



Thursday, February 07, 2002

Search

ANIMATION WORLD
MAGAZINE

Page One

SECTIONS

People
Profiles
Reviews
Tutorials

SPECIAL FEATURES

Gaming
Production
Technology
Voice Acting

COLUMNS

Editor's Notebook
Dr. Toon
The Animation
Pimp
Producing
Animation
Career Coach
Vilppu's How To
Anime Reviews

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Articles by Date
Article Archive
Current Acrobat
Issue
Contact AWM

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Headline News
Career Connections
Student Corner
School Database
AWN Store
Animation
Showcase
Web Animation
Guide
Calendar of Events
Upcoming
Theatrical Releases
Trivia Quiz
Toon Institute

Toon Boom Studio Animates the Web

Eric Oldrin reviews a new way to create animation for the Web. Toon Boom Studio brings USAnimation's expertise to vector-based animation.

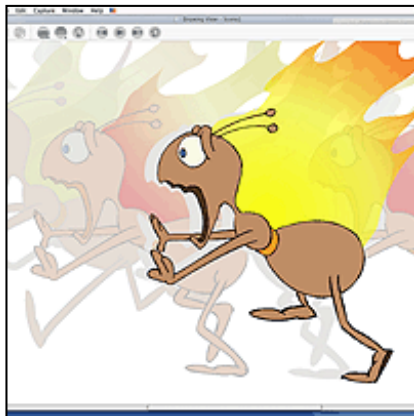
January 18, 2002
By Eric Oldrin

From sketch to animation using Toon Boom Studio.



Step 1: Initial rough sketches.

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Step 2: Onion skinning where we see the overlay of frames within an element.

It's the summer of 2000 and the Web has seen more stars than the Hollywood Squares. Adam Sandler, Matt and Trey, Jim Brooks, Tim Burton -- they were all looking for their 15 Megs of fame. With the promise of an unprecedented audience, uncensored expression and unlimited capital, old world artists met new world technology with open arms. Well, almost.

First they had to contend with some pretty serious [limitations](#). They discovered that online entertainment must be short form animation, with potentially very imprecise timing. This presented a unique challenge for artists accustomed to twenty-six minutes of tightly synched dialogue. Luckily, some of these issues were mitigated through the use of vector-based graphics.

Most people are familiar with Macromedia's popular vector-based design tool and for the most part Flash was the software of choice for these talented storytellers. However, Flash is primarily a design application and although it does an incredible job of simplifying the animation process, it is by no means a traditional animation tool. It was not created with the animator in mind.

Toon Boom Studio was created for animators and serves as an ideal supplement to Flash. Designed by Toon Boom Technologies, this well-focused software offers increased drawing accuracy, better lip synching, 3D scene planning and camera effects. Not to mention it just feels more like an animation tool, with a rotating light table, exposure sheets and onion skinning. This

[More From Page One](#)

[Find the Right School for You](#)

[Lille, France: Hotbed of the North](#)

[No LAAF-ing Matter](#)

[New from Japan: Anime Film Reviews](#)

[Beyond The Majors: Independent Animation Feature Production](#)

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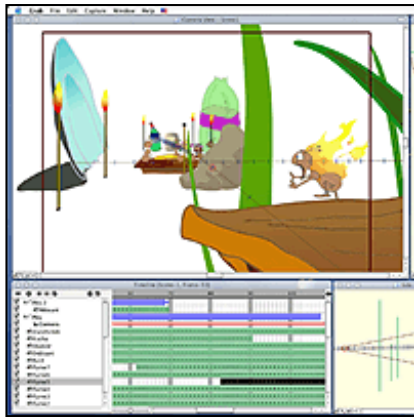
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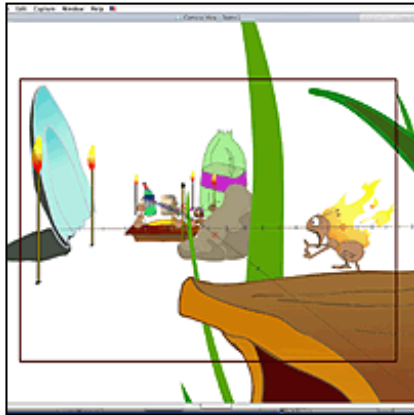
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Step 3: Camera view with timeline.



Step 4: Main camera view.

must be how designers feel when they use Flash! Toon Boom Studio can still output to a format usable in Macromedia Flash, allowing one to add layers of interactivity.

Facilitating Accuracy

Accuracy was a major concern for all of the Hollywood talent, especially during initial development. They wanted to be certain the work they produced would be true to their vision, no matter what the circumstance. Matt and Trey swore by the importance of timing. Cartman is funny not just because of what he says but also because of how he says it. They insisted that whatever they created for the Web have precise mouth positions and movement. Unfortunately, software cannot always control the quality of these variables. One has to consider the power of the audience's computer as well. Low-end machines will have choppy animation no matter how accurate the original production. However, there are some steps that can be taken and seasoned *South Park* animators Crispy and Todd, went to great lengths to insure precision.

In the first episode of *Stainboy*, evil Staregirl is defeated when an enormous light fixture falls on her head, creating a gory mess. As the climax of the story, the timing had to be exact. The sound effect had to match the event; otherwise the entire episode would be ruined. Burton's animators worked for days to meet his expectations and in the end, they did an incredible job of capturing the important moment by tweaking the frame rate and cheating the timing.

