Vectorworks Spotlight 2009

By: Patrick Immel

"Alex, I'll take "Calendar Copies" for $500!"

"Ok, Pat…here goes! The Super Bowl…The Tony Awards…A new Vectorworks release and *American Idol.*"

"Hmmm. I want to say, 'Annual Events,' but it can't be. Vectorworks has always been on a longer release cycle, I don't…"

Buzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

"Well Pat, you should have gone with your first instinct, the correct answer was indeed, 'Annual Events.'"

That's right, folks; Nemetchek NA's latest release of Vectorworks Spotlight 2009 marks the beginning of a yearly release cycle. This is only one of many fairly substantial changes to the program. I, too, am hopefully starting a tradition of providing you with my top-ten new features of the latest version of the software. I teach and use Vectorworks in our production process at my university. Of course, these are my personal observations, so your experience may vary. As there are more improvements to the program than can be noted in this article, please point your "Internet machine" at: www.nemetschek.net/spotlight/index.php. Now…on to the list:

1. *Pre-selection indication*. Huh?! Shouldn't numero uno on the list be something really amazing and sexy? Something like linking into your thought process and automatically placing the correct unit on the plot? The advent of a pre-select indication is not necessarily sexy, but it is quite amazing.

When you move the selection tool (2-D or 3-D) over an object in your drawing, you will receive immediate feedback in the form of a color code. This information will tell you if the object you want to select is on an active or inactive layer, or its locked/unlocked status. Then, when you actually select the object, you are given another color cue, again determined by its drawing status. On the surface, this is quite nice, but where it really turns to money is when you have a crowded plot or a detailed construction drawing. It is now possible to see what you are going to select without having to zoom way in simply to determine what items you wish to select. Another neat correlated feature is the tool highlighting mode. Let's say you have an object that you would like to edit and you choose a tool. If that tool is "allowed" to work with, or edit your object, the object will highlight. Conversely, if the tool selected will not work, the object will not be highlighted.

2. *Improved snapping tools*. The current snap feature will turn your mouse cursor into a crosshair when it passes over a valid snap point. Available snap points closest to the current snap point are notated with a small black mark. A very cool feature is the snap loupe. Many times, it is an advan-

tage to work on a drawing that is fully zoomed out, but then you have to keep zooming in and centering your view to work on a detail. With the snap loupe, you place your cursor where you want to zoom in (with a tool or command invoked or not!) and press the "Z" key. One click of the mouse, or press of the ESC key, will return you to your original view. All of these improved snapping tools are not terribly sexy, but darn useful.

3. *PDF snapping.* If memory serves, Vectorworks 2009 is the second or third version of the software to allow the import of Adobe Acrobat (PDF) files. While this has been useful, it has now been taken a step further with the ability to snap to all points in the PDF drawing. I used the Import PDF command regularly, but was always frustrated by one item: scale. The PDF file is imported into Vectorworks in no particular scale, so I always had to "eyeball" it, resizing to match the current drawing. This will happen nevermore thanks to the Scale Objects – Symmetric by Distance tool. Now, as long as you know one dimension in the imported file (like a door or proscenium width), you can accurately resize your drawing to match any scale.

4. Real-time Lightwright 5 import/export. Finally, you say: something with a little sex appeal! I have to agree that this is a pretty amazing, but I have only seen it in a demo that I received from Nemetschek and have not used it personally. This is because Lightwright 5 has not been released yet. [Editor's note: It is scheduled to be available in May.] That being said, after minimal setup, the data will flow freely between the two programs in real time. If you make a change in Lightwright 5, those changes are automatically and immediately imported into your Spotlight 2009 plot. This is a great improvement, because while the data-exchange process has gotten easier with each version of the program, it could still be a trying process.

5. *New and updated symbol content.* This includes new manufacturer libraries from Color Kinetics, James Thomas, Atlas Sound, Meyer Sound Laboratories, EAW, and d&b audiotechnik. There are also hundreds of new door, window, and molding symbols for you scenic designers and technical directors.

