

Quicktime VR

New uses for Photography in Computer Graphics

Traditionally the use of stills photography in computers has either been as a part of the digital publishing process where the photograph ends up on a computer because it is to be printed or there is a need to retouch the photograph in some way. Neither of these avenues is actually new to photography although their practice is now substantially different and certainly does offer new possibilities. Most of these possibilities we are already well aware of - ranging from Photo CD's to the use of computer collage to falsify reality. Yet there has always been a sense in which photographic images and computers have always had an arms length relationship, since we recognise a photograph as such whether we see it in the flesh, on a screen or in print, just as we feel we know when an image has been created on a computer. A photograph is put into a computer, is manipulated and comes out again - as a photograph, not a "computer photograph". On the other hand a computer denied access to photography fails to match up to our sense of reality, impressive and enjoyable though its results may be, and hence many computer "simulations" are a disappointment.

After the initial excitement of the ridiculous distortions available in Photoshop had worn off, it seemed briefly as if the burgeoning computer scene was leaving traditional photography behind, however there are two quite disparate developments which can leave us more optimistic about the future. Firstly in the huge growth area of the Internet, photography has found a new, world wide, gallery as well as perhaps a new medium - the screen. Secondly there is the new Quicktime VR Development Kit from Apple, which is specifically designed to use photographs in a computer context. Quicktime VR is a development of Apple's video technology which allows user-controlled movement within a space or round an object. Within Quicktime VR there is a truly symbiotic relationship between computer and photograph, in particularly in the panorama mode, where the programme uses about a dozen pictures (which together make up a panorama), stitches them together to form a loop, and then allows the viewer to walk around the panorama. This panorama may be a room, for example, where you can move round, backward or forward, perhaps have a look at the books on a shelf, and then go elsewhere in the same room or into the next room. The difference here is that all the motion is controlled by the viewer, we are not watching a film, it is totally interactive, and instead of some crass computer simulation we are moving within a recognised reality - the photograph. In addition the file sizes are many times smaller than the original dozen pictures and hence small enough to send on the Internet.

The potential power of this programme can be seen by the fact that version 3 of Netscape Navigator has the capacity to include the Quicktime VR Player as a plug-in. And so these two technologies, computing and photography, can finally unite and take a step forward together, onto the screen and out into the World Wide Web.

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