

PRE-VIZ

NEWS / OPINION / ANALYSIS

Making it wide open

ANALYSIS Can free software and a bunch of part-time creatives and developers really turn the professional graphics market upside down? Or at least sideways?

BY NICK VEITCH

PLUGGED IN

AUTODESK GOES OPEN SOURCE

Autodesk has contributed its web mapping platform (previously code-named *Tux*) to the open source community under the name *MapServer Enterprise*. It enables users to develop and distribute spatial and design data over the web or intranets, and the MapServer Foundation has been set up to support development. Autodesk states the move to open source is a response to demands for more frequent software releases, faster support for new standards, and lower cost of ownership for web mapping solutions. www.mapserverfoundation.org



March 17 is a red-letter day for Ton Roosendaal. He's better known as the creator of open source 3D software *Blender*, but he will also be attending the inaugural Libre Graphics Meeting in Lyon in the guise of a nervous creative. There, before his peers, he plans to present the first screening of *Elephants Dream*, the short animated film (formerly *Project Orange*) that has been created entirely with open source tools and software, and put together by a widely dispersed team with a small base at the Orange studio in Amsterdam. But the aspirations at stake are far greater than just creating a short: "The secondary goal is to research efficient ways to increase the quality of open source projects," claims the project manifesto.

And it does seem to need some help. In spite of the rapid take-up of the Linux OS and free software in other market sectors, the number of graphics professionals using open source tools seems low. A common complaint for professional users is the frequent lack of functionality. "Open source tools often lag behind in feature set compared to commercial tools. For example, *Blender's* built-in raytracer is quite inferior to those in some commercial packages," claimed Pallav Nawani, Co-founder of Bangalore-based games developer, IronCode Software. Other developers agree. Dave Neary, one of the developers of open source 2D graphics package *GIMP* (GNU Image Manipulation Program) confessed: "We're not where the pre-press industry or the design industry needs us to be. We need to be a compelling alternative."

And yet there are people using open source software for professional graphics and 3D. They may not be the mainstream, but

these pioneers have found some other attributes of free software that fits with their workflow. IronCode Software uses open source tools to both develop code and create artwork, and the company sees advantages here. "Open source projects typically release new versions quite often, and so we're able to use new features quickly, as opposed to the year-long development cycles of commercial tools," Nawani told *3D World*.

The big players in the 3D software market have already taken notice of free software and customers' demands to run render farms on reliable, cheap and hardware-agnostic operating systems, such as Linux. *Maya*, *Houdini* and *Softimage XSI* are all available on Linux, and the OS was chosen by Discreet (now Autodesk) as the preferred

platform for editing system, *Smoke*. More recently, Autodesk has released compositing systems *Toxik* and *Flame* on Linux. But in terms of applications, there are still few widely used free alternatives.

However, there will soon be another high-profile company entering the open source

