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ARTICULATE RAPID E-LEARNING STUDIO PROFESSIONAL

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RATING



ABOUT THE STAR RATINGS

Outstanding	★★★★★
Very good	★★★★
Good	★★★
Above average	★★★
Average	★★
Below average	★
Poor	★

TRAINING MEDIA REVIEW provides objective reviews of training content and supporting technologies, advice on media-related training issues, research reports, and consulting.

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ARTICULATE

800-861-4880

www.articulate.com/products/studio.php

\$1,846



Reviewed by Richard Karel, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

- Excellent integration of tools and ease of use
- Needs a lot of processor horsepower
- Costs more than Captivate but could be better value

I know a guy who's been a one-person e-learning department for the last eight years and was up against a four-hour timeline to put together an online training demo. Having seen a 2006 review of Articulate Presenter on the Training Media Review website, he decided to use Articulate Studio '09 to beat the clock and impress those university administrators who didn't know it could be done in-house.

That resource is me and—after reading the vice chancellor of finance's glowing email to my dean—all I can say is: Just in time for Christmas!

How many of us one-person online learning departments understand the need for reliable, rapid development software? That is integrated with a familiar tool like PowerPoint? That is useful to beginners and to advanced developers? That is capable of creating advanced learning objects by inputting text? And, of course, does not break!

I kept expecting Articulate's integration of software applications to break—to not do what it was supposed to do—and I was happily disappointed. It was as if the software was staring me in the face and asking, "What would you like me to do next?"

THE PRODUCT

Articulate Studio comes bundled with these applications:

- Presenter
- Quizmaker
- Engage
- Video Encoder

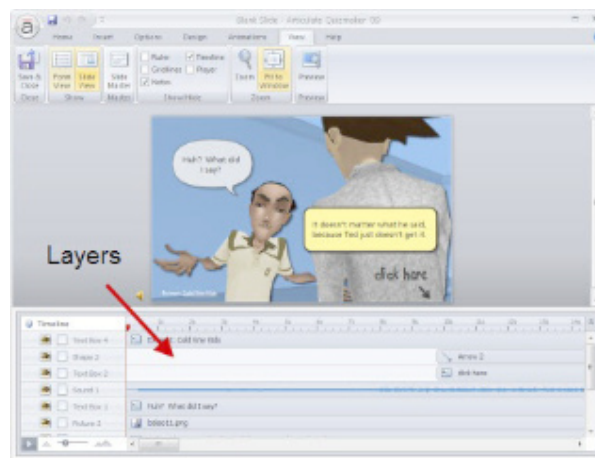


Presenter and Engage are the most tightly integrated with PowerPoint 2007—and, yes, unlike Adobe Captivate CS 3 these applications actually work with PowerPoint 2007. They are the template and learning object development components of Studio.

Quizmaker provides the tools to build virtually any type of online learning assessment. It integrates with PowerPoint as well. Video Encoder proved to be a solid digital video-to-Flash conversion tool with a bare-bones feature set. Installation of all four applications was seamless and easy.

INTERFACE

If it's not obvious by now, you will need to be somewhat proficient in PowerPoint to take full advantage of Articulate Studio's rich feature set. In fact, expect to do much of your work in Articulate through the Microsoft PowerPoint interface. Articulate shows up as an additional tab on the PowerPoint ribbon.



Click the tab in PowerPoint, and you have access to all of the features of Engage, Quizmaker, and Presenter. But also be prepared for Engage and Quizmaker to open separate user interfaces from PowerPoint. This takes about four hours to get used to. If you're not prepared, it can seem a little disconcerting at first.

EASE OF USE

My first project with Articulate Presenter consisted of downloading a random PowerPoint presentation I found on the

Internet and then converting it to web-ready form using Presenter. Would there be any problems with the use of a random presentation whose origins could have been PowerPoint 2003 or earlier?

No, there wasn't. Presenter handled this task and delivered a packaged, web-ready version of the PowerPoint presentation with no problem.

But what about projects—or online training demos—that require intense instructional design, engaging learning activities, interactive quiz elements, and very rapid development timetables? My next project was the demo I mentioned earlier. I had no time to access the Help and Support drop-down list, although community support portal and help documentation links were readily available.

UNBELIEVABLE INTEGRATION

First, I opened an existing PowerPoint presentation that was completed not too long ago as a template for online learning. This template served as the basis for my short demo. But I really wanted to take advantage of the features of the Studio suite to pack as much as I could into the demo. Here is where Articulate Engage and Quizmaker came into play.

After inserting my first Engage interaction (as simple as a mouse click on the Articulate ribbon section), I realized that what used to be 16 hours of development time just became 10 minutes. I copied and pasted text from a website into this reusable learning object and added another.

Now I had two very clear and concise learning objects in my demo that reflected sound instructional design. What next? How about a quiz?



Quizmaker was just as intuitive and well integrated with PowerPoint 2007 as Engage. One mouse click started the wizard-like process for entering either a quiz or survey. Question types to select from were diverse and, to my consternation, everything worked like it was supposed to. I wanted to add a multiple-choice question, then T/F, then...

Wait—I only had 30 minutes left. (Remember, I did not once use the Help and Support features.) I published the demo and previewed its functionality. Worked perfect, but I wanted to change the Articulate logo to the university's. This took about five minutes to figure out.

I did attempt to learn how to load Flash-based individual questions in the Articulate object “Flash Movie.” This didn't work, but I attribute this failure more to operator error than Articulate. I could have used a different file path designation or some other PowerPoint method, but I was running out of time. I published the demo to our Moodle LMS, and it worked just great within the Moodle course shell.

Conspicuously absent is the advanced scripting found in other authoring tools such as Lectora and Toolbook Instructor. However, if one is going to learn an ECMA-based object-oriented programming language, why not just learn Adobe Flash and forego a rapid development tool such as Articulate?

If you are a Flash programmer, you can build Community Interactions within Articulate Engage with the free Engage development kit.

Downsides

I have only a few complaints. Some of the fields required when entering an Engage interaction or quiz are not hidden fields so what you enter will be seen by the end user. It's a little frustrating to have to guess at what text or headings will be where, but Engage gives you convenient means to re-edit the interaction. You may want to type the name of the field in its blank field to see the layout of the interaction before proceeding.

This program is RAM- and CPU-intensive. I tested it on both Vista Pro and XP Pro. Performance was fine on the Vista Pro machine with 8GB of RAM but very slow on the four-year old XP laptop, even though it's a fairly high-end laptop geared towards multimedia production.

But there were never any system crashes, and this says a lot to me. Articulate Studio is a very well-crafted suite of applications, designed with a lot of forethought, dedicated to saving a developer like me an incredible amount of time. It's definitely worth the price tag because it ranks above most “end all of your troubles” WYSIWYG authoring tools on the market today that I'm familiar with.

Recommendation

If I were purchasing an enterprise license for a rapid development tool, Articulate Studio Professional would be at or near the top of the list. Its flexibility, scalability, ease of use, and astonishing performance make this an outstanding product. Unfortunately, many of us get caught up in the Adobe Captivate pricing go-round and sometimes don't allow ourselves a closer look at higher-cost products that are more affordable in the long run.

About the Reviewer

Richard Karel (rkarel@ecbatanatraining.com) has been involved with issue management and development of online learning for the past eight years. He has a keen interest in online tools for collaboration and management of e-learning projects. He is currently working with the University of Tennessee Cooperative Extension Service to implement a system-wide online learning platform that involves all aspects of e-learning development and deployment.