FREE BLENDER

Nick Veitch interviews **Ton Roosendaal** and reveals the story of how the GPL has saved a valuable 3D tool.

March 2002, Linux 3D fans were dealt a terrible blow when the news emerged that NaN, the company behind the popular *Blender* 3D software, had filed for banckruptcy in the Dutch courts.

NaN were an unusual company in the 3D marketplace. Unlike heavyweight rivals behind products like *Lightwave* and *Maya*, NaN had always been distributed freely, although the code itself was closed and proprietary.

This fact, combined with the growing emergence of Linux as a key factor in the CG studios, made *Blender* very popular with amateurs and professionals alike. Advanced features, particularly the game engine, helped the software gain credibility.

Hit by the general IT recession, NaN found itself insolvent and unable to trade out of debt. The website was frozen, the code locked up and many fans around the world assumed that was the end of a rather great 3D tool.

Months past, but then in July, *Blender's*

CHRISTMAS 2002

original creator Ton Roosendaal announced he had made a deal with NaN investors, and for the sum of €100,000, they would license the *Blender* code to a new Blender Foundation, with the intent that it be released under the GNU GPL. Ton had 10% of the required money within a day, and about half had been pledged or received within a fortnight. The foundation was set up and finally, on 13th October, the *Blender* code was released.

Linux Format caught up with Ton, after a hectic time launching the first *Blender* conference, to ask him how 'Free Software' helped to save *Blender*.

LINUX FORMAT: What precipitated the crisis at NaN in the first place? Financial trouble? **TON ROOSENDAAL:** In companies, troubles usually have a financial aspect! Of course there are issues related to internal competencies, product quality and marketing strategy. Looking back, I see a brave attempt of a small Dutch company trying to make a difference in the 3D market worldwide. In some ways we were way ahead of the competition, but the market proved not to be ready for that. In fact, the market completely collapsed, something all 3D software companies cope with nowadays. Especially the prospectus for interactive 3D

and game prototyping tools didn't take off the way it was predicted early 2000.

Internally, we finished all targeted projects within the deadlines, but the revenues were way below planning. This caused the main investor in the company to pull the plug. In the investor's opinion, downsizing or a reorganisation was not a topic, we've had one chance to survive, and we didn't make it.

LXF: Did the investors need much convincing about releasing the code as GPL? **TON:** Quite some! I proposed a survival strategy with a Foundation managing the IP by exploiting a GPL project months before the company closed. It took me three months of negotiating and putting pressure – behind the scenes – to get them to agree on the plan. The turning point happened when I proposed to collect a 100k fee from the community, as a feasibility study, to prove a Foundation strategy could potentially survive.

LXF: Do you think €100,000 was a fair price? **TON:** Compared to what the investors lost, it is less than 10%. The amount was just a nice 'round' number. Still a substantial amount, something that would prove there was still belief out there in the product.

Get Blender!

THE SOURCE CODE may be downloaded from www.blender .org/modules.php?op= modload&name= Downloads&file=index

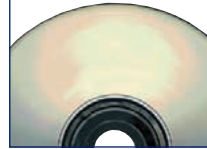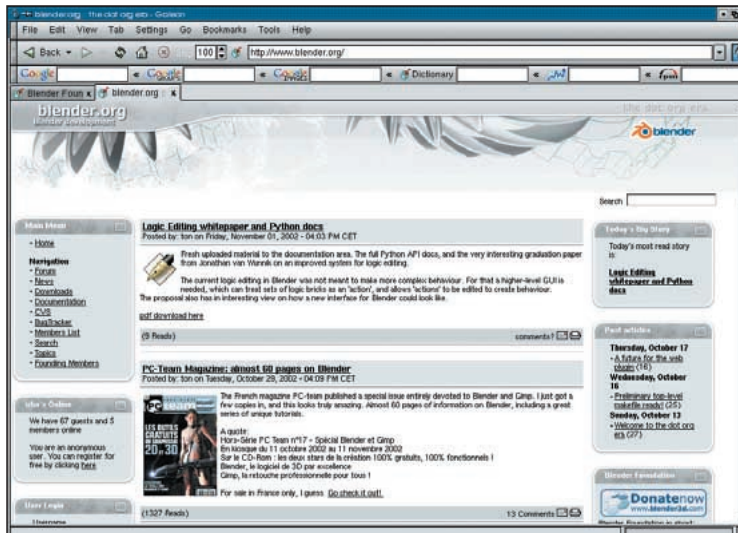It will also be on next month's coverdisc.

