Microware Review

The MacroMind Director

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The MacroMind Director is a software package designed to turn the Macintosh into a sophisticated multimedia production studio. While other computer graphics packages do a very credible job of assisting the user to create and present computer generated slides or overhead transparencies, few tools allow the user to combine the attributes of sound, animation and graphics in one document. The MacroMind Director is one presentation authoring package that does have this kind of flexibility. It can be used to create presentations that range in complexity from the production of a simple black and white title slide to a full color, animated motion picture production with an accompanying sound track.

System Requirements

The package, as it arrives from the manufacturer, includes the program, a help file, desk accessories, a guided tour of the program's features, tutorial files, clip animation files, sound files, and reference manuals. For black and white presentations, the program requires at least 1 megabyte of memory in a Macintosh Plus, SE or II and a hard disk drive. A minimum of 2 megabytes of memory is required to work in color. Installing the program, its utilities and the demo files will take up about seven meg. of space on the hard disk. The program is available from MacroMind, Inc. 410 Townsend St., Suite 408, San Francisco, CA 94107. The retail cost is approximately $695.00 Canadian.

Program Features

The main program has been segmented-into two modules. The movie creation module is called the "studio". The program presentation module is called the "overview". In the studio, which is analogous to a motion picture animation studio, eight windows have been dedicated to the creation of animated images, one VCR-like window controls the movie playback and one window is available to the author to add comments or production notes. The

overview, which is analogous to a production script, details the timing and assembly of graphic images, text, movie clips, visual transitions, and sounds that will be used to build the presentation.

In the studio module, the "paint" window can be used to draw or edit any bitmapped image that will appear in any frame of the movie. The "tool" window has tools for creating QuickDraw text and graphics directly on the stage. The "stage" is the window that displays the presentation much like the frames of a motion picture film are displayed on a screen. The "cast" window is actually a frame by frame database of the presentation's graphics, sounds and colors. When played in rapid succession, the frames create the illusion of watching an animated movie. In addition to controlling the timing of special effects like transitions, sounds and color palettes, the "score" window is used to keep track of the position of each castmember on the stage, in each frame of the movie 4 The "palette" window determines which of the seven types of color palettes (e.g., NTSC) that will be used to use to color the castmembers present on the stage. The "text" window is used to write, store, and edit text that is to be used in the presentation. Text can either be displayed on the stage, or heard as synthesized Macintalk speech. The "tweak" window facilitates the precise positioning and movement of any castmember on the stage.

On the control side of the studio, the "panel" window is analogous to a VCR control panel. A movie may be played, stopped, rewound or stepped forward and backward. The "comment" window is used to record staging or acting directions, detail storyboard scripts, or preserve the speaker's notes. When storyboards, transparencies, or handouts are printed, they may include pictures of selected frames of the movie along with the comments that have been written in the comments window.

The second major module is the overview. Overview displays all the documents that have been created in the studio or with other applications programs and the special effects that have been employed in the presentation. For example, still images maybe imported from a variety of paint, draw, or glue programs and animated motion sequences may be imported from VideoWorks or earlier versions of the MacroMind Director.

Interactivity

MacroMind Director is the successor to VideoWorks Interactive. Like VideoWorks Interactive, there are two basic tasks that have to be completed when creating interactive presentations. First, the animation sequences need to be developed, and second, controls need to be provided to the user so that the user can select the appropriate response to the activity or activities presented on the screen. The animation sequences are created in the studio and the control functions are provided by scripts written in an authoring language called Lingo. Lingo scripts in MacroMind presentations are are similar to HyperText scripts in HyperCard stacks. Frame scripts are activated automatically when the frame containing the script is displayed on the screen. Frame scripts are different from sprite scripts. A sprite may be any graphic that

appears on the screen. A sprite script is activated when the user clicks on any sprite that has a sprite script attached to it.

Documentation

Two manuals, one for the overview and one for the studio and an interactivity guide are included in the package. Each manual has a tutorial section, a reference section, and a section containing examples of how to use each of the features of the program. The tutorials are logical, well-organized and well written. The inclusion of sample files on an accompanying tutorial disk helps to reduce the time between creating the presentation and viewing the actual presentation as it will actually appear on the computer's screen. The usage section gives explicit, step by step instructions on how to make each feature of the program function. The reference section describes the menus and windows that are found in each module of the program. In total, there is almost 1000 pages of documentation.

CONCLUSIONS

With one computer and one piece of software, the production of still graphics, animated motion pictures, and sound clips can be achieved. In the past, this kind of production would have required the use of a 35mm. slide camera, a motion picture camera, an audio-tape recorder and extensive editing facilities. Similarly, the hardware required to display a multi-media presentation would be equally complex. Today, for black and white presentations, a computer driven liquid crystal display tablet and an overhead projector has replace much of the complex equipment previously required. For color presentations, the computer may be attached to any standard type of video projector.

The MacroMind manual indicates that the user does not have to be a programmer in order to use the Lingo language to create interactive presentations. This is true for the creation of screen displays and sound clips, but to create user involvement in the sense of creating interactivity, a rudimentary knowledge of programming would be a definite asset. For example, having the control of a screen display based on the user making "if-then" types of decisions, the assignment of user inputs to variables and the use of built in functions can all be very confusing to an author who does not have some background in programming. Lingo, like HyperTalk in HyperCard stacks, is a programming language. And, while they are both more humane than some of their predecessors, for an author to really take advantage of the power of these programs, a knowledge of the basic programming concepts is essential.

MacroMind Director is representative of the growing trend toward merging traditional forms of media into a singular, electron-based form. It capitalizes on what we already know about the production of still pictures, motion pictures and soundtracks. It takes advantage of the metaphor of theater and the terminology associated with motion picture animation to aid the author in

the design and creation of the presentation. And, it uses current technology to simplify the process of editing and revising a presentation. However, there is a price to be paid. The price is the size of the files that can be generated. Sound files in particular can become quite large and make the use of a hard drive equipped computer essential for presentation playback. Assuming that this minor limitation can be overcome by good planning, the MacroMind Director is indeed a valuable addition to any presenter's tool box. It will repay the user handsomely for any time spent in learning about the capabilities of this program and how to use them effectively.

REVIEWER

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