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Review: Toon Boom Studio 1.1 for OS X

© 02-01-02 Dean Browell

- **Product Name:** Toon Boom Studio 1.1
- **Company:** Toon Boom Technologies Inc.
- **URL:** <http://www.toonboom.com>
- **Category:** Commercial Animation Application
- **Price/Options:** \$349 Download, \$374 Boxed; Education: \$99 Download, \$124 Boxed
- **OS X:** Yes, OS X Only
- **Requirements:** Power Macintosh G4 (recommended) or G3; Wacom Tablet (recommended); 24-bit color display with at least 8MB Video RAM capable of 1024x768 resolution; 100 MB of available hard disk space; 128 MB of system RAM; Mac OS X or Mac OS X v10.1
- **Test System:**
- **Rating:** 4 bounces - **Pure Lust**



Ratings Legend	
One Bounce: Lustless	This product is uninspiring and not only lacks lust appeal, but it also lacks even the possibility of lust-production.
Two Bounces: Lack-Luster	If you need what it is that this product does, look elsewhere or wait, it lacks lust-appeal.
Three Bounces: Lustworthy	A few rough spots here and there, but overall a high quality item worthy of lust.
Four Bounces: Pure Lust	Unalloyed lust.

Readers be aware: The very existence of Toon Boom is A Good Thing. It isn't just because it is a quality image program, or



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How much it will cost to upgrade to OS X: A running total.

Current =

\$644

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even that it happens to be OS X only. It isn't because it is so advanced, or takes advantage of so many OS X features and qualities. It isn't because creators like Stan Lee (via web comic project 7th Portal) have utilized it. It's because this is the sort of powerful, thoughtful application that wins people to the Mac.

It is no industry secret that artists are drawn to Macs. Those that need computers inevitably use (or at least are advised to use) Apple's machines for bringing their creations to life. The key bit is: "those that need." Traditional hand-drawn animators have some excuse to leave their tables and papers depending on their desire, curiosity, or project but will not find the experience entirely warm to their normal routine. It's not simply the interface, devoid of the personal accouterments and intensity working at your own table under a harsh light, surrounded by the pencils and brushes that bear your finger prints and indentations... no, the key to getting a traditional animator to leave their desk is to convince them that their habits and idiosyncrasies are just as welcome, and in fact are just as applicable, on the computer screen.

If you want to scare a hand-animator away from a Mac, tell them they have to use Flash to get their ideas across. Obviously many artists have been able to utilize Flash perfectly well in their quest to go online with their work, but that doesn't mean that it is in any way ideal for the specific class of the hand-animator. In fact, as with many Macromedia products, Flash is built for many different people in mind, and primarily for the quick delivery of high-quality, quick-loading animations to the web in the form of menus and brief animations. Web designers go gaga and already digitally inclined artists feel at home. Depending on their style, they may feel more comfortable with a Freehand or Illustrator, or any number of halfway-there applications that might work if you shoe horned them into your routine, but hardly make up the whole pie.

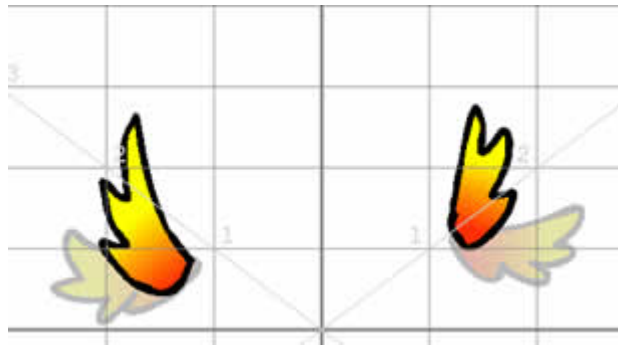
Enter: Toon Boom

Based on the industry standard USAnimation package, Toon Boom presents an altogether friendly in-between for trained animators and web animators to bring their creations (and their backgrounds) to life. When I first had the pleasure of witnessing Toon Boom in New York last summer (its 1.0 debut) it was truly amazing to see not only Toon Boom's qualities in action, but also to see any app running on all cylinders on OS X exclusively. I wasn't alone in that reaction, and in fact, Apple's Tony Lee exclaimed that a product as powerful and fluid as Toon Boom, so early on the OS X clock, "wasn't supposed to happen."