The blender3d.org site is the public face of the new Blender Foundation.

At www.blender.org, a community site helps focus development efforts.

Popular third party sites like elysiun.com will continue to feature *Blender* galleries and tutorials.

LXF: What made you so confident you could raise the money?

TON: Confident? Hah! I just like a challenge... the funding campaign was really a test. If it worked out well, the Foundation would have a clear future. Otherwise I just had to accept my baby would be locked up in oblivion forever.

Of course I had a strong motivation. There was not much choice here. "Pump or drown" as we say in Holland so nicely. Doing this, was also a promise I made to the user community three years before; I would accept investment money to build a strong company, but when it fails I would do anything possible to make the sources open.

I started the NaN company in 1998, doing business by giving away the software itself for free. By running an e-shop I could manage to survive pretty well the first 2 years. At least that gave me confidence, that there's at least some business we can do with the current user base. Not to raise millions, but certainly to do a 100k within six months.

LXF: You might have been sure the money could be raised, but were you surprised by how quickly the target was reached?

TON: Yeah, happily surprised! I could only dream of such a result. I really was prepared for a six month campaign.

LXF: Where did most of the money come from? Were most of the contributors corporates or individuals?

TON: Individuals. I approached quite some companies, and most of them were positively interested. But the simple fact that we already collected $^2/_3$ of the money in about three weeks, made it quite difficult for them to understand that they were actually needed. Corporate sponsors require a clear plan what

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you do with their money. I only had the campaign itself worked out, and not the actual Foundation activities once the sources were opened. For that I would have plenty of time. I thought!

LXF: Does the fact that *Blender* is now GPL mean any change in the direction of development?
TON: Hard to predict... I guess there will be quite some interesting forks available, which never should have been possible with a proprietary code project.

Within the Blender Foundation, using the blender.org platform, we will manage an 'official' release. Stable, tested and compatible releases. Especially in the beginning, the first months, we won't do radical things ourselves with *Blender*, but focus at bug fixing and feature requests instead. Setting up a decent project organisation will be far more important. Once we've reached that goal, serious work can be done to make a radical improved *Blender* version.

LXF: Is all of the *Blender* code now covered by the GPL?
TON: Unfortunately we didn't own the collision detection library in *Blender*. So in fact the current release is somewhat crippled, especially the game engine in *Blender*. Several people are working hard on a fix for this.

