having to manually adjust message text for each item gives plenty of opportunity to speculate on the question "What in the world were they thinking about when they wrote this program?" For having done so many things right with FirstClass, the creators certainly blew it on this point. The next generation of client software will supposedly rectify this oversight, according to SoftArc.

The lack of integration of FirstClass with the World-Wide Web is another shortcoming that one hopes will be rectified sooner rather than later.

Finally, the documentation that accompanies FirstClass is not all that good. It certainly isn't the worst I've seen, but it would be helped immensely by including a few examples of how certain features could be usefully applied, particularly in the area of creating and managing conferences. The current documentation is also too business-oriented to be of much use to educators; perhaps a companion volume of documentation could be developed for educational applications.

Overall, however, FirstClass is several steps ahead of competitors aimed at the educational conferencing market. Given the advantages listed above, as well as the modular licensing scheme and favourable educational discounts, FirstClass is well worth serious consideration if you anticipate becoming involved in computer conferencing for education.

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mPOWER is available from Mindscape Inc., Post Office Box 54984, Santa Clara, CA 95056-0984

Reviewed by L.F. (Len) Proctor

Recommended System Requirements:
Mac with 68040, 8MB RAM, System 7
At least 10 MB hard disk drive CD-ROM drive optional.
640 x 480 color monitor.
AV Macintosh or appropriate digitizing card.