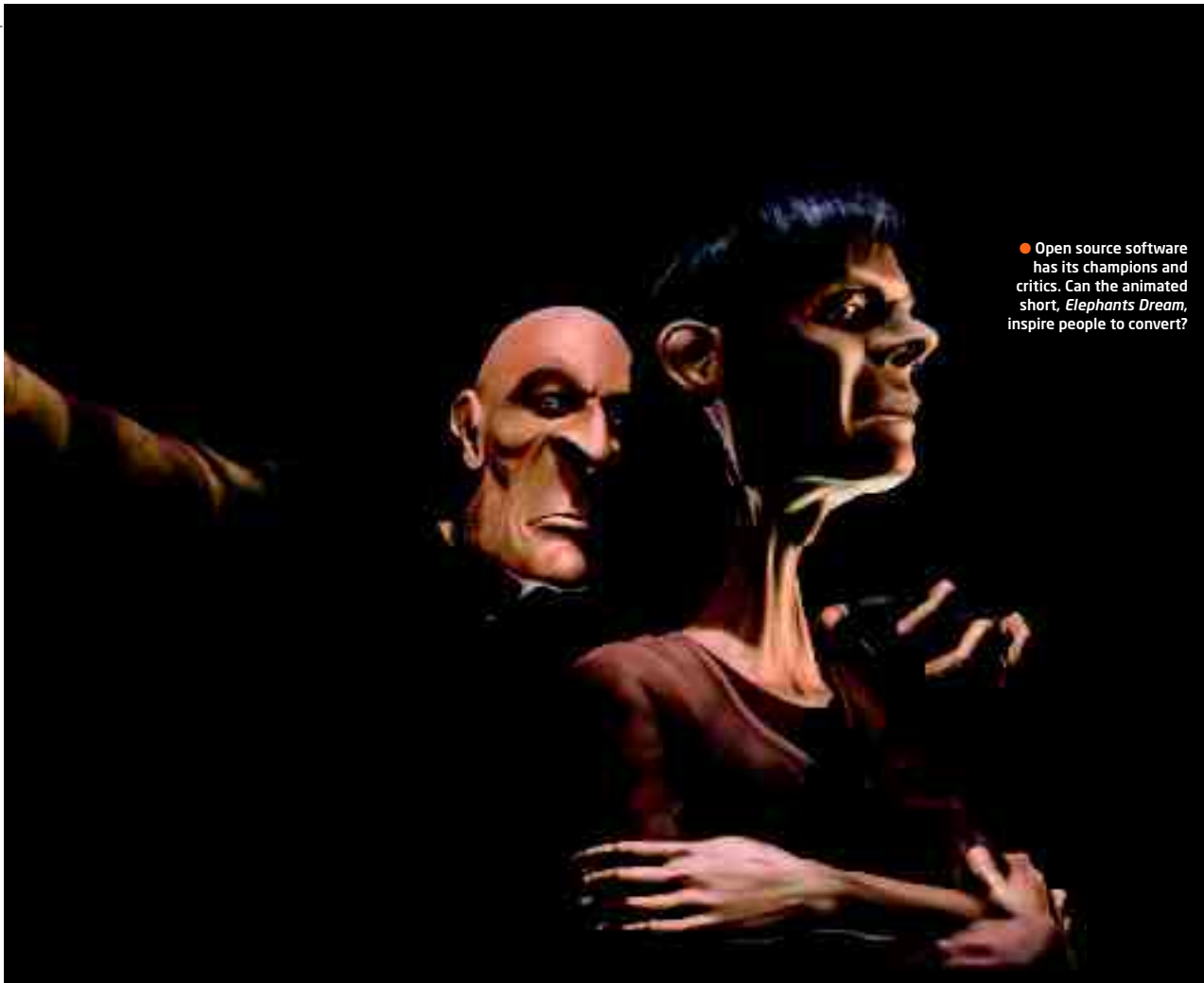
"THE OPEN SOURCE WORLD IS THE LARGEST THREAT TO GIANTS SUCH AS MICROSOFT"

CHARLES MOIR, CEO, XARA

community. Dismayed at recent consolidation in the graphics market, Xara announced plans that future versions of *Xara Xtreme* (currently being developed for Mac OS and Linux) will be released under the GPL (General Public License).

Xara's CEO, Charles Moir, announced: "The open source world is the acknowledged largest threat to established giants such as Microsoft. We felt it was necessary for us to shake up the graphics world a bit, and making one of the most powerful, easiest to use graphics applications open source should do the trick."

There's no doubt that free software is stigmatised by its lack of price tag. In the world of professional graphics, serious people look



● Open source software has its champions and critics. Can the animated short, *Elephants Dream*, inspire people to convert?

Image: *Elephants Dream* courtesy of Orange

TALKING POINT | The benefits of open source software and tools



"In my experience, bugs are fixed faster, problems are acknowledged more honestly, and the application is improved by user input on a more regular basis with open source applications. If professionals need support, they can get it. Will it be a phone call? In my experience, no, but will it be useful and friendly? Absolutely."

