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Toon Boom Studio 2.5

2-D Pro Animation Package Delivers New Tools for 'Toons

By Galen Fott

SUMMARY

Pros: Excellent value; outstanding drawing, painting, animation, and multiplane camera tools; easy cycle creation; audio scrubbing; drawing tools available in Sceneplanning mode.

Cons: No type tool; no vectorization preview; no printed full manual.


OS Compatibility: OS X

Price as rated: \$374; upgrade, \$199

Company: Toon Boom Animation, 514/278-8666
www.toonboom.com

Thanks to the runaway success of 3-D computer-animated feature films, led by Pixar (Steve Jobs's *other* company), traditional, hand-drawn animation is in a slump. Animation studios are tossing aside their pencils to jump on the 3-D

bandwagon, abandoning the art form that started it all. Toon Boom Studio 2.5 could be just the thing to turn that slump around.

The previous version of Toon Boom ( ; March 2002) was nothing less than a full-fledged animation studio. It let users draw, ink, paint, assemble a soundtrack, and use a multiplane camera to frame and record their shots. This long-awaited new release adds several important tools and capabilities into the mix. With so much animation power readily available at such a reasonable price, independent artists have the means to create the next—well, *'toon boom*.

Draw a Little Closer

PICTURES

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Toon Boom Studio's automatic line-cure

If you're handy with a Wacom pen and tablet, the easiest way to get started with Toon Boom Studio is to use the program's Drawing mode to sketch. The pressure-sensitive Brush tool gives you variable line widths, and there are simple shape-drawing tools. The Polyline tool, a new element in the toolbox, is great for users who are comfortable with an Adobe Illustrator-style Bézier pen. (You can also import art directly from Illustrator CS.) This version's toolbox has only one significant omission: a type tool for generating titles.



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feature can get lips flapping in no time.

All of Toon Boom's tools draw in vectors, rather than pixels, and you can export images to the Macromedia Flash SWF format. The new Smooth command reduces the number of points in vector lines, lowering the SWF file size. If you'd rather draw on paper, the Import And Vectorize command now lets you scan your drawings directly into the program and convert them to vector images on-the-fly. While this saves time and disk space, guessing the correct vectorization filter settings before you scan can be tricky; a preview would be helpful.

You can also scan drawings without converting them to vector images, but then you miss out on Toon Boom's dynamic coloring tools. Just click inside a drawn shape to fill it with the selected color. If your drawing style is sketchy and your shapes aren't always perfectly closed, the new, adjustable Auto Gap setting ignores small gaps so the shape fills properly. And if you're careful to name your swatches correctly—name the swatch for the object you're coloring (“tutu” instead of “yellow”)—it's a snap to go back and make changes globally if you decide your hippo ballerina would be prettier in pink.

Toon Boom's Exposure Sheet lets you plan the timing of your individual art elements. Among the program's most welcome new features are the Create Cycle commands, which eliminate the old version's reliance on tedious cutting and pasting to create sequences of repeating drawings, such as walk cycles.

Vocal Sync

The previous version of Toon Boom could analyze a dialog track and generate a lip-sync chart for you to refer to as you animated your character's mouth. Version 2.5 goes a step further: If you draw a stationary character's mouth shapes in advance, the program can place those shapes according to a soundtrack analysis and create an instant lip sync. The results probably wouldn't satisfy Uncle Walt, but this feature is great for limited TV-style animation.

As you refine your synchronization, the Sound Element Editor's new audio scrubbing is absolutely vital; it lets you closely analyze the audio so you can make your own adjustments.

Scenic Design

Toon Boom's Sceneplanning mode—where you gather various art elements to animate them on a virtual 3-D stage—has been updated in version 2.5. Audio scrubbing is available here, too, so you can synchronize the broader movements of your animation to the soundtrack. And you can create dynamic multiplane effects of depth and perspective by animating your camera, zooming past foreground elements, and moving in for a close-up.

The most welcome change to the Sceneplanning mode is that you can now draw in it. Before, this mode often revealed problems with your animation that could be fixed only in Drawing mode. In this version, you can just pick up a drawing tool and touch up your art at any time in the process.

Toon Boom Studio 2.5 can export to QuickTime, in addition to Flash. You can easily drop your animated scene into an iMovie project, or you can render a movie, complete with alpha channel, to composite in a program such as Apple's Final Cut Express. The program comes with a 100-page Getting Started book, but, unfortunately, the 450-page printed manual has been replaced with a PDF file.

Macworld's Buying Advice

Toon Boom Studio 2.5 is a fantastic, reasonably priced program that gives you almost every tool you need in order to produce hand-drawn animated cartoons on a Mac. For previous owners, this version has a cavalcade of new features that make it an essential upgrade. For new users who can draw reasonably well and who want to animate, passing this program up would be downright goofy.

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