

A hands-on review of Toon Boom Animate Pro, a program for creating cartoons and animations

SCORE CARD

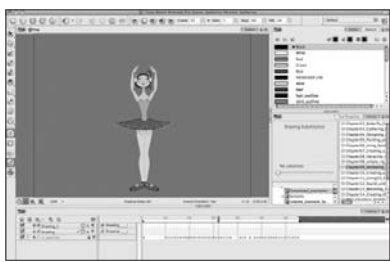
- EFFECTIVENESS **A+**
- INTERFACE **A**
- USABILITY **A+**
- INSTALLATION **A**
- OVERALL **A**

WEB SITE

www.toonboom.com

PRICE

Animate Pro: \$1,999.99  
 Animate: \$699.99



A ballerina created from a template in Animate Pro. The ballerina has a complete kinematics hierarchy that allows the character to be moved and repositioned quickly and easily. JOSHUA PHILIPP/THE EPOCH TIMES



A 3-D set created using Animate Pro from Toon Boom. The multi-plane feature in Animate Pro allows users to create a better sense of depth in their animations. JOSHUA PHILIPP/THE EPOCH TIMES

# TECH REVIEW

## MAKING ANIMATED CARTOONS WITH TOON BOOM ANIMATE PRO

By JOSHUA PHILIPP  
 Epoch Times Staff

I haven't wanted to make cartoons since I was a kid, but after spending a couple weeks with Animate Pro from Toon Boom, I'm inspired to try it again.

As the name suggests, Toon Boom specializes in software for making cartoons and animations. The company has a fairly large range of products targeting everyone from hobbyists to professionals, and from Internet-based cartoonists to kids. Disney, Cartoon Network, and The Simpsons cartoon series are among the more popular names that use Toon Boom's software.

Animate Pro is the professional version of Animate—Toon Boom's flagship product. This review is primarily on Animate Pro, but will touch on Animate since it shares many of the same features.

**A CARTOONIST'S BEST FRIEND**

Each time Animate Pro is opened, a welcome screen comes up. From there, users can choose from different ongoing projects, create new projects, or open a set of tutorials. There are also links to a few of Toon Boom's online tools, including a job finder where animators can post resumes and employers can post positions for animation jobs.

After opening a project, I was taken to Animate Pro's main workspace. The working area is much simpler than similar programs such as Flash. I found it to be very intuitive and easy to figure out.

Creating animations in the program proves just as easy. Simply press the "Animate" button to let the application know you are creating the animation for a character. Similar to Adobe Flash CS4, setting things in motion is as simple as drawing an image, making alterations to it further down a timeline, and clicking a couple of buttons. Then just sit back and watch as Animate fills in the gaps.

**KEEPING IT ORIGINAL**

After spending some time with Animate, I discovered a few features that I have never come across in a similar program—features that make a huge difference in the animation process.

Lip-Sync automatically generates a character's mouth movement when you import a sound file into Animate Pro. Basically, it examines the sound image and determines which movement a mouth should make at each part of the sound. The user can then draw similar mouth positions, link them, and instantly create advanced lip-syncing for a character.

Another very cool feature is multi-plane—a signature feature of Toon Boom. It allows



A vector samurai drawn in Animate Pro from Toon Boom. The ability to use the Onionskin feature in Animate Pro makes it easy to trace an image to create a character or object in vector. JOSHUA PHILIPP/THE EPOCH TIMES

the user to create a 3-D set using 2-D images. A camera can then pan through the set, creating a better sense of depth. For example, it brings realism to a city scene by having buildings in the foreground move by quickly while buildings in the back move more slowly as a character walks through.

Animate's color selector is one of the best I've come across. The user is able to create a set of colors (swatches) for each character or object in a project. The color swatch will then be linked to the object. If a change is made to a color, all items currently painted with it change accordingly. The color swatches can also be cloned and altered so that characters can be quickly re-colored for different times of the day or different lighting.

Animate also has a good number of minor features that help the process, such as advanced kinematics for making a character with freely-movable parts, the ability to smooth out an animation with the "easing" function, and many others.

**ANIMATE PRO OR FLASH CS4**

Being a regular user of Flash CS4, I've known about Animate Pro for a good while but had never used it until this review. I found Animate to be much easier to use than Flash and much less complicated.

Toon Boom also provides an in-depth set

Animate can be compared to Flash, only it is tailored specially for animators.

of free video tutorials and PDF guides that go over just about every feature the application has to offer. Since they are also ordered in a somewhat linear manner, a new user could start from the top and learn how to use Animate from the inside-out.

Animate can be compared to Flash, only it is tailored specially for animators. Flash still beats Animate when it comes to creating Web sites and games, since Animate isn't made for ActionScript coding. Yet in all areas related to animation, Animate prevails.

Flash and Animate do share some common traits, such as creating keyframes to animate an image. However, there are many features in Animate that cannot be found in Flash, such as the ability to rotate the canvas, 3-D multi-plane camera use, forward kinematics, advanced morphing, and so on.

Just one example of this can be found when trying to make a change to an animation midway through a sequence.

In Flash, if an animator makes a change to an object during an animation, that change affects the entire animation. If you swap out a symbol in the middle of an animation, it will also insert it for the entire animation.

