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Review: Toon Boom Studio Express

Reviewed By: [Kirk Hiner](#)

Review Computer: 867MHz G4, 640MB RAM, ATI RADEON 8500, Mac OS X v10.2.6

Review Date: August 8, 2003

Product: 2D animation software

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

Minimum Requirements: G3 PowerPC, Mac OS X (Jaguar), 128MB RAM, 100MB available hard disk space, 24-bit color display capable of 1024x768 resolution, 8MB VRAM, WACOM Tablet (recommended)

Mac OS Classic Compatible: No

Retail Price: \$144.00

Availability: Out now

For a long time, I've been a victim of the bait and hook strategy in the computer industry. The first time I can recall getting hooked into buying a full product was when I downloaded the 16 free levels of Castle Wolfenstein 3D clear back in the early to mid-90s. I figured that was all I needed, but, 16 levels later, I found myself shelling out the cash for the rest.

The bait and hook comes in many forms; demos, trial versions, free internet services and the ever-popular "lite" or "express" versions of software. That moniker kind of confuses me, though, as I always took "express" to mean faster. In the computer industry, it pretty much means "dumbed down."

With express versions, though, the price is always "dumbed down" as well. Pay less, get less. It's all fair enough until you decide that less isn't enough, and, hook in mouth, you're suddenly tempted to fork over the cash for the full version.

Such will most likely be the case with Toon Boom Studio Express. At \$144, Toon Boom Studio Express is less than half the price of the full Toon Boom Studio. However, it also gives you less than half the capabilities. So, why do it? We'll get to that in a moment. First, let's take a look at what Toon Boom Studio Express does.

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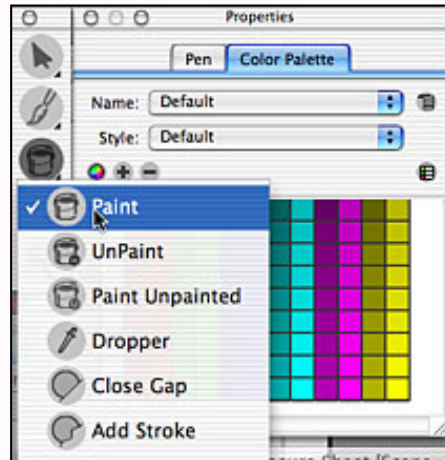
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If you've ever had the desire to create your own cartoons, this is the place to start. Toon Boom Studio Express not only simplifies the task of creating animation, but it also provides some pretty cool tools you really can't find anywhere else for this price. The animations you create here can be exported to Macromedia Flash or iMovie (but not to QuickTime), allowing you add an extra dimension to your web or video projects. Got your own TV show you're editing in iMovie? Think of how cool it would look with an animated introduction. And it's just as easy to get elements into Toon Boom Studio Express as it is to get them out, since the program allows you to import film clips, photos, Illustrator files and Flash elements.

Of course, you can also create your own elements directly in Toon Boom Studio Express with the program's drawing tools. WACOM tablets are supported as well (in fact, Toon Boom Studio Express can be purchased bundled with a couple different [WACOM tablets](#)), and I'll back up Toon Boom Technologies' recommendation that you go this route. Although the drawing tools in Toon Boom Studio Express are pretty good (and the painting tools are fantastic), you'll achieve better and quicker results in Toon Boom Studio Express by drawing your elements directly with a WACOM tablet.



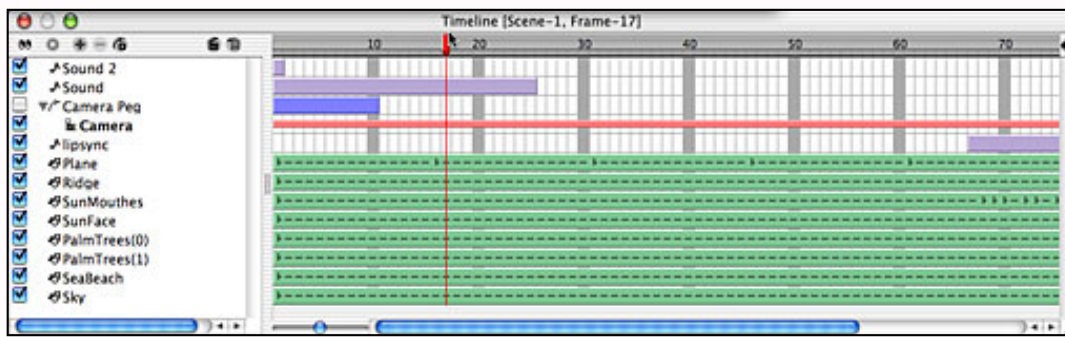
Once you have your elements in place, Toon Boom Studio Express makes it easy to paint and repaint your illustrations. You can easily create color palettes for your scenes, and any change to a swatch in your palette is automatically applied throughout the animation...no need to change each cell.

The image shows a screenshot of the 'Exposure Sheet [Scene-1]' in Toon Boom Studio Express. It displays a table with columns for 'Plane', 'SunFace', 'SunMouthes', and 'lip sync'. The rows represent individual frames from 68 to 90. The 'lip sync' column contains letters (B, A, E, A, A, A, C, C, B, D, B, B, B, C, C, C, X) indicating the lip position for each frame.

