# The Lighter/Compositor

an industry op-ed by Steve Wright

Heads up visual effects compositors, our world is about to change again. Just when you got your head around 3D compositing here comes 3D lighting. The official handwriting is on the wall. The Foundry (Nuke) and Sony Picture Imageworks (SPI) announced in early November that SPI's proprietary Katana 3D lighting software will soon be integrated into Nuke. This will have a profound effect on the visual effects pipeline affecting both 3D and 2D artists. You only have about one year to prepare.
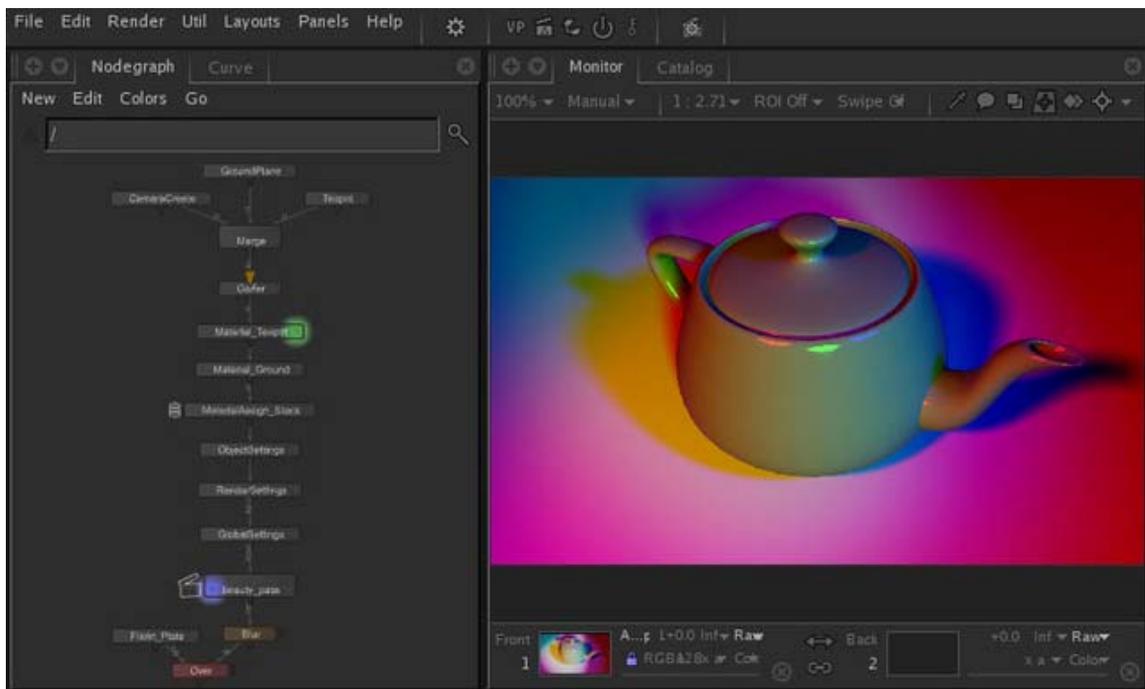
**Katana's node-based interface sets shader parameters,
assigns materials, and sets up 3D lighting rigs.**

Katana is not a renderer like Pixar's Renderman. It is a node-based "control panel" used to set shader parameters for Renderman and other renderers. It also contains typical 3D lighting rigs as well as materials assignment capabilities. This is part of the overall trend to move as much 3D into the 2D department as possible where it is faster and more cost effective. The visual effects pipeline is evolving to where the 3D department does the modeling and animation, but the 2D department will do the lighting, materials assignment, and compositing.

It was realized in the big studios some time ago that lighting and compositing are tightly coupled, so it started to make sense to have the same artist do both rather than having the compositor run to the 3Ddepartment every time a new lighting

pass was needed. Of course, this could only be done in the big studios that had the software development staff to write the proprietary software. Indeed, this is how Katana was born.

The problem with the proprietary software approach is the long learning curve required when adding new artists. This definitely slows response time and increases overhead. Now, with Katana embedded in Nuke, any studio that uses Nuke can expect new hires to know Katana and hit the ground running. Even if they don't use Nuke they will know that a Nuke hire will at least be familiar with 3D lighting in addition to compositing.

This brings me to the punch line of my story. Compositing artists that want to future-proof their careers will want to learn Nuke with Katana. As compositors we will now be expected to know about shaders, materials, 3D lighting, and 3D compositing in addition to our regular 2D compositing with bluescreens, multi-pass cgi and all. The good news here is that this elevates the job of the compositor in technical proficiency, artistic contribution, and pay. Some of the big bucks paid to the 3D artists will now go to the compositors. Sounds fair to me.

So when does Nuke hit the streets with the Katana enhancements? The Foundry hopes to preview it at NAB 2010 (April), but no word yet on when it will actually ship. Based on witnessing such heavy package integrations before, my guess is that the Katana version of Nuke will be available in the 4th quarter of 2010. Better get ready.

Click here to read the Nuke Katana story in the November 2009 issue of fxguide.

Steve Wright