pricing and fast turnaround. Our goal is total customer satisfaction.
• Standards Conversions
• Labeling/Packaging/Shrink Wrapping
• Printing Services/Packaging Materials
• Fulfillment/Drop Shipping
• Storage Facilities
• JVC licensed tape only.
311 H Route 46 West, Fairfield, NJ 07004
(201) 882-8330 (800) 966-8175
FAX: (201) 882-6692
Contact: Mark Roth or Burt J. Sempier
CIRCLE 158 ON INFO CARD

COMING NEXT MONTH
NAB '97 PREVIEW:
VIDEOGRAPHY presents the industry's most comprehensive and insightful preview of the technology trends awaiting the industry at this year's National Association of Broadcasters show, April 7-10, in Las Vegas.
Coverage includes:
• The video Web
• Lenses and filters
• Audio networking
• Inside the digital igloo
• Digital videotape tutorials

Dynamic Duopod™
Travel light & set up fast.
The Duopod™ Pro takes monopods one step better—with an adjustable fold-out second leg.
When you reach your vantage point, simply stand the Duopod up, fold out the second leg and brace it by stepping on the footplate. You're free to zoom focus, pan and tilt, all while the camera remains stable.
Call Toll-Free in U.S.
888-BAND PRO
CIRCLE 107 ON INFO CARD