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ACROBAT VERSION

Toon Boom Storyboard: Is It An Animator's Friend or Fiend?

Michael Hurwicz looks at Toon Boom Storyboard -- software for creating storyboards and animatics for 2D animation, 3D animation or live-action -- to see if it will draw you in or leave you staring blankly at the screen.

November 13, 2006

By Michael Hurwicz

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When Toon Boom Storyboard came out in June 2006, I questioned the value of storyboarding software, for four basic reasons:

1. **Expressive Freedom.** First, the main purpose of a storyboard is to tell a story with a minimum of fuss and bother, and a maximum of verve and expressiveness. Yes, the storyboard artist does break the story into scenes and shots, thereby advancing the visual thinking process toward the final product. But the main thing is to let creativity flow, to give the characters life, expression and feeling. During storyboarding, artists should use the tools they're most comfortable with, the tools they can use without thinking about them. For many artists, that is pen or pencil and paper. For others, it may be Flash, Illustrator or Photoshop. Let the artist work in his or her favored medium for this critical creative phase of animation. This is the place to minimize technology and maximize freedom. It's the wrong place to interpose anything that could come between the artist and his or her inspiration. This would seem to argue against having any software specifically targeted at creating storyboards.
2. **Overview.** An important function of a storyboard is to allow the viewer -- be it an investor, producer, director or animator -- to get a quick visual overview of the whole story. A computer screen is inherently the wrong place to do that, because it can't show you all the drawings at once in one long, uninterrupted sweep, the way you see them on a corkboard. Storyboard artists I questioned confirmed that they were happy with corkboards. They seemed to have little interest in storyboarding software.
3. **Cost.** Even assuming the artist masters the storyboarding software completely, so it becomes second nature, what can storyboarding software offer that is worth \$900 (Toon Boom Storyboard's list price)?



Storyboard offers a tight integration with Toon Boom Solo and Toon Boom Harmony and could be a valuable tool for a geographically dispersed team.

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4. **Efficiency.** Finally, if you use your animation program to create your boards, you'll also create assets, which can be integrated with maximum efficiency into the final project. If you're using Flash to animate, for instance, why not just use Flash to create your storyboard? If you're using a Toon Boom product, like Toon Boom Studio, Toon Boom Solo or Toon Boom Harmony, surely any of these programs is capable of creating storyboard art.

Despite these doubts, I went ahead with testing Toon Boom Storyboard. I liked the user interface. It was easy to get oriented and start creating storyboards. Having used the Toon Boom Studio animation software was a help, since many of the tools (such as drawing tools) and concepts (such as the use of the camera) were similar.

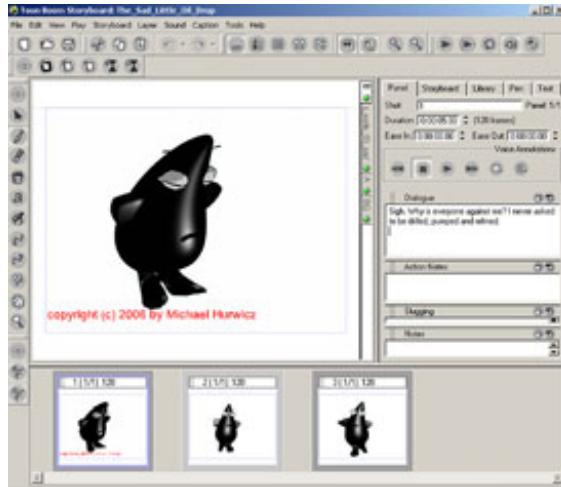
One big difference between Toon Boom Studio and Toon Boom Storyboard is that Storyboard forces you to think in shots and panels. In contrast, Toon Boom Studio allows you, though by no means forces you, to organize your animation into scenes. To put it another way, Toon Boom Storyboard forces you to think like a storyboard artist.

But it goes beyond that. The Storyboard timeline is a mini-storyboard (minus text elements such as dialogue). There is nothing similar in Studio. The Toon Boom Storyboard timeline is automatically divided into discrete shots and panels.

With Storyboard, you can see what your boards are going to look like. Studio just doesn't have that capability. Clearly, this makes Storyboard a better environment for building storyboards.

In addition, Storyboard has:

- A "Panel" tab for entering dialogue, action notes, slugging (timing for the panel), and notes, for the current panel or shot. Only the information associated with this particular panel or shot is visible in this tab.
- A "Storyboard" tab where you can store a script that will be visible from all panels and shots (The first figure above shows the Panel tab.)



