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Chapter 9 - Advanced mental ray Lighting (3ds Max 2010 Architectural Visualization (Advanced to Expert))

Darren Brooker

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In terms of film effects' work, you don't get any more advanced than the Academy Award winner for Visual Effects. In the instance of The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, over 100 different lighting setups were shot on set, with the Lighting Supervisors at Digital Domain developing CG lighting to match each one. As many as 50 different elements, each rendered out of mental ray, were combined into the final composite. As architectural projects go, you would be hard-pressed to find one that is nearly comparable, but you have to look only at the work of cutting-edge design practices like Uniform to see that technologies pushing the boundaries of today's VFX blockbusters trickle down into the mainstream of visualization remarkably quickly.

Most day-to-day design visualization projects are a million miles away from the world of Oscar-winning effects work; therefore, what constitutes advanced lighting with mental ray in this context? We've already seen a perfect demonstration of the advanced power of mental ray a couple of chapters ago. The Lighting Analysis tools within 3ds Max would not be possible were it not for the fact that mental ray is a physically-correct renderer that uses photon mapping as its algorithm for calculating indirect illumination. This means that it is capable of physically-correct materials and physically-correct lighting. This might be great news if you are the Lighting Supervisor working on matching the lighting setups to in excess of 100 shots. However, it is even better news for those in design visualization as the Lighting Analysis tools shown in Figure 9-2 so deftly demonstrate.

Within this chapter, we will build on the core concepts introduced in Tod Stephens' excellent chapter on Lighting Analysis tools and move into the further reaches of what a physical renderer like mental ray has to offer, examining the theory in the context of three tutorials. The first of these will look at a completely computer-generated interior, while the second will examine the match lighting and integration of CG elements into an outdoor scene, looking at the role that HDR (High Dynamic Range) lighting can play in this process, as shown in Figure 9-3. Finally, our last tutorial will tie these two subjects together, looking at how the lessons learned from the second tutorial can be of benefit when applied in context of the first.

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