

Vectorworks Spotlight 2011

By: Patrick Immel

Vectorworks 2011 is the latest offering from Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc. In this review, I will specifically explore what I consider to be the top ten new features of Spotlight, Nemetschek Vectorworks' design package for the live entertainment and event planning industries. Spotlight, along with Renderworks, can be used to conceive, create, and present your designs. Nemetschek also provides solutions in the architectural, landscape, and machine design disciplines as well. I teach and use Vectorworks in our production process at my university. Also, these are my personal obser-

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ventions, so your experience may vary

1. More advanced 3D environment/new Renderworks engine. If you have been paying attention at all to Vectorworks since Version 2010, you will notice that Nemetschek is really pushing the whole 3D work flow thing with what I believe to be the ultimate goal of a completely seamless marriage of the 2D and 3D worlds. A big change is the merger of the 2D and 3D selection tools and the introduction of “planar object.” To be fair, we first saw them in V2010, but this is a better, more pumped-up version. For example, if you draw a rectangle, then switch to an isometric view; the rectangle will be redrawn correctly in the new environment. At this point, you can tweak and edit your object as you normally would. This holds true for text and dimensions as well. “Ok,” you say,

“now I want to extrude my rectangle.”

In V2010, you would have to work through a few menu commands to get your box. Now, just select the new “push/pull” tool and you are off to the races! If you have used Google Sketchup, you will be familiar with push/pull in that you select a face of your object, then drag to change its shape. This has proven to be a very useful tool for me. Renderworks has been reworked from the ground up, using the “cinema 4D” rendering engine. This addition has created faster rendering times (based on my real-world, decidedly non-scientific

methods!) and a more streamlined, cleaner user interface.

2. Focus point use and management. When drafting a light plot in 2D, you can insert a lighting object and determine precisely at which angle the object will be “hung.” When you switch to a 3D view, your lighting unit is pointing straight ahead, regardless of where its focus point is placed. Usually, this is not a problem, but let's face it: The whole point of 3D is to give the user an exact representation of what objects will really look like. Therefore, we want the 3D units to accurately face their focus points. This is solved in 2011. Now, when you switch to a 3D view, your fixtures are pointing exactly where they need to on stage. You move the focus point? No problem! The fixtures track any focus point movement.

3. Smart focus points. Another cool new focus point feature is that they are “smarter.” What does this mean? The tool remembers that name of the last focus point inserted. I letter my focus points, so I insert “A,” then the next time I click the tool, it automatically populates the dialog with “B.” This is not even the best thing: I generally insert one focus point, then copy the rest. “Drag/ctrl” focus point “A,” and, when you release the mouse, the focus point is now “B.” Let's say you have a row of focus points in your plot and you want to copy them upstage. Yup! That works too.

4. Improved Lightwright data exchange. The integration between Vectorworks Spotlight and Lightwright has been made even better. Previously, when you inserted a unit between two other objects in Lightwright, lord knows where it might appear on your plot. Now, if you insert an object in Lightwright, it appears exactly between its two neighbors. This is quite helpful. Another useful addition is the ability to pre-determine a unit's “selection state” before it is imported into Spotlight. I find this useful for confirming that units have indeed been accurately imported into the drawing.

5. Lighting paperwork improvements. Not everyone has the need for a full-featured paperwork solution like Lightwright. That's okay; Spotlight has you covered. You can produce any number of different types of paperwork, but a user gripe over many years was how the columns of information sorted. Now everything sorts correctly.

6. Improved ganging tool. New in Spotlight 2011 is the ability to adjust settings for the ganging tool

(two-fer) before applying it to symbols. It's a small item, but very useful. Another improvement in this tool is that its ability to follow its unit gets moved on the drawing. Previously, I would need to "refresh instruments" to complete the change.

7. Text improvements.

Nemetschek Vectorworks has rolled out "perfect preview text editing" in Vectorworks 2011. Okay, so we are not going to be writing a novel (or article!) on Vectorworks, but every drawing has many of those pesky letters on them. Nemetschek just made it easier to work with them. First off is "text styles." Do you use the same font type, color, and size on every drawing? Or does your business have strict typographic standards? Now, once a text style has been created, it can be shared, imported, exported, and applied by simply dragging and dropping. Remember planar objects? You can now edit text directly in an isometric (or any other) view. Don't like that? One mouse click, and you are editing "straight up."

8. Select connected objects.

Have you ever received a dwg or Sketchup file to edit in Vectorworks that had objects created with thousands of tiny lines? I have, and it is maddening! Now, using the select connect objects menu command, you can select one of the lines and any other line connected end-to-end with

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it will be selected.

9. Program add-ins. While this is not a new feature of Vectorworks Spotlight, I applaud Nemetschek Vectorworks for giving developers the tools with which to expand and enrich our experience. Sam Jones (AutoPlot), Joshua Benghiat (Beam Draw, Savvy Symbol, et al.), and Andrew Dunning (Staging Tool Set, Video Screen, SoftGoods, et al.) are three developers (and designers/technicians in their own right) who's products I have used over the years. On certain occasions, I have emailed these folks a question in the morning, and, by the afternoon, the plug-in was adjusted to meet my need. Thanks again to Nemetschek Vectorworks for giving us this wonderful resource!

10. Support / education options.

Again, I believe that the support system provided by Nemetschek Vectorworks, is second to none. I could call and speak to a technical support staff member, but many times I either visit the Vectorworks community board or the Spotlight list serve.

Usually within minutes, I will have a response to my question, sometimes from a Nemetschek staffer, other times from one of the hundreds of active, knowledgeable users who frequent the help sites. At any rate, I know my problem will be answered.

Another great feature is Nemetschek Vectorworks' commitment to education. Yes, I know this isn't a feature of Spotlight, but it is wonderful, nonetheless. After an easy registration process, Vectorworks Designer is provided, free of charge, to any eligible student or faculty member. You might say that, this is simply Nemetschek building its user base; while that might be true, the company is also introducing CAD to a whole new generation of students. I have had a few students come into our program with actual Vectorworks knowledge and skills; four or five years ago, this simply wasn't the case.

The slogan for Nemetschek Vectorworks' Vectorworks Spotlight is "Flexible. Versatile. Intuitive. Smart." I tend to agree. This is a full-featured solution that pushes the boundaries of what we perceive a CAD program to be. This in turn allows us as designers and technicians to push the boundaries of our work. ☺

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