Mediaware Review

Creating Desktop Presentations with Astound

L F. (Len) Proctor, Editor

System Information and Requirements

Astound ™
Gold disk Inc
P.O. Box 789, Streetsville
Mississauga, Ontario. Canada. L5M 2C2
Customer Service (416) 602-4000
Tech Support Phone: (416) 602-0395
Tech Support Fax: (416) 602-0393

System Requirements:

- Macintosh Plus or later, 68020 or faster recommended
- 2 MB minimum but 4 MB of RAM memory or more is recommended)
- At least 40MB hard disk drive (although larger drives are recommended)
- System 6.0.8 , but system 7 or later recommended
- QuickTime™, version 1.5 or later

Program Description

Astound is a desktop presentation production package. With this software, the user can prepare transparencies, presenter notes and attendee handouts. The tools available for this purpose include a full text editor, spelling checker, drawing tools, a graphing utility, slide sorter and an outliner. Graphics created with other applications and stored as PICT, TIFF, and EPS files can be imported and incorporated into any presentation. Similarly, QuickTime clips, Gold Disk's own animation sequences, AIF and SND sound files, can be placed anywhere in the slides produced by this program. With the appropriate file management and the runtime player programs included in this package, presentations created on a Macintosh platform can be displayed on a MS-DOS platform but not revised .

Program Installation

The installation instructions are brief and to the point. To get started, insert Disk 1 of Astound program into the floppy disk drive, double-click on the Astound Installation icon, click on the startup screen, approve the hard drive selected for installation and enter your name on the registration card. After inserting and removing nine high density floppy disks at appropriate screen prompts, installation will be complete. The Astound folder placed on the hard drive now contains the main program, a dictionary, Windows and Macintosh players, and a copious number of templates, sound files, clip-art files, fonts, backgrounds, animations and tutorial support files. In total, there are over 700 files that require about 26 MB of storage space on the hard drive.

Basic Functions

The outliner, one of the most powerful and often overlooked features of any presentation program, is extremely useful because of the ease with which a presenter can organize and reorganize the main points of the presentation. In Astound any text that is entered into the outliner appears on the transparencies as titles or bulleted points. Once entered, the text can be edited, formatted and revised for display purposes without ever having to leave the Outline View mode.

Slides can be created with or without the use of background templates. Templates (master slides) are provided for 9" black & white screens, 13" color screens, 35mm slides, overheads and powerbooks. The use of a master background is highly recommended because of what it adds to the cohesiveness and unity of any presentation. A standard set of graphics tools for drawing and filling squares, circles and odd shaped figures is also part of the main package. Editing clip-art or other forms of graphics however, still has to be done outside Astound program. However, a good library of clip-art images has been provided to assist the presenter in illustrating the topic being presented. If graphs and charts are required, data can be entered directly into the data sheet or imported from Excel or Lotus 1-2-3 compatible spreadsheets

A battery of special effects has also been provided to help add variety and vary the pace of the presentation. For example, bulleted text items can be dissolved or "flown" onto the screen, one at a time, until the entire screen has been built up to the desired level. Special transition effects such as wipes or fades can also be invoked when changing from transparency to transparency.

The inclusion of animation and multimedia capabilities is new. The animation feature uses actors. By definition, an actor, is really a series of still pictures, which when presented in rapid succession, creates the illusion of motion on the screen i.e.. animation. Actors may be inanimate objects such as arrows or animate objects such as people who "walk" about on the screen and point to captions or objects in the screen in order to draw the viewers' attention to their specific details. Graphs and charts may also be animated as they are displayed on the screen. Assuming the sound has already been digitized, adding sound clips to the slide is as simple as clicking on the add sound icon,

selectingthesound file to be used and clicking on the "add sound"button. Then, when the slide first appears on the screen, the sound file will be activated and the sound will be played back. Finally, any object on the screen or sound file associated with the screen can be controlled by interactive buttons. Buttons may also be used to help the presenter navigate through the presentation.

