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- G5 iMac
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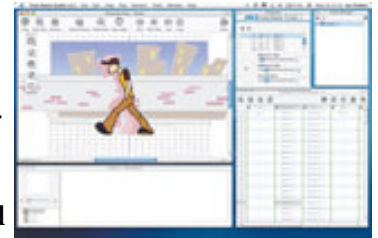
Toon Boom Studio 2.5

2D animation tool

Rating: ★★★★★ /8.9
Publisher: Toon Boom Animation <http://www.toonboom.com>
Distributor: Pixelution <http://www.pixelution.co.uk/>
Tel: 01462433558
List Price: £256 excluding VAT.

For those who sometimes prefer to pick up a pencil rather than a mouse, a program like Toon Boom Studio is a welcome release – neatly bridging the gap between traditional and digital animation, giving you the best of both worlds in a package that's simple to use but which packs serious raw power.

Although Toon Boom Studio doesn't boast the feature set of its older brother USAnimation OPUS, which is used by Warner Brothers and the makers of the Simpsons (Windows only, I'm afraid – also from Toon Boom Animation), it comes with many high-end features including automated lip-synching and multi-plane camera effects. The program is also fun to use, combining traditional animation techniques in a digital workflow that greatly simplifies the creation of crisp Web- or movie-animations from multiple elements.



Beginning a new project is a straightforward affair: simply create a project folder to hold all the components of your animation and begin importing scenes for manipulation. The program supports vectors and bitmaps, and now supports scanners – so users can develop characters using traditional media and import them for inking and animation. This is a surprisingly painless process within a workflow that will make even the most computer-illiterate animator feel at home.

Work is done in either drawing mode or scene-planning mode. In drawing mode you create cartoons as vectors using a range of tools that will be familiar to anybody who has ever worked with a vector-based package. This makes it easy to manipulate and resize drawings – but for those who prefer a more traditional approach, Toon Boom offers onion skinning and an Auto LightTable mode that let you paint and draw with previous frames partially visible.

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When happy with your efforts, move into screen-planning mode – which is where Toon Boom Studio really comes into its own. Scenes (be they imported photographs, scans or vector drawings) are treated as layers that can be moved back and forth in front of virtual cameras. Thus an animation of a man walking towards you, for example, can be created with a minimal number of frames, copied-&-pasted into the timeline to create a loop, and then moved towards the camera to give the illusion of space and depth. Because drawings are created as vectors, the image will always be crystal clear. For South Park-style animations, for example, such a feature would probably save a lot of time and trouble.

While the range of tools is probably about as extensive as you need, it's good to know that the developers have been listening to what users have to say about the product. Although there's nothing earth-shatteringly different about the previous version, there are enough tweaks and enhancements to keep the average user happy for some time to come. For example, one of the program's biggest oversights – its inability to allow sound scrubbing in the timeline – has now been addressed, as have other niggling quirks such as the lack of an auto gap-closing tool and the inability to draw new elements or tweak existing ones in scene-planning mode.

There are myriad other improvements that considerably improve the workflow. These include the ability to use the end of a stylus as an erase tool; automatic mapping of lip charts to lip drawings; the ability to paint using bitmap textures; support for Illustrator CS files; and well as clipping effects.

Although Toon Boom Studio is primarily a tool for creating Flash Movies for the Web, additional support has been added for other output formats. You can, for example, now export animations as DV streams as well as QuickTime movies with sound and alpha-channel support. You can also choose to export in the more Windows-centric AVI format.

The minuses? There are surprisingly few for a program of this scope. Seasoned users will, no doubt, still be dismayed by the lack of support for text (if you want to include text in your animation it must be imported in vector format or scanned in) and lack of interactive effects, but the developers will argue that both of these features are better handled in Macromedia's Flash.

Macworld Buying Advice

All in all, Toon Boom Studio 2.5 is a worthy upgrade to a program that has already gathered a legion of fans since its initial launch in late 2001. For long-time users of Director or Flash, it's fair to say that Toon Boom Studio offers the superior animation features. Indeed, Macromedia seems to acknowledge this by bundling a native Toon Boom import plug-in with Flash. And although Toon Boom Studio has plenty of power, its learning curve is not so steep as one might imagine.

For both traditional and digital animators, the program offers an easy and intuitive way to turn working ideas into complete working animations in a manner that takes a lot of the drudgery out of the animation process. Creating complex animations has never been this easy on a Macintosh.

- **Ian Probert**

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