Chris Burt, Founder/Lead Developer, Exenex Designs



"We have a load of technology that's better than anything Microsoft or Adobe have. By making *Xara Xtreme* open source (GPL) we believe we can help the Linux platform compete in the mainstream graphics arena better than it ever has before. We believe it will significantly accelerate the acceptance of the platform as an alternative to Windows."

Charles Moir, CEO, Xara



"Open source software is better BECAUSE it's free software. It also offers an enviable development structure, the community, the passion for excellence and everything else that comes with free software. We need to spread that message to the graphics industry. They have lots to gain from tools that they can modify, and we have a lot to gain from them."

Dave Neary, Developer, GIMP

down their noses at packages costing sub £500, never mind programs people are giving away free. But in other areas, free software has conquered these false perceptions. According to the latest figures from Netcraft, in the last 10 years Apache has risen from having a five per cent share of the webserver market to now running over 70 per cent of all the websites in the world. Google, Amazon and Flickr – the entrepreneurs of the web economy – have turned to free software in a big way.

One reason is the stability and compatibility open source offers. The office suite *OpenOffice.org* has been growing in popularity not just because it's free, but because organisations know they're not locked into proprietary file formats and held to ransom by the software provider. Free software can promote healthy competition, leading to innovation without introducing deliberate incompatibilities. This is another reason Xara is getting involved with free software and helping to fund a giant universal translation engine for converting between different graphics formats.

The *Uber-Converter* (<http://scratchcomputing.com/projects/uber-converter/>) aims to enable files to be converted from any

known vector format to any other. This is the kind of 'glue' application that's already making open source useful in the professional arena.

"The killer application for open source software is for what I call 'gap fillers': applications that can do something very well or very fast that other software simply cannot. *Blender* is a great example," said Chris Burt, Founder of New York-based design agency Exenex.

The momentum is building slowly. Dave Neary is also one of the organisers of the Libre Graphics Meeting in Lyon - established to set up a meeting place for users and developers, but also to make a point.

"There's a huge chunk of the graphics industry that isn't even aware of free software," lamented Neary. So the pressure is on for *Elephants Dream*. Will it inspire people to convert? Maybe, but if the results fail to catch the imagination of the graphics industry today, there are a thousand tomorrows. It seems, as elsewhere, the rise of open source is inexorable.

<http://orange.blender.org>, www.libregraphicsmeeting.org

Turn to page 106 for the first in a new series of production diaries on *Elephants Dream* from the *Blender* team at Orange.

FEED > < BACK

We want to hear from you on the issues affecting 3D artists, so from now on, once you've read our main news story on the facing page, why not visit our forum and post your reaction to it online?

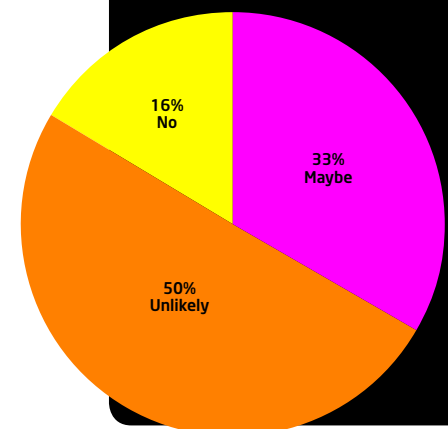
In this issue, we've discussed some of the pros and cons of open source software and whether the developers providing free tools will ever be able to galvanise the graphics industry.

This month, the question up for debate is: "Is it smart to continue to pay for 3D software when open source tools are free and more reliable than ever?"

- **Yes** - it's wise to buy from the larger corporations because the trusted brand name gives you peace of mind
- **Maybe** - because free software lacks functionality, support and security; and development schedules are never guaranteed
- **Possibly not** - as the functionality of open source tools catches up with commercial packages, they become an enticing option
- **No** - the likes of Microsoft will always dominate the market unless we actively seek out and support open source alternatives

LAST ISSUE: THE VERDICT

"If the consumer sector is driving the development of graphics cards, could the professional sector suffer as a result?" (Note: no votes were cast for 'Yes')



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