To print the handouts, presenter notes and content outlines is a matter of calling up the print function, and select the appropriate icon. For handouts the user is offered a choice of printing 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 thumbnails per page. Space for attendee notes can be made. Presenter notes also contain a miniature of the slide and space for the notes on the bottom half of the page. Outlines may be printed in either main heading form or main headings complete with all sub-headings. The presentation can also be printed to 35mm slides if the equipment is available. If it is not, the files may be sent to a jobber, printed, and returned to the user as 2x2 projection transparencies. This is a nice feature both for backup purposes or for when presentations are given where the presenter is not sure that a computer LCD tablet or other projection device will be available.

Documentation

The Astound documentation is well laid out and easy to follow. For those users who don't want to read the entire main manual, there is a quick and easy "Getting Started" tutorial which quickly orients the user to the most often used features of the program. Appropriate disk files have also been included in the tutorial so that if something doesn't work right the first time, the user is not frustrated by having to complete one section accurately before being able to proceed to the next lesson. While the table of contents does not include page numbers for chapters, the index makes up for this deficiency by using common terminology and direct reference to page numbers. Both manuals are richly illustrated with screen displays to help the novice user remain oriented within the program.

While the main user's guide and the getting started manual focus on the technical or operational aspects of creating slides, a slim 8 page guide on creating dynamic presentations has also been included with the documentation. It is full of suggestions for selecting content, screen layout, emphasis techniques and color selection. Novice users who take advantage of these production recommendations will avoid many of the common, visual pitfalls often associated with the use of transparency display devices.

Observations and Recommendations

This program is large (1.8 meg) powerful, and versatile. Users can create professional looking presentations quickly and easily. Its import capabilities allow data from spreadsheets, QuickTime clips, TIFF and PICT graphics and AIF and SND sound files to be incorporated into the presentation. Slides from Astound files can also be exported as PICT files and QuickTime clips. Animation and interactive capabilities have been added to an already fine set of text editing and drawing tools. Over time the existing libraries (20 meg) of sound

files, clip art and animations can be enhanced by purchasing commercially available products or producing locally prepared resources.

If there is one drawback to using this program, it is speed. Even with the heap size set to 10 meg and running on an Quadra 840AV Mac, it takes a significant amount of time for complex slides to be displayed and to change. With slower machines that have less memory, this apparent lack of speed could be a limiting factor. To maximize performance, the documentation suggests that users should limit themselves to a few objects per slide, keep object transitions consistent, and keep object exit animations to a minimum. Speed of operation, on the other hand, has be be balanced against versatility and ease of use. Given a choice between a fast, user hostile environment and a slower, user friendly environment, user friendliness would win out over operational speed. As newer, faster machines such as the PowerPC come to market, concern for operational speed will become less and less.

The ability to convert Microsoft PowerPoint and Aldus Persuasion files to Astound files is valuable in the sense that much of the investment made in creating the original presentations can be recaptured. It only takes about 2 minutes to convert ten PowerPoint slides to Astound slides. However, in doing so, only the text and graphics transfer. Transitions and special effects in the PowerPoint presentation are lost. While not yet tested, the cross platform capabilities of being able to author Astound presentations on the Mac and present on MS-DOS equipment is intriguing. PowerPoint has this option and seems to go both ways quite seemlessly.

Given the wide variety of equipment found in most educational institutions, software developers should be encouraged to continue building this kind of capability into all programs. Rapid changes in hardware and operating systems make cross platform and upward compatibility of programs like Astound a valuable asset. On the surface hardware and software costs may seem to be expensive, but when considered on a more long term view, these costs are often small when compared to the investment of time and labor made by the presenter to create any format of presentation support media. Tools like Astound can do much to facilitate the organization, production and presentation of high quality instruction.

EDITOR

L. F. (Len) Proctor is Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK S7N OWO