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Review: Toon Boom Studio v1.2.1

Reviewed By: [Kirk Hiner](#)

Review Date: January 23, 2003

Genre: 2D animation software

Developer: [Toon Boom Technologies, Inc.](#)

Minimum Requirements: G3, Mac OS X, 128MB RAM, 100MB available hard disk space, 24-bit color display with at least 8MB Video RAM capable of 1024x768 resolution, Wacom Tablet (recommended)

Mac OS X Support: Yes

Retail Price: \$374.00; special pricing for [students and schools](#) available

Availability: Out Now

What I've always enjoyed about most of the computer programs I use is that they make me look more talented than I am. PhotoShop, for example, or even iMovie, fool others into thinking I have talent. Or perhaps the talent was there, and it took these programs to bring it out.

Unfortunately, some other programs have the reverse effect, serving as harsh reminders that I have a long way to go before I'll be speaking at software seminars on some cruise ship. Adobe Illustrator is such a program. To a lesser degree, Flash. These are programs of which I just can't seem to get a grasp, and I'm certain only a ten week course at the nearby community college could change that.

ToonBoom Studio from ToonBoom Technologies, Inc. falls squarely into both categories. Here is a 2D animation tool that makes animation easy, but pretty much only if animation was already easy for you.

I'll better explain that. Toon Boom Studio provides powerful tools to simplify the process of animating 2D images. At this, it's highly successful. It doesn't, however, make you a good animator. If you have no illustration or animation experience, working your way through this program requires a strong working knowledge of some fairly tricky tools. Still, without these tools, you wouldn't be animating at all. That's the wonder of Toon Boom Studio.

January 27, 2003

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I won't focus on the program's feature set. I'm not an animator, so I don't have prior experience with this type of tool and therefore don't know what exactly would be considered important and what would be considered fluff. Also, I have no basis of comparison outside of some work with Flash, which is not really a competitor. Therefore, I'll stick with the Toon Boom workflow as applied through the 30 day [trial version](#), which is actually what I'm evaluating here.

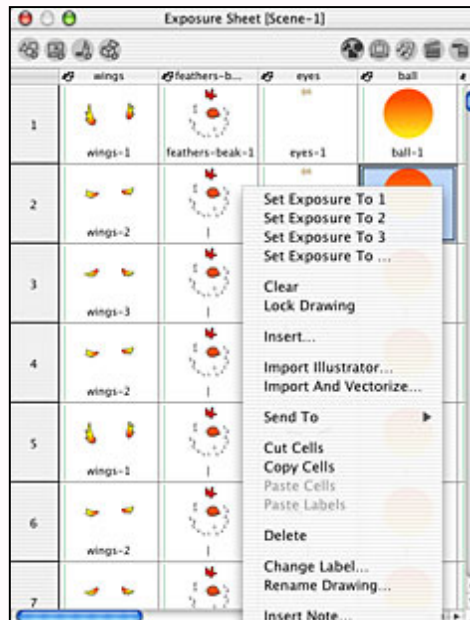
As with any project of this sort, it's best to plan everything out in advance. Toon Boom facilitates this through its Exposure Sheet, which allows you to assemble and manage all the assets of your animation. The various images (vector and bitmap) sounds and even video can be stored here for easy access.

So, how do you get the pieces of the animation in the first place? Ideally, you'd draw them. Toon Boom takes full advantage of pressure-sensitive drawing tools such as your average Wacom Tablet, so illustrators will have no problem creating their objects. Once the object is in Toon Boom, an impressive set of vector tools is available for manipulation of the object. The benefits to this are many, but there are two major ones even an uneducated animator such as myself can immediately identify.

First, you don't have to draw every cell of an animation. Once the object is in place, it can be altered with the vector tools to create the next cell. Movement now becomes easier to control and quicker to produce. Anyone familiar with illustration programs such as Illustrator or FreeHand will immediately feel comfortable with the Bezier editing tools and will appreciate the refinements Toon Boom has made to simplify animation (although the odd symbols used to represent the tools makes selection a bit confusing at first). Combined with the tools are onion skin and light table features that make it easy to see through the layers for the creation of fluid movement. You'll be surprised how easy this makes things, albeit still time consuming (at least for the amateur).

Speaking of the amateur, the other major benefit of the vector tools is that you *don't actually have to draw anything*. If, like me, your illustration skills stopped developing in the third grade, Toon Boom has you covered. You can import any type of graphic you want, then vectorize it for easy manipulation. Heck, who needs talent? I can't draw people, so I could instead take digital photos of people in various positions, then scan them in and vectorize them. I could then place these images in the Exposure Sheet and select the one that is closest to the position I want to animate. Some alterations with the vector tools, and I've got my scene. Done. This, of course, would probably take much longer than just drawing the characters, but for some of us, it's the only option.

And yes, individual animations can be played back in real time to make sure they're behaving as they should. If something looks wrong--the motion is too jerky, for example--it's very easy to alter or add/delete cells.



