



Shake: the Undead!

an industry op-ed by Steve Wright

Apple's recent announcement that they are no longer selling Shake rekindled another round of the "Shake is dead" pronouncements. The first round occurred in April of 2006 when Apple announced that it was no longer supporting Shake. In stark contrast to all this, I am here to pronounce that Shake is alive and well with several more years of life left in it.

How can I make such a radical assertion? Because the end of life of a software program is not when it stops being supported or sold but when people stop using it. With that as the definition of the death of a program Shake's funeral services are still a few years off. Shake has a huge installed base and is still in use by most visual effects studios in business today. Not to mention that an estimated 50 studios purchased the source code from Apple when they offered it at the end of the support. Granted, most of these were just hedging their bets and did not actually continue to develop Shake. But still, it gives you a measure of how seriously the serious visual effects studios take Shake.

The thing that Shake has going for it is "tonnage" - there are still thousands of Shake seats out there pounding pixels for high end visual effects shots. Having a large installed base is in fact one of the most important signs of a successful program - much more important than the quality of the software, as the sordid story of the Windows operating system clearly demonstrates. Tonnage matters.

While high-end visual effects studios may be using their own custom software or have purchased power programs like Nuke, Flame, or Combustion, these cost many thousands of dollars per seat. Every VFX studio has a few inexpensive After Effects seats for those quick and dirty compositing chores, plus some Shake seats for even more complex tasks that are beyond After Effects. There are still many studios where Shake is still the main compositing program for production. Discontinued or not, Shake is still an immensely powerful and important compositing program.

Besides being one of the most common node-based compositing programs out there, there is another special purpose that Shake fulfills, and that is as a "flight trainer". If you want to do serious special effects you have to go beyond After Effects layer-based compositing and move up to node-based compositing. The typical selling price for this class of production software is \$2500-\$3500 and up, far out of reach of struggling students, training institutes, and many colleges. But Shake, a world-class node-based compositing program, can be had for \$500 or less, depending on your source. This is exactly the right price for students trying to learn serious compositing.



For learning node-based compositing and supporting the modern visual effects production pipeline, Shake is still a strong contributor with a large installed base. Even if a studio is not a Shake house and uses custom software of some other node-based compositor, if you know Shake they will know you can quickly learn their software. Once you know how to fly jets, you can easily learn to pilot a new plane. The bottom line is that if you know Shake there are thousand of potential jobs out there for you.

Steve Wright