

# LUX

PC AND MAC \$169 (£91)

3D Sumptuous glows and volumetric light beams are now just a few clicks away

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PC/MAC After Effects 6  
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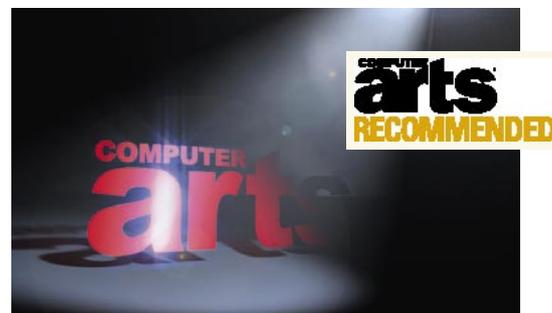
★★★★★

Simple to apply, renders quickly, works beautifully, and makes all your 3D scenes look great. You'd need to argue long and hard about why you wouldn't want Lux in your Effects menu.

Since After Effects 5, we've had the ability to position layers in 3D space and illuminate them with ambient, spot or point lights. However, all these sources of light are mere ciphers, apparent only by their effect; point a spotlight directly into the virtual camera lens and you'll see nothing at all.

Lux, from Swedish developer Trapcode, changes all that. It creates volumetric light effects, from subtle glows to full-on light beams, all correctly rendered according to the location of lights and camera. And even the most simple application of Lux alters any scene, adding a huge amount of atmosphere, ambience and realism. You have control over the intensity of the beam, which can be linked to that of the light source, or set manually. You then have full control over the look of the beam itself, where it starts, how far it travels, as well as the Light Model - whether it observes the normal inverse square rule of fall-off, or projects a more solid beam.

However, like most programs, Lux is not without its limitations. It's applied to an empty layer, and doesn't actually interact with any 3D elements, so you can't break up the light beam - say with volumetric shadows - and the glows and beams are perfect, without any smoky swirls or dust motes. The latter problem can be overcome by simply overlaying a little animated fractal noise, and Lux even generates its own alpha channel for just such a purpose. Of course, if you want truly 3D



The Computer Arts logo gets the Lux treatment. Animated fractal noise is added to the light beam, via Lux's own alpha channel, while another Trapcode plug-in, Starglow, adds a touch of sparkle.

volumetric lights and shadows, you'll have to dip into a 3D package that can perform full raytracing. However, the inverse is also true - if your volumetric light beams don't need this level of detail, and you can export light and camera data to AE, then you'd be much better off doing them as a post effect using Lux.

Lux is truly amazing, capable of generating beautiful end results, very quickly and with the minimum of set-up. With many After Effects plug-ins it's sometimes hard to imagine where you might use them; with Lux it's difficult to see when you wouldn't! □

# 3D LAYER

PC AND MAC \$169 (£91)

3D Give your After Effects work some real depth with this unique and useful plug-in

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Digital Anarchy  
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**COMPUTER arts VERDICT**

★★★★★

A fascinating and unique addition to After Effects' 3D functionality, 3D Layer is great for logos and idents, but it also opens up all sorts of possibilities for the experimental After Effects artist too. Now, if Digital Anarchy can just smooth the sides and speed it up a bit...

Distributed by Digital Anarchy, but co-developed with Conoa, 3D Layer is another plug-in that pushes After Effects in new directions.

Ordinarily, the 3D layers in a composition are perfectly flat, existing as two-dimensional planes. But by applying 3D Layer you can create flapping flags, wavy surfaces, even 3D landscapes - all with depth and solidity.

Set-up is straightforward: you apply the plug-in to a new solid, and then use other layers or pre-comps to texture and distort the object. It enables you to use the same image as texture and/or displacement maps, and you can texture the top, bottom and sides as necessary. You can choose to displace the layer using red, green, blue or alpha channel information, and you can get great animated results from the Fractal Noise or Wave World plug-ins as a pre-composed layer.

3D Layer even goes a step further, providing the ability to cut chunks out of the object based on the channel information of another layer, to produce ragged shapes or even extruded text.

This plug-in adds a new dimension to AE layers. Previous tools have let you distort images into spheres, cubes or tubes, but these were all limited to basic primitive shapes; 3D Layer lets you displace the layer any way you like, and animate the effect over time.

There are a few minor drawbacks. Because the layer information is actually being mapped onto polygons, it's



Here a flat CA logo image has been distorted using 3D Layer, and extruded to give it real solidity. The surface of the object has been given a shiny surface with specular highlights, and is also reflecting an environment image placed in a separate layer.

difficult to hide the mesh structure - especially when cutting into the object. Despite using the highest resolution mesh, you get a blocky, geometric edge. Also, when striving for the best results (dense poly mesh, high anti-aliasing), it can slow After Effects to a crawl, but a multi-threaded version is apparently in the pipeline.

3D Layer is an excellent plug-in. Once you're past the novelty of making wavy flags, you're struck with lots of ways of employing it, for things like bubbling liquids, ocean swells, embossed logos, fake pin-screens... It's the kind of tool that begs to be explored in depth. □