Bringing The Animator's Table To You

One of the outright coolest notions you'll get from Toon Boom is the virtual world it sets up for an awaiting animator, all rendered

beautiful in Quartz. The amount of control you're given to adjust the area you work in isn't far from the real-life possibilities. It's a complete package: You draw within Toon Boom, so no need to pair it with another app (and I mean "no need" seriously, the tools are way too good to ignore). The Drawing mode features a Light Table and drawing area that is fully customizable with grids, perspective and quick rotations of the area itself, mimicking an animator's twist of his sheets, to draw at the correct angle. (If you can afford [Wacom's Cintiq](#), you can easily see how having this on an animator's traditional table might entirely replace a hand-drawn studio.) Hand-drawn lines are vectorized and perfected by the engine underneath Toon Boom, and even truly hand-drawn sketches on a *gasp* real piece of paper can be scanned in and vectorized within Toon Boom for use in scenes. Organize your work with the Exposure sheet, and get the perfect animator's vision right with the Onion Skin layers, rounding out traditional animation's expectations in drawing tools, all in one studio package.



Here you can see the onion skin of only a few frames of a bird's wings.

Filling in your lines couldn't be easier- the way they have organized the painting features in Toon Boom is striking. Manage your palette to be as complex or simple as you want; by assigning colors (including gradients) to particular areas, it makes changing the color of, say, all bricks in your buildings (no matter how many buildings with bricks you've drawn) is simply a matter of picking the color you've assigned to them and changing it. That's all you do, before you get to watch all your bricks change in an instant. My example is very basic, but you can see how complex you could make your setup, particularly with primary characters and shading, to fit your own tastes and need for experimentation.

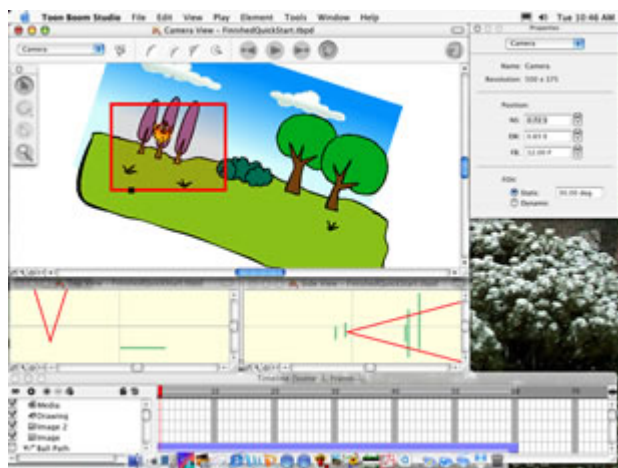


True Syncopation

If there was a single feature that blew me away and left me chatting with friends and colleagues about Toon Boom it was the lip-synching and sound. By simply generating lip charts featuring your character's mouth and the phonetic syllables they'll need to speak, Toon Boom will take you

the rest of the way to great sound and voice effects in your animation. Handling all sorts of sound files, (MP3, wav, aiff, PCM) Toon Boom will add the sound to your exposure sheet as just another item to be manipulated by the program. Adding effects, fades and the such is easy, but the real time-saver that knocked my socks off was how Toon Boom can help assign the appropriate lip chart designations to your imported voice tracks. This piece of the puzzle means that one of the most tedious elements to traditional animation is virtually conquered in a single option. Suddenly, the lip chart you created is applied for you, and you can immediately begin testing how your character's mouth will react to voice tracks of any length and in any language.

This is an example of thumbnails from an alphabet recitation I did. Toon Boom's lip-synching feature provides an incredible timesaving tool in an already well-rounded application



See the sidebar below for more information on the camera's position in scene planning-mode.

Cameras, Cameras, Anywhere

The 3D possibilities brought into the world of 2D animation by Toon Boom's camera in the Scene Planning Mode are limitless. Superheroes can fly over and around buildings with ease as the selected camera angles can follow the tracks you provide. Dealing with a multi-layered 2D background is quite easy given the logical interface Toon Boom provides in the Scene Planning Mode. When you maneuver the camera, you have the control (instead of the objects you've drawn requiring you to move them). In the background Toon Boom works hard for you in the 3D space, calculating positions and rotations in a snap, much like the fluidity the drawing area affords you even if you draw a sloppy line.

Scene(ry) Planning

The anatomy of Toon Boom's Scene Planning mode is a good example of their attention to detail from an animator's perspective.

Exporting

Toon Boom can save your creation in Quicktime, Flash a Digital Video stream, and even directly into an iMovie project file. All exporting selections come with a variety of options on what frame length and custom settings you'd prefer. See the clip below for an example of a short Flash scene.

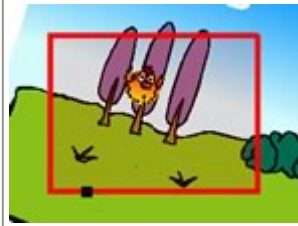


Click for a sample Flash animation export of a Toon Boom created scene.