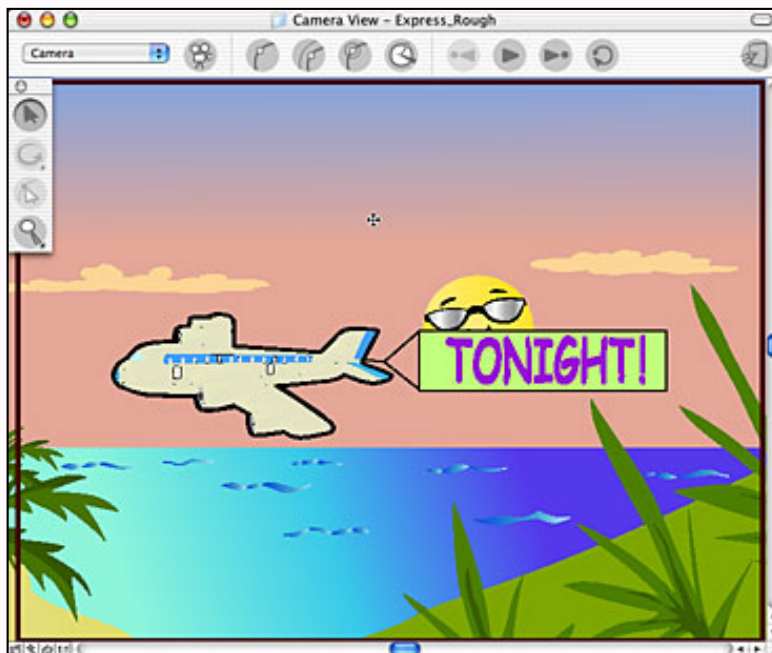
| Frame | Plane | SunFace | SunMouthes | lip sync |
|-------|---------|---------|---------------|----------|
| 68 | | | SunMouthes-10 | B |
| 69 | | | SunMouthes-5 | A |
| 70 | | | SunMouthes-11 | A |
| 71 | | | | E |
| 72 | | | SunMouthes-12 | A |
| 73 | | | SunMouthes-13 | A |
| 74 | | | | A |
| 75 | | | SunMouthes-14 | A |
| 76 | Plane-2 | | | A |
| 77 | | | SunMouthes-13 | C |
| 78 | | | SunMouthes-12 | C |
| 79 | | | | C |
| 80 | | | | C |
| 81 | | | | B |
| 82 | | | SunMouthes-13 | D |
| 83 | | | | B |
| 84 | | | SunMouthes-14 | B |
| 85 | | | SunMouthes-15 | B |
| 86 | | | SunMouthes-14 | B |
| 87 | | | | C |
| 88 | | | | C |
| 89 | | | | C |
| 90 | | | SunMouthes-5 | X |

Perhaps my favorite feature of Toon Boom Studio Express, however, is lip syncing. On my own, quite honestly, I simply wouldn't be able to do this. Here's how easy it is. You import the sound file of someone speaking, then generate the lip chart. Toon Boom Studio Express will compute the sound file and create a lip chart in the sound column. This chart breaks down the sound file into eight possible lip positions, and you then simply need to match up your animation with these eight positions. So, although you still have to be the one to draw the eight lip positions, Toon Boom Studio Express at least takes care of the assignments and timing for you. Quite honestly, it's even easier than I just made it sound. I recommend downloading the trial version and running through a tutorial so you can see what I mean. Be careful not to look at the features of the Windows version, however. They're up to v2, where the lip syncing capabilities are even more robust. Mac users have been waiting for these capabilities at least since I reviewed [Toon Boom Studio](#) back in January, and the wait was frustrating them even then.

Now, it's when we come to scene planning that Toon Boom Studio Express starts to show its limitations. Here, you can layout different scene elements to appear in your animation. You can animated these elements by assigning pegs to them, but the express version of Toon Boom Studio allows you to assign only 2 pegs, whereas the full version allows for unlimited pegs. Likewise, Express gives you only once camera (which you can also move if you make it the second peg), but you can have unlimited cameras in the full version. The same goes for the number of scenes and frames; 1 and 1,000, respectively, in the Toon Boom Studio Express, unlimited and unlimited in Toon Boom Studio. At only 1,000 frames, you're looking at intro or TV commercial length animations at best.



So, why bother with Toon Boom Studio Express? To learn it. Simple as that. Toon Boom Studio is a big, powerful program, and there's an awful lot to take in. Especially for people who haven't worked in animation before, it can prove quite daunting. Toon Boom Studio Express, by eliminating some of the features and a lot of the power, is much easier to grasp. You can download a guided tour and some samples to help you on your way (clip art, too, to help you fill your project), and they do a decent job of getting you started. Because there's not much else that can be done in the express version, you're pretty much ready to go after only an hour or so's worth of practice.



Unfortunately, after only a little while more, you'll also have pushed Toon Boom Studio Express to its limits. As I mentioned before, there's not a lot you can do in here, and the limited capabilities will have you considering selling your guitar or your grandfather's pocket watch to upgrade to the full version. You'll get a discount, of course, but one that balances out to what you would've paid for the full version in the first place. This is fair, but I think the Express version could've been cheaper up front. There's not a lot that can be done for \$144, so I think it would've been more realistic to charge \$99 or even \$79 for Express and then make up the difference in the upgrade to the full version.

Whether you go Express for full, Toon Boom promises that Mac users who buy v1.2 now will get a free upgrade to v2 upon its release, but I've heard no promises, or even an estimate, as to when that will be.

Toon Boom Studio Express is a great program for learning how to create your own animations. Once you do learn, however, you won't be satisfied with this. Understand that if you get into this program at all, you *will* be paying for the upgrade to the full version. If you can afford it now, and if you know that animation is something you want/need to do, you may as well just go ahead and pick up the full version. As a bait and hook program, Toon Boom Studio Express excels. As a lower-cost solution for those who may not need the capabilities of the full version, however, it's a bit too expensive and a bit too "lite."

Applelinks Rating:



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