

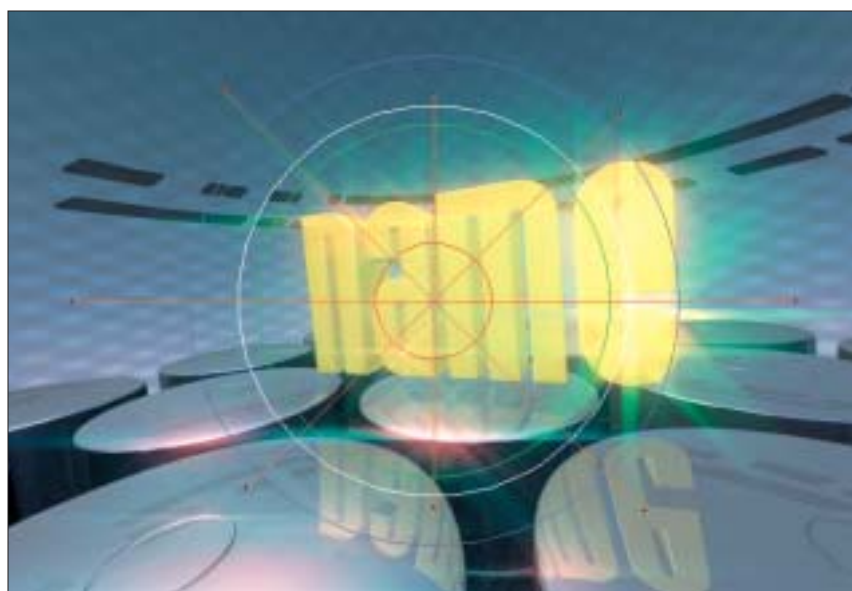
REVIEWS

Sapphire Plug-Ins

After Effects (and compatible)
Plug-Ins

GenArts, \$1,699
(\$599 per box)

BY MATTHEW CALDWELL



above:
Pictured is the on-screen widget for the Glint effect. The red lines control X, Y, Diagonal 1, and Diagonal 2 sizes. The red, green, and blue circles resize the respective color channels of the glint. The white circle globally resizes all of the size parameters. (CGI courtesy of Dosch Design.)

Adobe After Effects was originally created by a company called The Company of Science and Art (CoSA), whose name, although it didn't exactly roll off the tongue, is indicative of the two elements needed to make a good effects and compositing application. You must be careful how you mix these two elements—too much science and you may alienate customers who have a more artistic vision. However, if you cater too much to a certain graphic style, your app may produce imagery that's too narrowly stylized and doesn't fully exploit

the variety of imagery that can be produced by good algorithms.

Many compositing and effects apps tend to land on the science side of the fence, leaving it up to the artists to recall or relearn each app's definition of terms like frequency, phase, and amplitude. Fortunately, for the left-brain-challenged effects artists, there is the GenArts Sapphire Plug-Ins package (www.genarts.com). The Sapphire plug-ins, with their on-screen controls and sensitivity to high production value, offer a uniquely intuitive interface and allow the user to create a high-

SCORE



PROS

High-quality effects for a wide range of uses. On-screen widgets are well-designed to give artists tactile, uninterrupted control of images.

CONS

A bit expensive, with some redundancies when used with high-end compositing apps.

BOTTOM LINE

Great variety of effects plug-ins make it quick and easy to produce high-end effects.

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

Host applications include 844/x 4.03; After Effects 5.0–6.5; Boris Red 3.0 for Windows; Combustion 2 or 3; Digital Fusion 4.03; Final Cut Pro 3 or 4; Liberty Paint 8.3 for Windows; Motion 1.0; Premiere 6.5 or Pro for Windows; Quantel with Synapse; Sony Xpri 7.01b.

end look in less time—and with less effort—than many built-in or third-party filters.

Designed for artists

Think of Sapphire's filters as new and improved versions of those After Effects filters you spent hours tweaking but never could quite get the look you were going for.

For example, one way Sapphire's Gradient Radial filter improves gradient rendering over After Effects's Ramp filter is by adding a Smooth Curve slider, allowing you to smooth out that annoying circle you normally get at the outer edge of Ramp's radial gradients.

If you want to generate realistic lightning, you'll probably be happier with the results from Sapphire's Zap filter than After Effects's Lightning filter (see the image on the right).

When it comes to generating an Edge Blur, Sapphire's Edge Blur filter is the best. I tried to get an edge blur out of After Effects's Channel Blur filter by choosing the Alpha Channel, but I got a black, blurry edge around my cutout instead. Boris Continuum Complete's Gaussian Blur filter allows you to blur the alpha channel also, but too much blur reveals the background the cutout was made from.