The user interface is easy to use in Toon Boom Storyboard. The process of getting oriented and creating storyboards is quick.

All screenshots © Michael Hurwicz.

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Toon Boom Storyboard: Is It An Animator's Friend or Fiend?

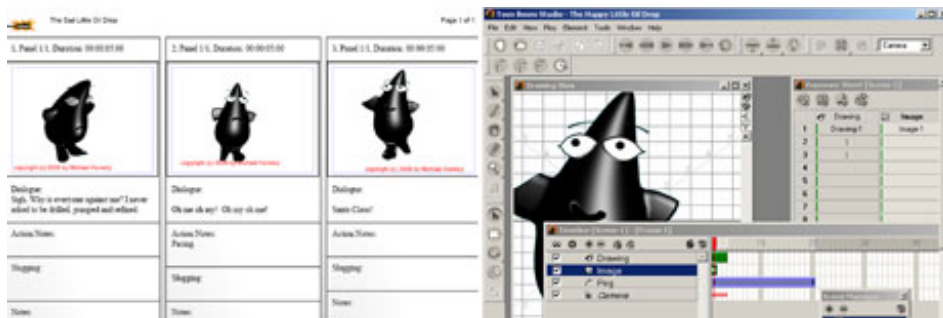
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When you export as a PDF for printing, the Panel tab information is used to construct the storyboard, as shown in the figure below.

You can also render an animatic (essentially an animated storyboard) as a QuickTime or Flash file or as a Targa sequence. The animatic contains only the graphics, not the information in the Panel tab. QuickTime and Flash versions can also contain audio.

As for expressive freedom, you can (and I suspect most Storyboard users will) create your art outside Storyboard and import it.



One big difference between Toon Boom Storyboard (left) and Toon Boom Studio is that Storyboard forces you to think like a storyboard artist.

That can also address the issue of creating assets. It's perfectly viable to create your art in Flash, import it into Storyboard to make the boards and use the same art in Flash as the basis for the final product.

Storyboard has a much tighter integration with Toon Boom Solo and Toon Boom Harmony. All of these products organize their assets in libraries, and all of them can share libraries. For example, create your assets in Toon Boom Solo and bring them into Storyboard. Or vice versa. Unfortunately, I only have Toon Boom Studio, which cannot share libraries with Storyboard. So I wasn't able to test this feature.

As I tested Storyboard, my doubts moderated somewhat, but they didn't entirely evaporate. Basically, I got to the point where I thought I could recommend Storyboard if it cost a couple of hundred dollars, but still didn't see why someone would pay \$900 for it.

So, I asked Toon Boom to refer me to a customer. They referred me to Kat Caverly, technical director at No Evil Prods. in New York City. As a result of my conversation with Kat, a big light bulb went off: Corkboards are great, but what do you do if you're in New York and your writers, directors and animators are scattered around the globe? Caverly told me that, for connecting with her team over the Internet, Storyboard fits in nicely with

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their Toon Boom Solo and Harmony-based pipeline.

"It's exciting for me to be connecting to directors and writers using Storyboard," says Caverly. "It gives us a breakdown of the script, a common format. And it connects to our Harmony and Solo pipelines directly."

This makes a lot of sense to me. If you're going to be working on your storyboards over the Internet, the corkboard-centric approach is out, and a more computer-centric approach starts to make sense. At that point, most of my objections disappear. Though I think Storyboard will be overkill (or simply "overspend") for a one-person shop and for many small, centralized operations, I can see that it could be a valuable tool for a geographically dispersed team, keeping everybody on the same page (or panel) and creating a common framework in which to work. Geographically dispersed teams are more the rule than the exception these days. So I think Storyboard could find wide applicability.

Pros

- Mature user interface and robust code base adapted from other Toon Boom products
- Tight integration with Toon Boom Harmony and Solo
- Forces you to think and view in panels and shots
- Printout or view on the computer
- Also creates animatics with audio

Cons

- Cost
- Hard to get an overview at a glance on the computer

Bottom Line

As a product, Storyboard is excellent. I think it will be most appreciated by geographically dispersed teams, especially if they're using Toon Boom Harmony and/or Solo.

Michael Hurwicz has been using and writing about computer animation software since 1999. He is the author of Using Macromedia Flash MX, Using Macromedia Studio MX and Using Macromedia Studio 8, all published by Que. He is also creates online tutorials on Flash and other animation and graphics applications for VTC.

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