We also use the proprietary *FMOD* library for sound. It's a very good
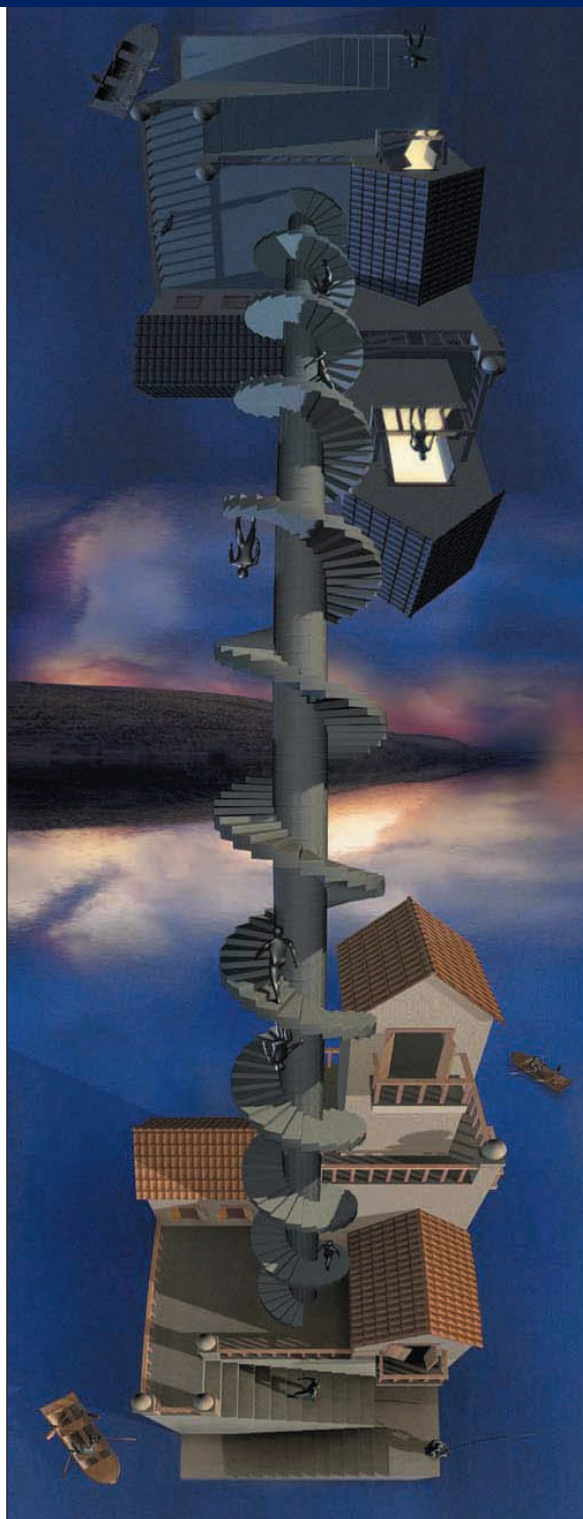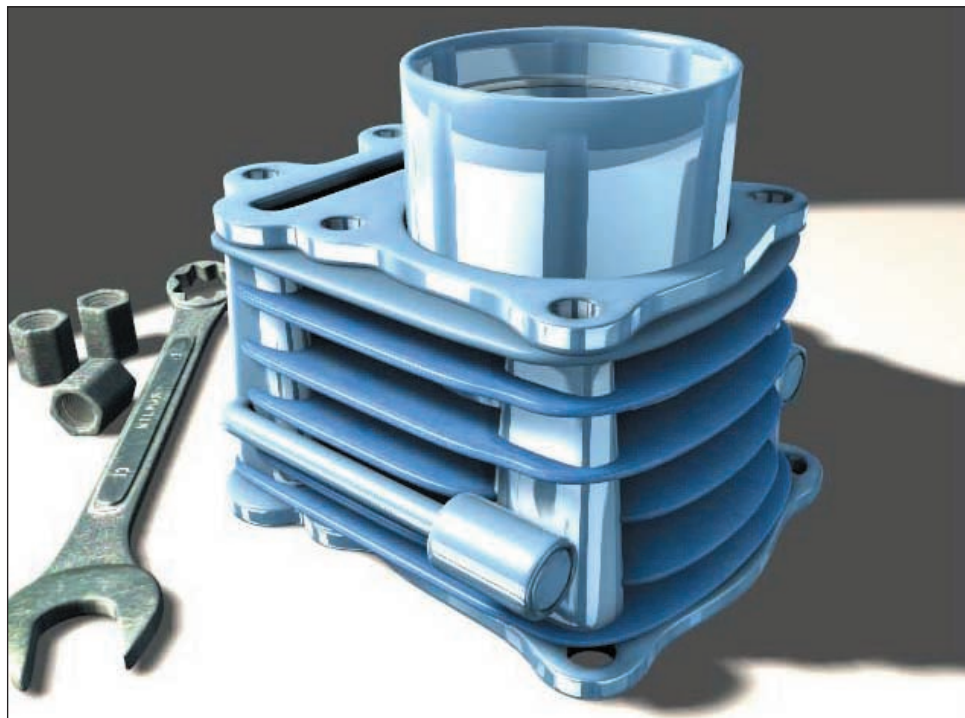
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CHRISTMAS 2002

ILLUSTRATION: CHRIS PLUSH – blengine@hotmail.com

" sound system, but limited in licence... we have to evaluate that.