Sapphire's Kaleido filter produced far superior results than a similar filter included with GrangerFX's TrinityFX. I also was happier with the results from Sapphire's Half-tone filter than I was with DigiEffects's Newsprint filter.

On-screen widgets

One feature that sets Sapphire apart is its on-screen widgets. These are graphical representations of some parameter controls (see the opening image). For example, the Gradient Radial filter overlays a circle over the imagery in your comp window. You can grab this circle anywhere along its edge and push

or pull it to make your radial gradient large or small, circular or oval, etc.

The beauty of the on-screen widget is that it keeps your eye trained on the comp window and not bouncing back and forth between the comp window and the plug-in parameters window. Some plug-ins allow you to adjust several parameters at a time in this way, while others may have one on-screen widget. Some plug-ins don't have on-screen widgets. If you would like to view your image unfettered by the widget, you can always turn it off.

My only complaint with the on-screen widget is that it doesn't name what parameter you're adjusting, so if you're not sure, you'll have to look at the effects parameters window to see what parameter is being adjusted.

The package

You can buy all 177 Sapphire Plug-Ins filters for \$1,699, or you can buy them in what GenArts terms *boxes*. There's a Lighting Effects box, a Stylize Effects box, an Adjust, Blur, Comp & Distort box, and Render, Time & Transitions box. Each box can be purchased separately for \$599. If you buy the complete package, you'll get the following Sapphire categories in your effects menu: Adjust, Blur + Sharpen, Composite, Lighting, Distort, Render, Stylize, Time, and Transitions.

The Adjust category, much like After Effects's, has filters to change global color and luminance values in different ways. Duotone and Tint are just a couple of goodies in this category.

The Blur + Sharpen category includes a Blur filter with Box, Triangle, and Gaussian options. Other handy filters in this category include Edge Blur and Rack Defocus.

Want greater control over blending modes? The Composite category has several filters that allow you to apply blends



top:

The 5-Minute Effect Test: Give a slightly dull-witted artist 5 minutes to generate a lightning bolt with After Effects's Lightning filter and Sapphire's Zap filter, and here's what you get. The lightning bolt on the left was generated by Lightning, and the lightning bolt on the right was generated by Zap. The lightning bolt in the center was generated by Mother Nature and photographed by Artbeats.

bottom:

Real or Rays? Some of the light rays in this still were generated by Sapphire's Rays filter, while others were generated by the sun. Search for image SC118 on www.artbeats.com to compare with the original.



above:
Fun with Film Effects. I used two of the presets in Sapphire's FilmEffect to give Artbeats's *Time Lapse Flowers* footage a very stylized look. Search for image TF104 on www.artbeats.com to compare with the original.

(Overlay, Screen, etc.) at the effects level, giving you much more control over how your blends interact with other effect filters that may be applied to the same layer.

Next is the Distort category. There are several goodies here, from liquid metal looks to the Shake filter. Tired of setting innumerable keyframes to give your text that edgy, shaky look? Shake does it through several parameters for X, Y, and Z, including Amplitude, Frequency, Phase, and Random Seed.

The Lighting category is where you find a wide variety of glows, glints, glares, and even lens flares. Here, too, you'll find the ever-popular ray effects, plus a spotlight effect.

The Render category includes Clouds, Gradients, Zaps, and other texture generators.

The Stylize category has a wide variety of filters from Emboss to FilmEffect to Kaleido. Stylize also has a good Scan-Line generator.

Sapphire also comes with a few good time effects in its Time category, but they're not the type of time replication effects that you get from Continuum Complete's Optical Flow. The Time category is where you'll find effects such as flicker, trails, and random edits.

Sapphire also comes with several

transitions, divided into dissolve and wipe subcategories. This may be the weakest part of the collection, although WipeDots and WipeRings are pretty cool and unique.

Conclusion

The one obvious issue with Sapphire is its price. This matter varies depending on your host application and your production standards.

Editing applications are typically light on complex effects and therefore editors might see the most bang for the buck from Sapphire. Compositing and effects users, on the other hand, may find that Sapphire duplicates some of the effects of the native application. I found several times that even in the case of duplicate effects, Sapphire went the extra mile and added a few extra parameters or re-engineered the effect, taking it to a higher degree of production value. I used Sapphire through several After Effects projects, and even though I have all of the effects available from After Effects 6.5 Pro, Boris Continuum Complete 3—plus a few DigiEffects effects—I found the effect I was looking for was often a Sapphire effect. ■

Matthew Caldwell is a promotions editor at the Shop At Home cable network in Nashville, TN.



"Visit www.genarts.com for more information and a free trial of Sapphire Plug-ins."