Newbies and the Nervous

The Toon Boom tutorials, User Guide and Samples are quite helpful. Kudos specifically to the User Guide team for putting together a helpful, pertinent, non-patronizing Guide that actually informs without putting the curious reader to sleep. And no, I'm not just saying this because they reference any project with Stan "The Man" Lee's name attached. All of the samples I'm using here to demonstrate can be found in these packages. You can download everything along with an evaluation copy of Toon Boom Studio at www.ToonBoom.com. And while some may find the number of windows to work with a bit daunting, there are no more than any normal graphic program expects you to juggle, and surprisingly few when you realize the full potential and scope this Studio provides in terms of drawing, cameras and sound.

If you are even reading this review and feigning interest in Toon Boom without owning a drawing palette, then bookmark this review, and go buy at least a Wacom Graphire 2. Aside from the obvious assistance in getting your ideas across, you'll be interested to note that Toon Boom features pressure sensitivity with Wacom's line of pens and pads (and in fact, has from its release in summer of 2001, far before anyone even really had a driver for Wacom's products in OS X).



The red box marks the camera on the table



From above, you can see how the camera's view point is marked with the perspective of the red lines. The 2D scenery is seen to the right of the camera's position.



The side view shows how the various patches of trees are placed along the camera's path, while we know from the top view that they don't cross into it.

Conclusion

While some may say that with a strong animation program that we are preaching to a choir that already chooses to go Mac, I'd argue that Toon Boom is even more attractive to a cache of artists that haven't chosen any platform yet for their work. In that vein, it is no less an important application for recruiting. Trained animators will feel at home with the level of control and power they won't lose between their decades old, paint-caked tables and the computer screen. It'd be tough to leave Toon Boom's drawing surface and head back to the smudged surface world...

That being said, for the "choir" of Mac using digital artists, Toon Boom is still a boon. And I have a good feeling that a number of would-be animators will find this tool an invaluable step in the right direction of an animation career. Can you imagine this tool in the hands of a college-doodler? I'm not even referring to the already-in-art-class type (although that's huge too) but rather the computer lab lurker who boots it up and starts to give it a whirl. I predict love at first sight. And for \$100, how can an Art Department not have a copy on hand? There are simply too many tools in this entire Studio to ignore what this program could do for the budding animator.

But, its still a niche player. Non-artists and maybe even web-designers will not find a dearth of tools they don't already have, or even want. While the camera movements and Flash compatibility is nice, if you don't already have an artistic bone in your body, the rest will be old gravy. For the regular public, this app would easily only get 3 Bounces given the sheer confusion the uninitiated might encounter at tweezing and workflow. But if you're even remotely inclined, have used Flash to even a small degree of success, or have ever doodled and yearned to make it come alive, Toon Boom is your app.

Finally, I need to agree with one of my initial reactions seeing the 1.0 release version more than 6 months ago in OS X's infancy: Toon Boom Studio has got to be one of the most attentive programs to a normally non-computerized profession I've ever seen. They have really translated exactly what an animator would want, would normally have, and would really like to take advantage of, and coupled it with a very slick OS X interface. I was encouraged enough even as a 2D graphic designer myself that I think I could really fool with a program like this and get some great results. It's designed so the great results practically come in the box.

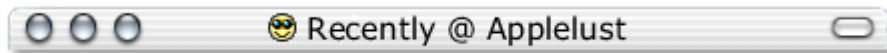
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- [Dean Browell](#)

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Macworld

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- **Macworld Expo: Whatever Happened to "The Rest Of Us?"** (1-18-02) Pierre Igot. Pierre shares his thoughts about the Macworld keynote presentation and the apparent focus of Apple's latest development efforts.
- **The Marriage of Form and Function** (1-9-02) This blessed event took place at MWSF 2002, and Steve was the best man. Apparently, no jacket or tie was required.
- **Picture Yourself Using iPhoto** (1-8-02) Did you think the holidays were over? Dean unwraps Steve's iPhoto gift to the world...
- **Forgive the hype, cheer the iMac** (1-7-02) Did the keynote come short of your expectations? Just think about all the things that the new flat-panel iMac packs in its futuristic, elegant enclosure for just \$1,799, and you'll feel better. A first look at the new iMac by András Puiz.
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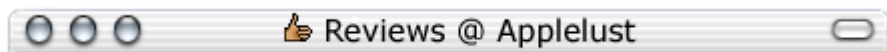
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