Software Description

mPower is a slide show package that features user friendly peripheral device control, multimedia integration and interactivity similar that found in several current CBI authoring tools. Assuming you have an A/V Macintosh or a Mac with a suitable digitizing card, still pictures and audio or video clips can be created without the help of additional editors. Audio and video segments can also be called from com-
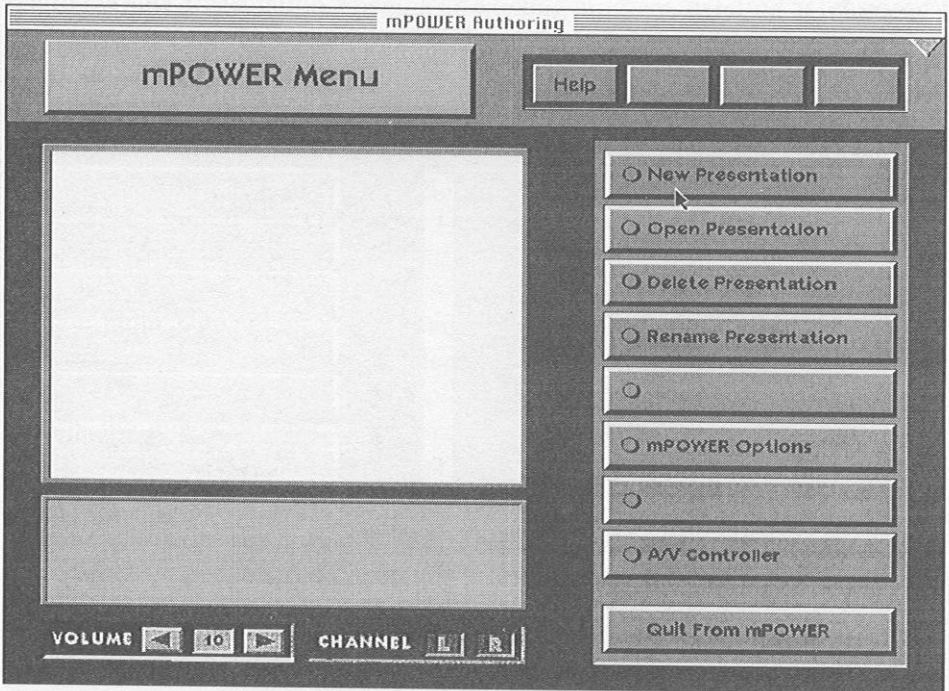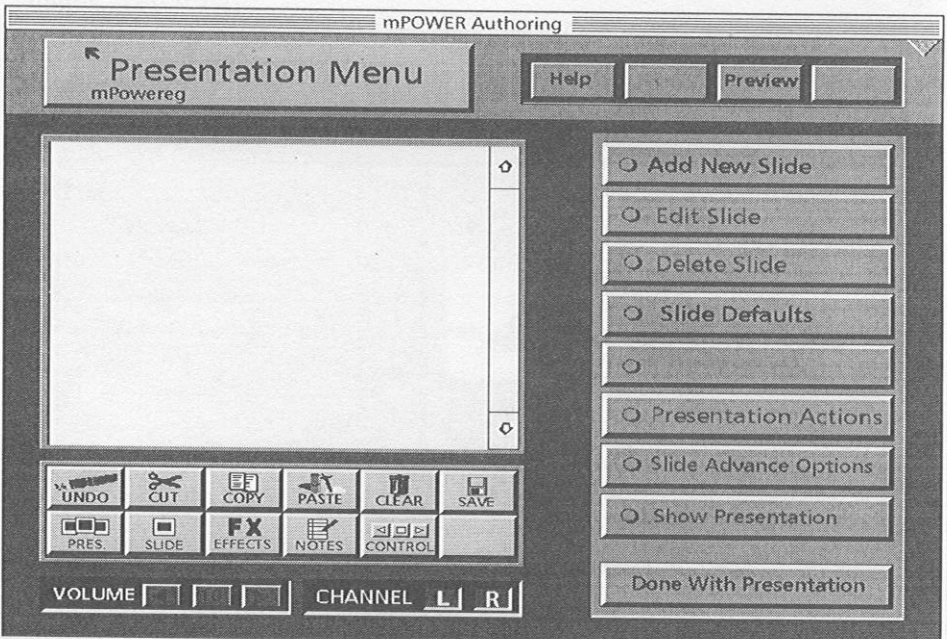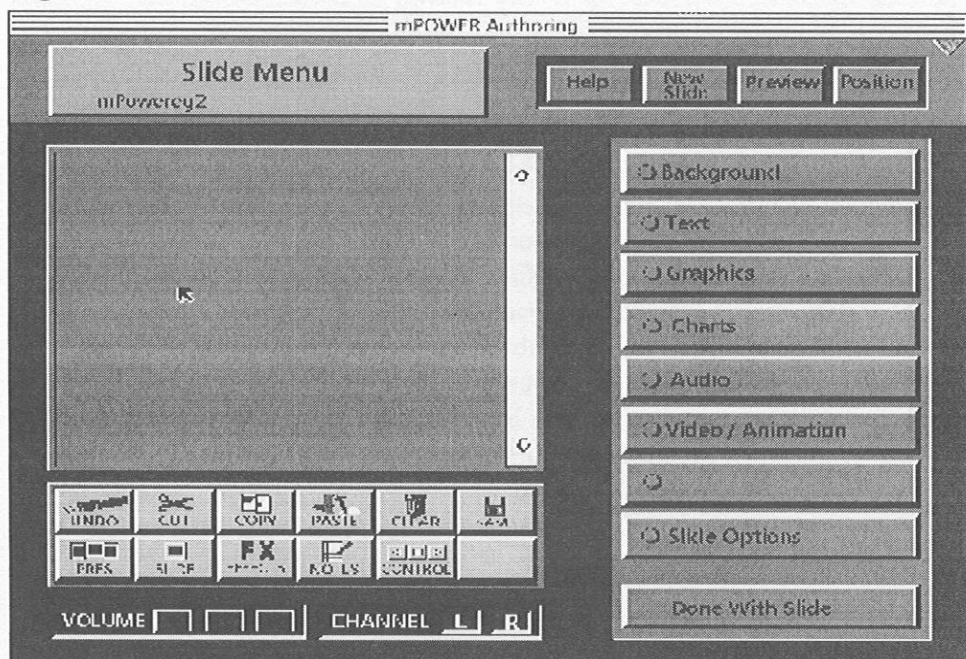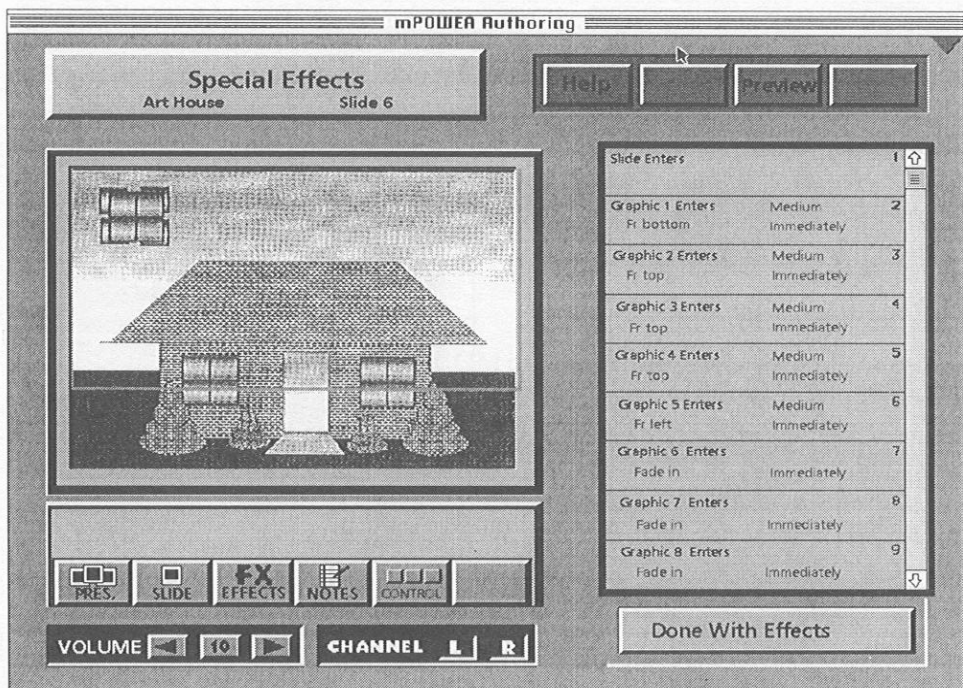
Figure 1:

Figure 2:

Figure 3:

Figure 4:

After booting up the program, the opening menu (Figure 1) offers the option of creating, a new presentation, opening an existing program, deleting or renaming a previous program, selecting mPower options or entering the A/V controller. This is typical of the user interface for accessing all capabilities of the program. Clicking on the new presentation button brings up the second main menu (Figure 2) for creating the presentation and the function buttons. At this point, the author selects default options for the background for the slide, the transition to the next slide and how graphics loading will take place. These options will remain in effect until customized for individual slides. Clicking on the new slide button brings up the third main menu (Figure 3). This is where most of the action happens. Text is placed in the slide, along with graphics, sound, animation or charts. The order in which these are to appear on the screen is controlled by a queue. Editing the order in which the objects appear on the screen is as simple as click, hold and drag the object to a new place in the queue (Figure 4). At any point, the authors can elect to show the presentation and observe the results of their creative efforts. If the order in which slides appear on the screen needs to be changed click on where the slide is in the presentation, hold and drag it to where its new location.

The control mode is equally simple to use. For example, to capture a video clip from a video disc, select the add new video option from the slide creation menu, specify starting and ending frames, then create a quicktime movie and place it in the desired location on the slide. Other media formats can be captured and similarly imported into the presentation. Help files are available at appropriate points in the program. Special features like presenter notes and printing to video are also available in mPower.

Documentation

The documentation accompanying the software is just over 100 pages in length Chapter I outlines basic system requirements, installation instructions for the program and offers a quick tour of the software. Chapters 2 & 3 offer guidance on how to create slides for presentations. Chapter 4 addresses the question of how to customize backgrounds, graphics, charts and audio/video objects. Animation and how to make the presentation interactive is also covered in this chapter. Chapters 5 & 6 are devoted to using advanced features like video compression and the AN controller.

Critique and Recommendations

mPower was installed and tested on a PowerBook 180. and PowerMac 8500. In each case, the installation instructions were accurate and installation of the software with the installer program was uneventful.

While the software was usable on the PB 180, editing or showing a presentation of any size was painfully slow. Creating the same presentation on the PowerMac confirmed the need for taking advantage of all of the computer's available processing power. Large amounts of RAM memory and disk storage space are essential to

the reducing frustration when using of this software. Even when audio, video and picture files are compressed, modest presentations will quickly reach 15 to 20 Mb. in size. Simplicity, user friendliness and auto configuration for many types of hardware variations have all contributed to the size and speed of presentations created with this software.

The apparent simplicity and user friendliness of this software often mask its complexity. For example, all of the function buttons are presented at appropriate times during the editing process but the user is still left with the "clear if known" feeling. "Which one to start with" is still left to experience and user intuition.

The documentation reflects a similar approach. While each function of the software is described in a logical and systematic manner, there is an expectation that the user will have a fairly high level of computer literacy. The reference book approach to presenting the facts about a function frequently makes the explanation of the function hard to follow. Novice users, which are a major target group for this program, are likely to feel the need for a more detailed description. Parsimony, in this case, may have been misplaced.

The mPower tutorial on the CD is another case in point. It is not a tutorial, but rather a linear explanation of button functions littered with technical terms like eps and AIFF. Trial and error experimentation with the program is often just as fruitful as reading the documentation or watching the "tutorial".

Hardware and documentation concerns aside, mPower is an excellent multi-media presentation creation tool. The ease with which graphics, video and sound may be integrated into a slide or a series of slides in a "what you see is what you get" manner makes the program a joy to use. mPower's authors have made a concerted effort to help the user cope with hardware limitations and variation, and cross platform presentation needs. Several good multimedia sample files have been included on the CD for user experimentation and use in presentation creation. I look forward to future versions which hopefully will continue to minimize user concern with technical detail and allow them to focus on the more creative aspects of multimedia presentations.

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