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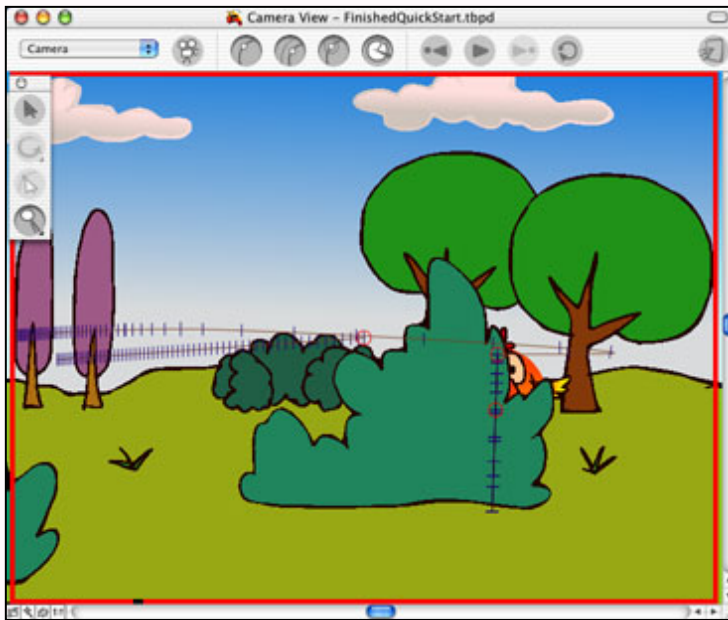
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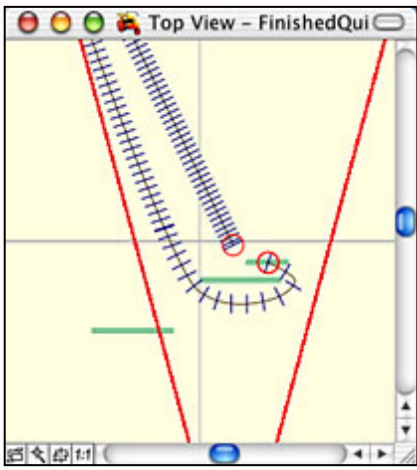
Now, where Toon Boom saves time for amateur and professional alike is in the painting phase. The palettes here are wonderful in that you can create and identify multiple color groups, which can then be easily adjusted across the board. Say, for instance, you've set up all the colors in a room in one palette. The colors represent daytime lighting, though, and you need to alter them for a night scene with moonlight shining through a window. With Toon Boom, you need only adjust the setting in the palette and it's reflected across all the colors which can then be applied to the animation. Or, suppose you decide halfway through the project that you want a tree to be a different shade of green. Change the swatch once and it can update all of your drawings automatically.

Toon Boom also supports transparencies and gradations to add more depth to your animation, and, when version 2 is released, you'll be able to apply bitmap images to get some good texture. Again, I ask you, who needs talent?

Of course, even your web animations have sound these days, so Toon Boom equips you with the tools necessary to add audio and even sync it with lip movement. I mean, unless you're doing 70s retro cartoons or badly translated anime, it's important to make sure your characters look like they're saying what they're saying.

Toon Boom allows you to import audio and edit the tracks once in Toon Boom. The editing features here aren't as nice those in programs such as Deck or Peak, so for *really* good results, you'll first want to prep your audio in another program before bringing it into Toon Boom.

Where the audio tools really shine, however, is in lip syncing. Now, I've never had to do this by hand, so I have no idea what that process normally entails. Here, Toon Boom analyzes the audio clips and automatically generates a "mouth chart". This chart comprises eight cells of the mouth in various configurations you can use as a guide when animating lip movement. Coming soon in v2 of Toon Boom, mouth drawings will be able to be automatically mapped to the lip chart Toon Boom Studio generates from a voice track. From that point, the new sound scrubbing feature will help synchronize the sound to the image.



To me, that's enough. Toon Boom has already taken what would be impossible for me to do on my own and has put it within my grasp, but they're not done. Animation's not complete with a background, and Toon Boom makes it possible for you to create a 3D scene space in which you can take control of camera angle and positioning. It's basically the same as setting up a stage; you've got a matte painting at the very back, and various objects positioned before it. Using a path defined by you, your animated characters can move around these objects--forward and backward, left and right, up and down--followed independently by the camera. Positioning and moving these objects is a simple matter of selecting the object and dragging it to where you want it placed. For an extra degree of realism, you can scale and angle the objects throughout the animation. A timeline offers easy control of the various independent elements, so managing the relationship between the objects--whether they're animated or not--is a simple matter of selecting and dragging.

And finally, Toon Boom offers a good deal of control over how the final product will look and how large it will be. Movies can be exported in either QuickTime or Flash format as stand alone files or to be further used in other programs (such as iMovie). The export command allows you to control various elements that will affect the file size/image quality ratio, so it's easy to target the animation for its delivery medium. Better yet, v2 will allow you to create animation templates to facilitate the reuse and sharing of various elements between scenes, thereby reducing the file size of linked scenes (yes, the scenes can be linked together). Sticking with the tight integration of elements, anything edited in a template will be automatically updated in all scenes linked to that element.

I've done a lot of talking about what Toon Boom Studio v2 will bring to Mac OS X when it's released, but there's no reason to wait for it. Anyone who purchases Toon Boom v1.2.1 between now and the release of v2 will be eligible for a [free upgrade](#) when it's released.

So, there you have it. Given a decent amount of time to practice and to familiarize yourself with the program's workflow, you could very easily produce some really amazing animations with Toon Boom Studio. Just check out their [theater](#) to see what others have already done. You'll notice that most of them are quite short. I'm not sure if I should attribute this to web delivery or to the fact that animation, by nature, takes a long time to produce. With Toon Boom Studio, however, Toon Boom Technologies has greatly eased this process for animation professionals, and it's created a whole new breed of amateurs and hobbyists in the rest of us.

It's just too bad that drawing wasn't already a hobby of mine.

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