6. *The functionality of the Number Instruments command has been increased greatly.* In previous versions of Vectorworks Spotlight, you could simply number lighting units. Now you can fill pretty much any field that will take a number. A couple of cool tidbits: It will remember the last number assigned, and will know when to add multiple channel numbers. This is particularly useful when working with automated fixtures.
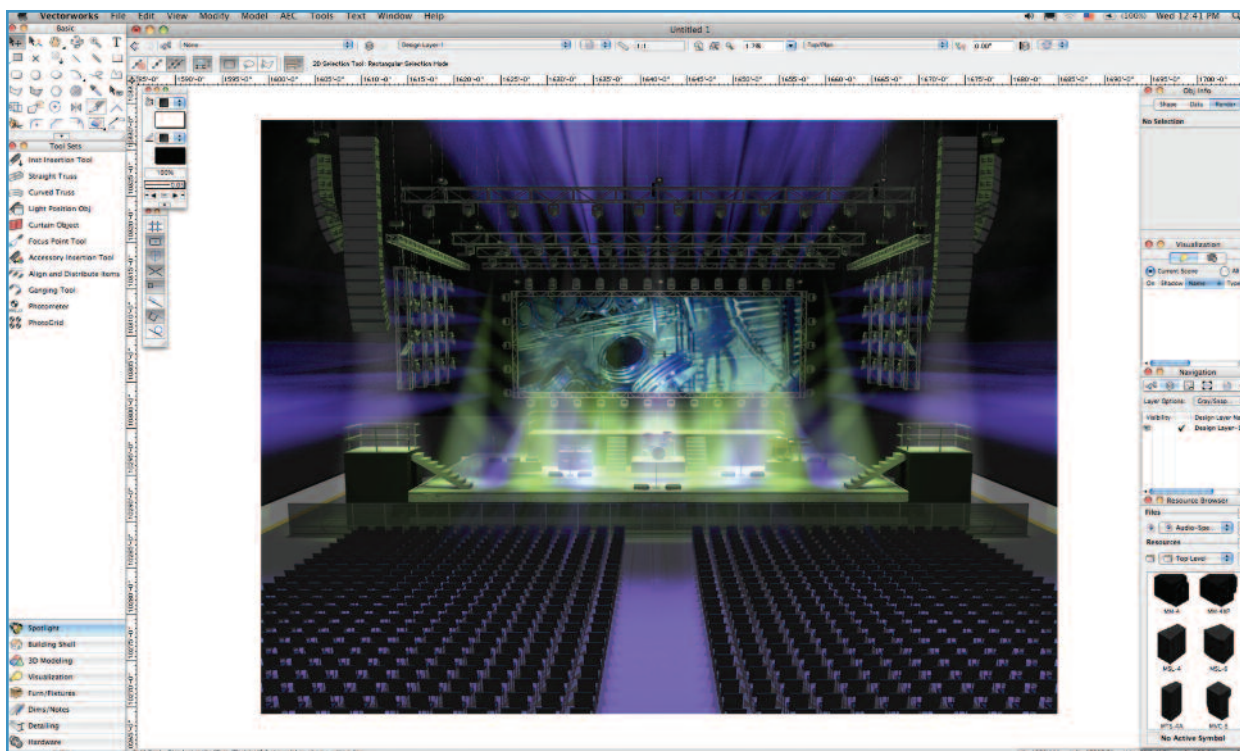
7. *Editing mode improvements*. In earlier versions, when you wanted to edit a symbol or a group, you could double-click on the instance, but the rest of the drawing "went away" and you were editing in a vacuum. In Vectorworks 2009, when you begin to edit a symbol or group, the rest of the drawing remains, albeit grayed out, but you can still snap to other drawing geometry.

8. *Similar object creation*. Create an object that matches one already in a drawing. With a simple command, the right tool, mode, attributes, and parameters are automatically set to match the source object.

9. *Drag-and-drop importing of files*. New in Vectorworks 2009 is the ability to drag supported file types (read DWG and DXF) onto the workspace to begin the import process. Overall, the import/export process is still relatively pain-free and accurate.

10. *Create Plot and Model View command.* I wrestled with my decision to place this at #10, as it could easily have gone higher. But first, a scenario for you: Many designers are now creating their plots in 2-D as well as 3-D for the previsualization purposes. On many plots, the positions are always horizontal, and they can be presented equally well in both dimensions. The challenge arises when there is a vertical position, such as a dance boom. If this boom was drafting correctly in 2-D, it would display in 3-D as a pipe and a bunch of symbols stacked on top of each other—not terribly useful. Without over-complicating matters, what the Create-Plot-and-Model-View command does is allow the designer to see his or her plot in 2-D and full 3-D, including vertical

positions. In my demo of the program, I got the sense that it just wasn't quite ready…yet. If the engineers at Nemetschek spend any amount of time for version 2010, this will be an absolutely amazing tool.

Now, to prove that I am not a complete fanboy, there are some things that I'd like to see changed in Spotlight 2010. My first two are holdovers from last year's list; maybe I can build a groundswell for these items in 2015:

1. When working in 3-D, the placement/focus of lighting units for a rendered model is hit-or-miss. Perhaps placing the user view at the front of the lighting unit and providing interactive, real-time movement/feedback would be a workable solution.

2. Although the beam-spread tool is very helpful, there are still quite a few steps involved in its operation. Again, a more interactive, real-time approach, such as one where the user would invoke the tool and draw a line from the unit on the position (the program would determine unit type and "Z" value) to a place or object on stage, would be useful.

3. There is currently no real way to covert a truss into a "complex" lighting position that it could be (i.e., each main pipe of a truss could be used as a hanging position).

With Nemetschek NA's latest release of Vectorworks Spotlight version 2009, users are offered a program that is powerful, flexible, and intuitive. Powerful enough to be able to present my designs in 2-D and 3-D. Flexible enough to let me work my way and intuitive enough to help me make decisions so I can concentrate on my designs.

See you next year! 🔊

Image Courtesy of Jim Woodward