

SOFTWARE REVIEW

# Mettle SkyBox Studio

PRICE \$99 (Standard) \$189 (Studio) \$90 (upgrade from Standard to Studio) | COMPANY Mettle | WEBSITE [www.mettle.com/product/skybox](http://www.mettle.com/product/skybox)

Mettle, creators of the After Effects FreeForm and ShapeShifter plug-ins have released SkyBox Studio, a plug-in enabling you to generate skyboxes from your comp or imported items in After Effects, allowing you to output still and animated skyboxes in various formats.

If you're familiar with After Effects' workflow, you'll have few issues using the plug-in. It's completely integrated into After Effects and will function on par with its other plug-ins. SkyBox sports a very simple workflow, so long as you provide a plate or comp it can generate output from.

Your output can be generated from live footage, an animation, an existing or imported HDR file, a render, or the entire comp you just created. Starting by running the SkyBox Creator script (SkyBox is a hybrid plug-in, calling on both script and plug-in), it creates a full 360-degree animation, with a default set of cubemap-type cameras, providing front, back, left, right, up and down views of your plate. This output you can change

By keeping things simple SkyBox plays to its strengths

into an equirectangular or spherical map – also as part of your comp or animation, meaning you can have an equirectangular map turn into a spherical map or vice versa as part of your comp. And if you're using, for example, Element 3D, the generated output will also reflect correctly onto your 3D mesh(es).

Even though you'll have to use After Effects' native tools or a plug-in to tweak the image-related components of your skybox, such as colour correction, blur, or distort, SkyBox does provide a handy set of tools to tweak your output, like the ability to Tilt, Pan, and Roll your skybox to match the movement (or not) in your scene. It also provides an Edge Blending option on skybox generation – it's a masking option to soften the edges of rough or bad edges that won't stitch, thereby

giving it better edges and output. In addition, SkyBox lets you define whether you're using 3D plug-ins, such as Element 3D, ZaxWerks, or any of Red Giant's Trapcode plug-ins, like Particular or Horizon. Be aware of this, as SkyBox will output differently if you're using 3D plug-ins or if you will be working with 'just' 3D layer outputs.

Regardless of the output format you choose, you can export your skybox as both stills and animations, and it can be used in anything from gaming engines to YouTube 360-views. However, SkyBox is not a complete HDR-stitching or generation tool such as ptGUI or PanoWeaver – if your input needs a lot of work, look at a dedicated stitcher instead.

But by keeping things simple SkyBox plays to its strengths, which are ease of use, (GPU-based) speed, peaceful coexistence with most other plug-ins in the After Effects universe, and it's a timesaver – as you're able to do a lot of your skybox work in-program and in-pipeline.

VERDICT ●●●●○

MAIN FEATURES

Generate VR/360 comps

Converts equirectangular and spherical formats

Supports Maya, Cinema 4D, 3ds Max, Houdini and Modo

Animated as well as still outputs



AUTHOR PROFILE

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Cirstyn is a freelance CG artist and educator, with over a decade's experience in 3D, focusing on modelling and texturing.

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Mettle-generated skyboxes can also be exported and used in other applications, as seen here in this 3ds Max/Corona combo

METTLE PUTS A SHINE ON THINGS

Mettle are a small motion graphics company who also provide After Effects tools for designers, by designers. With over 20 years in the industry, they have provided plug-ins such as ShapeShifter and FreeForm Pro. The latter was last seen in use during the opening titles of 2014's season of True Detective.