For character animators this is a problem, since these two features are needed for making the character move properly and to create a sense of depth. Without these features, the

character lacks full movement and has a robotic look. ActionScript can be used to do this, but for animators that don't know code, this is not possible.

Animate does allow for this, however, and even takes it a few steps further. Animate gives free reign over the animation, and objects can be morphed, swapped, altered, and changed at any point without affecting the rest of the animation.

Animate can also export files in FLV, SWF, MOV, and image sequence formats, which means that it is compatible with Flash, and can still be used to create SWF files to be used on Web sites.

**GOING PRO**

Animate and Animate Pro share quite a bit in common, but there is a significant price gap between the two programs. For most users Animate will have just about everything you'll need. For professionals, however, there are some really good features that can only be found in Animate Pro.

The most useful, in my opinion, is the compositing feature. Previously, I had only seen this feature available in 3-D animation and rendering software. It allows a user to connect different parts of an image or sequence using small boxes connected by lines.

The end result is much better rigged characters, and it can be done fairly quickly and easily. By creating a hierarchy of control among various moving parts and their relationship to one another, the feature ensures that if one part is moved, the part below will move along with it.

From within the compositing window, much more can be done, such as creating special effects, and so on.

There are also a handful of other features and enhancements that are only in Animate Pro.

**IN A NUTSHELL**

For anyone interested in animation or creating cartoons—whether for fun or for a career—Animate Pro is a great tool to have.

If you are trying to decide between Animate and Flash, think of it like this: if you want to make games and Web sites, go with Flash CS4. If you want to make animations, go with Animate Pro.

My only complaint about Animate Pro is the steep price. Toon Boom offers a free version of it on their Web site, but it is more for learning purposes since it will put a watermark on anything created.

For users on a tight budget, I'd recommend Animate which includes a good number of the features in Animate Pro and is close to the same price as Adobe Flash CS4 Professional.

## Holiday Buyer's Guide

Your guide to e-readers, cell phones, and MP3 players

**MP3 Players**

The Apple iPod Touch is still the best MP3 player on the market, yet there is some rising competition. The iPod Touch has a plethora of great apps, games, and tools that it can download directly.

For users who are more into movies, the Zune HD is the better choice and has features including movie rentals and subscription music. Both MP3 players are close in price. For users on a budget, however, the recommended MP3 player is the SanDisk Sansa Clip+.

- IPOD TOUCH**  
 Price  
 \$278.99  
 Web site  
 www.apple.com
- ZUNE HD**  
 Price  
 \$289  
 Web site  
 www.zune.net
- SANDISK SANSA CLIP+**  
 Price  
 \$39.99  
 Web site  
 www.sandisk.com

**e-Readers**

So here's the deal: The Nook from Barnes & Noble is on backorder until Jan. 4 and it is still uncertain if the Sony Reader Daily Edition will be available for the holidays.

If you want to risk it, you can hold out for the Sony which is the best bet among e-readers and can be pre-ordered from Sony's Web site. Next in line would be the Nook. But, if you want something wrapped under a tree, go with the Kindle—which is still very good.

- THE SONY READER DAILY EDITION**  
 Price  
 \$399.99  
 Web site  
 www.sonystyle.com
- THE NOOK**  
 Price  
 \$259  
 Web site  
 www.barnesandnoble.com
- THE KINDLE**  
 Price  
 \$259  
 Web site  
 www.amazon.com

**Cell Phones**

The once undisputed Apple iPhone now shares the ring with a rather tough competitor—Android. The iPhone 3GS and the iPhone 3G are still ahead of the game and are still the best bets for holiday shoppers.

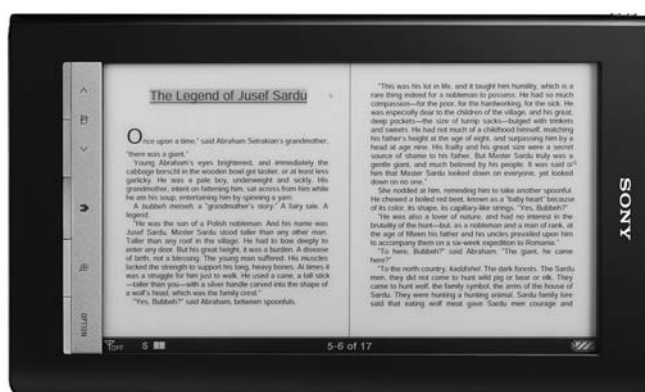
Still, some users have complained about the iPhone's additional service fees, which make Android a bit more attractive. On that note, the recommended Android-based phones are the HTC Droid Eris or the Motorola Droid, depending on your budget. Keep in mind that Android is an operating system and not a particular phone, so it will vary between different phones.

- IPHONE 3G**  
 Price  
 \$99  
 Web site  
 www.apple.com
- IPHONE 3GS**  
 Price  
 \$199  
 Web site  
 www.apple.com
- HTC DROID ERIS**  
 Price  
 \$199  
 Web site  
 phones.verizonwireless.com
- MOTOROLA DROID**  
 Price  
 \$99  
 Web site  
 phones.verizonwireless.com

Note that the prices may vary depending on the service contract



ENTERTAINMENT: The Zune HD MP3 player. COURTESY OF MICROSOFT



READERS: The Sony Reader Daily Edition. COURTESY OF SONY



CELL PHONES: The iPhone 3G is still a few steps ahead of the Android. COURTESY OF APPLE