LXF: Do you think it's still possible to build a business around *Blender*, perhaps offering services, training or documentation?
TON: We decided to publish *Blender* under a dual license. Meaning that the original code is not only GNU GPL, but also available under a 'BL', a license that could be of interest for companies who – for whatever reason – cannot afford to incorporate GPL code in their products. Selling these licenses could be a nice source of additional revenues. And since the Blender Foundation is an independent non-profit public benefit corporation, these revenues will contribute to providing better services for everyone.

The plan is not to expand the Foundation to a big company. I prefer to keep the organisation as slim as possible, and facilitate a network of companies and professionals around the Foundation who like to do commercial work with *Blender*. We are currently already in contact with a few companies about this. I would happily invite everyone to contact us, especially for setting up services and training. I don't consider that core business for the Foundation, but really hope others will pick that up in the near future.

LXF: Moving forward, what do you see as the key benefits of *Blender* now being free software?
TON: Of course a lot of people are very happy with the move. Especially the fact that this is the first Free Software 3D tool available, will help a lot of other GPL projects out there.

Whether we will be able to set up an efficient organisation to do functional releases is something only time will tell. *Blender* is not just a nice project for coders, there are thousands of artists out there who demand a product that works for them.

A very clear benefit that we already notice now, is that organising Free Software – within the non-profit sector – easily gets sponsors and volunteers for a lot of tasks and initiatives. In some ways, it even works more efficiently than having a large company doing it. Like doing the very successful *Blender* Conference last month. Our web services are also 100% sponsored now.

LXF: Have there been any disadvantages?
TON: Well, I've started something with an impact and complexity that is very hard to oversee...

LXF: Would it not have been worthwhile making *Blender* open source long before now?
TON: I don't know. In a way, I think it just happened at the right moment. The Internet hype is over, the landscape resembles a burnt-down forest... with very interesting new green sprouts popping up. I've jokingly mentioned we've entered "the dot org era", but seriously; it feels like being part of something bigger that's going to happen.

LXF: The new website has more of a community feel than the old one. I expect this is something you are keen to develop?
TON: The site blender.org will be devoted to development in general. For coders as well as for artists, we really need each other to get *Blender* developed. So there's a strong community aspect in it. The site is also far from ready... we work at getting full project management running here, SourceForge style.
With a team of volunteers, we'll also build a 'product and usage' site at www.blender3d.org. Here we can reuse the entire old NaN database. That site won't have a community department, but will just provide the end-user services. We expect independent community sites, like the successful www.elysiun.com, to remain attractive. That's not something we should replace, but instead support where possible.

LXF: What are the immediate goals now that the money has been raised?
TON: Getting the services at the new sites up and running!

LXF: Will you continue to seek donations?
TON: Yep. Even with a slim organisation, a few people should be able to make a living of running the Foundation services. I expect more response from corporate sponsors now as well, and will apply for subsidy at EU and culture funds.

> **" I prefer to keep the organisation as slim as possible and facilitate a network around the Foundation "**

LXF: When development gets moving again, what key areas of the software need work?
TON: That list is too long!
I prefer to call it 'bug & feature fixing'. That's priority number one, especially to keep *Blender* attractive for the huge amount of users out there. With the team who manages to do that, we then can sit together and discuss more radical changes.

LXF: We wish you luck, and no doubt, we'll be featuring your progress in future issues. ■

Blender **offers many advanced features, and is particularly useful for game design.**