

Comparing the Most Popular Sound Editing Programs

Introduction

For many multimedia designers, the issue of adding audio is a problematic one. There is little doubt that adding audio can enhance a multimedia experience, and there are authoring programs such as Macromedia's Director and Flash that allow designers to add digitized audio with relative ease. However, it is difficult to acquire usable digitized audio. Using commercial digitized audio may involve the necessity of obtaining permission. Furthermore, creating digitized audio used to require expensive equipment and professional handling. Nonetheless, as sound editing becomes more accessible to the masses, so do the possibilities.

Significance of the Topic

Understanding the use and capabilities of sound editors is an important step for a multimedia designer. It is only with this understanding that a multimedia designer can make informed decisions about what is needed to create the quality sound desired. Depending on the project and the platform a multimedia project will be distributed, the sound produced by a sound editor may vary in a permissible range. The platform on which a sound will be edited must also be taken into consideration. Furthermore, cost of the editor, ease of use, and the options offered all must also factor in the decision of choosing a sound editor. Therefore, it is with these factors in mind that the most popular sound editors were compared.

Steps to Digitizing Audio

If a multimedia designer would like to record some sound on an analog tape, and then digitize the sound for a project, there are several items he or she must remember. First, let us assume that the designer already has a sound on a cassette tape. The designer must be able to connect a tape recorder to a computer using an AV cable. To do this, the computer must have a AV sound card. This is not a standard issue card for most personal

computers and is usually bought separately. The sound is then captured into a computer with the use of a sound editor. At this point, the sound selection may be manipulated in several ways. After editing, the sound editor also saves the selection in a digitized format for use in multimedia projects (Adams, 2001). This study does not look at various analog recorders or how to use audio for websites. Instead, this study looks only at the sound editors used to capture and edit analog sound.

The Programs Under Consideration

There are four programs that seem to be the most popular: **Sound Forge**, **Sound Edit 16**, **Cool Edit**, and **Peak**. To be sure, there are other editing programs out there, such as Steinberg Wavelab (English, 2001), but this study focuses on programs that are currently the most popular and under \$400. However, keep in mind that the field of digitizing audio sounds is expanding rapidly. Will Strauss of the market research firm Forward Concepts explains that, “Digital audio technologies are driving the consumer entertainment market”(Computing: Digital, 2000). This means that consumers can expect to see more editors come out on the market as the technology hurries to expand home audio editing programs.

First Consideration: The Platform

“Once upon a time, it was a Mac world, digital audio-wise....Pity the poor Windows “enthusiast” who tried to touch true quality. Audio editing and recording on a PC has come into its own since then”(Connell, 1999, p. 1). Interestingly enough, the most popular programs are not cross-platform. You must choose whether to use a Mac or a PC. Sound Edit 16 (from Macromedia) and Peak (from BIAS) are both for Macs, while Sound Forge (from Sonic Foundry) and Cool Edit (from Syntrillium) are for PCs.

Second Consideration: The Price

Surprisingly, there is quite a range. Sonic Foundry's Sound Forge for PC is the most expensive, at around \$300 (Sonic Foundry, 2001). BIAS' Peak for Mac is the next one in line, at around \$250 (Preger, 1999). Sound Edit 16 for Mac is around \$120, while the cheapest is Cool Edit for PC, the light version of which runs only about \$50 (Connell, 1999).

Third Consideration: The Output Quality

Not at all surprisingly, Sound Forge for PC is often stated as the best; it is hailed as "probably the best two-track audio recording and editing software available for Windows" (Louderback, 1999, p. 2). However, this program is often used by the professionals in the music business. Therefore, those of us interested in simply adding sound to a website can use any of the others. Keep in mind that some players, such as MP3, highly compress sound (Matthews, 2000), so the end product may not sound much different from that which was digitally re-mastered using the most expensive editing equipment.

Forth Consideration: Ease of Use, Options, Popularity

All four editors can handle resolutions of at least 16-bit, and two at 32-bit, an important aspect considering that the best output will come if all editing is done in the highest resolution possible (Adams, 2001). All have cool functions and add-ons. However, only one of the programs, Cool Edit, was often described as easy to use by beginners (Chaikin, 1996). When people discuss sound editing, Cool Edit was the most cited editor, and therefore wins the popularity contest (Chaikin, 1996; Connell, 1999; Adams, 2001; Louderback, 1999).

Summary

For the best bang for your buck, Cool Edit for PC seems to win hands down. The cost is low, offers “Aural Fetish Fun” (Chaikin, 1996), is easy to use, and comes with all the necessary options for good-enough quality for basic sound. However, if you would rather work in a Mac platform, Sound Edit 16, an older tried and true program that still offers much for a small price, would be the editor for you if all you want are simple sound tracks. If you want something a bit more complicated, then opt for Peak for Macs.

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Related Links

<http://www.bias-inc.com> - For information about Peak

<http://www.syntrillium.com> - For information about Cool Edit

<http://www.sonicfoundry.com> - For information about Sound Forge

<http://www.macromedia.com/software/sound/> - For information about Sound Edit 16

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