In both cases, Toon Boom would have brought a layer of great ease to these otherwise difficult situations. The animators would still have had to consider the processing ability of their computer but they would have been in familiar territory. They could have used familiar tools to find greater accuracy without such frustration and they could have presented their work to the talent in a more predictable form.



Thursday, February 07, 2002

Search

ANIMATION WORLD
MAGAZINE
Page One

SECTIONS

People
Profiles
Reviews
Tutorials

SPECIAL FEATURES

Gaming
Production
Technology
Voice Acting

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Editor's Notebook
Dr. Toon
The Animation
Pimp
Producing
Animation
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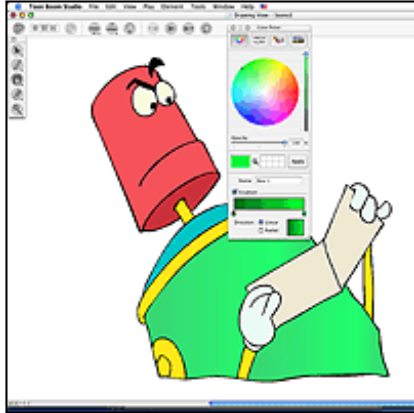
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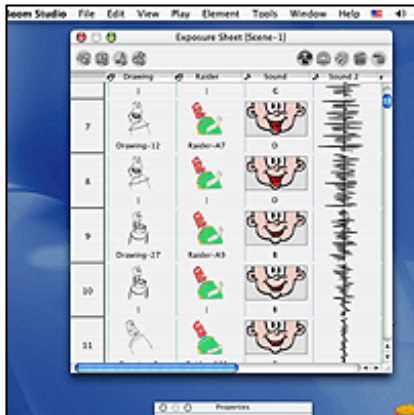
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AWM Store
Animation
Showcase
Web Animation
Guide
Calendar of Events
Upcoming
Theatrical Releases
Trivia Quiz
Toon Institute

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(continued from page 1)



Step 5: Painting and drawing using dynamic color picking tools.



Step 6: The Lypcsinc exposure sheet.



Step 7: A Lypcsinc drawing with audio sample.

Zip! Pan! Zoom!

In addition to facilitating accuracy, Toon Boom Studio provides some other outstanding capabilities. The camera work is perhaps the most impressive of these attributes. "Toon Boom Studio is very much about camera moves and effects that can be done in Flash, but really aren't its core functionality," says Mike Viner of Balloon Dog Studio. You can lay out 2D drawings in a 3D space, simplifying the creation of depth and perspective. You can use a motion path to map out where you want to move from one frame to another and you can add control points to this path to change its shape, changing the motion path the element will follow.

The opening scene to [Stan Lee's](#) epic Web adventure *The 7th Portal*, presents a long pan and zoom that could easily have been created in Toon Boom Studio. As a matter of fact, the production of the series is presented throughout the Toon Boom user guide as a tutorial. Stan Lee was a perfectionist and always pushing the medium to its extreme. In using Toon Boom Studio, he would have been at home. The type of camera effects that can be found in Toon Boom are not presented the same way in Flash.

With a little talent, this software and a computer, anyone can become their own animation studio. That was the promise of Flash but somehow it's more fun with Toon Boom Studio. "It's not for making animated GUIs that talk to a backend. It's for a Web show -- not for making buttons," adds Viner. If you want to get serious, you can always import your cartoon into Flash.

For \$350, it's a pretty good deal (100 bucks if you're a student!). Maybe if we'd have had this software when all those celebrities were on the Web, they would have stuck around even after the bubble burst. But if Toon Boom Technology's track record is any indicator, those big names may just come back. Their high-

More From Page One

[Find the Right School for You](#)

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[No LAAF-ing Matter](#)

[New from Japan: Anime Film Reviews](#)

[Beyond The Majors: Independent Animation Feature Production](#)

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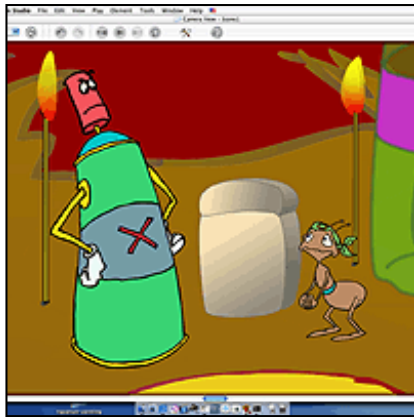
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Step 8: Camera output shows the final composition from the camera's view.

end tool, [USAnimation](#) is the leading software among major studios, including Klasky Csupo and Warner Bros., with a presence in more than 30 countries. Toon Boom Studio is considerably less expensive but follows the same standards and ideals.

The world of online entertainment is more fertile today than it ever was during the summer of 2000, despite the economy. This wonderful tool will undoubtedly open the door to another wave of creativity and expression. Maybe this time, without the distraction of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, something exciting will evolve. Regardless, Toon Boom Studio will help everyone have a lot of fun trying.

Eric Oldrin was the senior producer of series and show content for Shockwave, where he produced and developed some of its key content, including Tim Burton's World of Stainboy. Prior to joining Shockwave, Oldrin helped build Mondo Media's online animation studio and produced The God and Devil Show, Thugs on Film and Like, News. Before that, he created games at America Online's WorldPlay Entertainment and Sierra Online's Imagination Network. Currently, Eric is a principal at Telepathic Transmissions, his new, new media company. Eric holds a B.A. in Philosophy from Pomona College.

Note: Readers may contact any Animation World Magazine contributor by sending an e-mail to editor@awn.com.