Presedia Producer

A Review by Geetesh Bajaj

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Introduction

A few months ago, I was scouring the Internet for whatever information I could find on using PowerPoint and Flash together. Well, there were so many pages which showed you how to incorporate Flash movies in a PowerPoint presentation. On the other hand, there was precious little information available on the other way round - getting your PowerPoint content into the Flash format.

There's a reason behind this state of affairs - porting PowerPoint content into Flash is a specialized affair - I wondered if there was a tool which would do it automatically for me. And then I found Presedia Publisher - at first Presedia seemed too good to be true. Yet, there it was, and presently we're going to take Presedia Publisher on a rollercoaster ride to ascertain whether it delivers whatever it promises.

An Interactive Review

Keith Kitani is the Chief Operating Officer of Presedia, a company which functions from Sunnyvale, California. He's been coordinating with me on this review. Since Presedia Publisher is so much different from other PowerPoint add-ins, I thought it would be eminently more interesting if this review was written in an interactive fashion.

There are reasons behind this decision, primarily the fact that Presedia is a product as well as a service. Unlike other PowerPoint add-ins, which you can buy off the shelf or through ESD, Presedia cannot be used in a conventional fashion. Your PowerPoint presentations need to be uploaded to Presedia servers for them to be web enabled as Flash movies, which can be thereafter delivered online or through CD-ROM as multimedia presentations.

The Story Begins...

What led to Presedia? That's the question I put up to Keith - and his answer makes very interesting reading.

The idea started when Kevin and I were at a sales meeting - the typical event with hundreds of salespeople viewing 20 presentations in 3 days. We felt there had to be a better way to deliver this type of presentation

information. We decided to develop a solution so the typical business person could produce high quality web presentations in minutes.

Presentations - specifically PowerPoint - are the most common method for delivering business information. Yet, effective presentations are designed to be accompanied by audio. Slides alone do not provide the complete message.

The web is an ideal way to deliver business presentations with audio, yet no one had developed a good solution for delivering presentations with audio over the web. There were a few solutions available, but each had drawbacks, including the solution within PowerPoint.

Our solution needed to make it easy to create a multimedia presentation. We wanted the typical PowerPoint user to be able to create the web presentation - not just the multimedia designer.

We wanted the presentation output to have some of the following characteristics: high quality output, cross platform support, bandwidth efficient, animation and multimedia support, powerful viewing controls, and easy to deliver (no server software). Flash was an ideal solution.

About Keith Kitani

Mr. Kitani has over 15 years of marketing and engineering experience at both startups and established technology companies. Before co-founding Presedia, Mr. Kitani was Vice President of Marketing for Sensory, Inc., a leader in the emerging speech recognition market. At Sensory he was responsible for marketing, software engineering and development services and helped the company become the market leader in speech recognition for embedded systems. Before Sensory, Mr. Kitani held senior positions at Centigram Communications, Dasar, and TRW. Mr. Kitani received a BS in Electrical Engineering and an MBA, both from Stanford University.

To Set An Account

Keith set up a Presedia trial account for me, the next step was to download the Presedia Producer Add-in, a 4 MB download from the Presedia site.

A word about Presedia accounts, they are basically of two types: there's one where you can host your presentations on Presedia servers; the other option is to host your presentations on your own servers.

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Naturally, every customer may make their own choice regarding the hosting, but the Presdedia hosted solutions cost more.

All accounts are per presentation.

In addition - the Presedia solution itself is available in two flavours - Presedia Publisher is the solution we're covering in this review; its sibling - Presedia Publisher Pro adds other niceties like the ability to use prerecorded audio and edit animation timings.

Installing The Add-In

Installing the Presedia Producer add-in is quick and uncomplicated - however installing the add-in into PowerPoint is only half the story, as we shall examine later in this review.

As of now, the installation creates a Presedia menu within PowerPoint. On my system, with both PowerPoint 2000 and PowerPoint 2002/XP installed, I had no problem in accessing the Presedia menu in both versions.

A word of caution here: although Presedia does function within PowerPoint 2002/XP, you must use only PowerPoint features accessible in PowerPoint 97/2000, since the new features may be still unsupported by Presedia's server technologies.

The Guidebook

Since this is an interactive review, I'm sharing all my stops, brakes and accelerations with you here. My first stop, was the Presedia Publisher help file - an excellent resource written in a lucid style. Apart from guiding you about the capabilities and functions of Presedia Publisher, the help file also provides useful tips on utilization of graphics to create smaller sized presentations, which could be ultimately more bandwidth friendly on non-broadband Internet connections. The help file also provides tips on using your microphone properly - in fact there's a whole section devoted to microphones.

You may of course avoid the help file altogether and instead choose to run the Presedia Producer Wizard straightaway. Nevertheless, going through the help documentation may help you in the long run.

The First Steps

First things first - before anything else, you need a presentation to play...er, work with! So, I decide to create a presentation which discusses the scope of Indezine, this site.

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Time to think. I want to try Presedia to the extremes, yet I know the limitations of a dialup Internet connection. A great level of balance is required here, so I finally settle for an original PresentationPro design in a pleasing light blue shade. The typeface used throughout is Trebuchet, which is a fairly standard typeface.

On the first slide, let's just put some text - that way at least our first slide will be available instantly. We'll leave the graphics and animations for the inner slides, so that they have enough time for streaming and buffering.

All in all, I've ended up with 10 slides with no images or animations - of course, if your audience is broadband enabled - you can forget all the dialup woes and go in for the full killing.

Recording Voiceovers

When your basic presentation is ready, you can choose the 'Run Wizard' option from the Presedia menu. The wizard basically guides you in a step-by-step way.

First, Presedia runs a test to set your microphone recording level - you can skip this option, but considering that the whole thing takes less than 30 seconds, it may be worthwhile getting through this step.

The next step is to actually record your voiceovers concurrently with a running presentation. Once you're done recording for the current slide, Presedia helpfully provides you with an elegant interface which proceeds to the next slide on a click of a button.

Once I had achieved this, the Presedia add-in gave me the option of logging into my Presedia account or returning to PowerPoint. I chose the latter since I needed to view my presentation again.

Well, the presentation ran fine - but there was no voice. To cut a long story short, let me tell you that it wasn't Presedia's fault - my installation of Philips FreeSpeech had changed the default recording format of Windows - and a registry tweak restored it to the default 'Radio Quality' again. Windows' own Sound Recorder allows you to change the recording file for a current session through the Properties dialog box - I wish something like that was present in Presedia too. Anyway, that maybe too much to expect!

Now that the sound recording problem was resolved, I chose the Publish option in the Presedia menu. Before we get to that subject, a few thoughts about the recording process: Presedia Publisher's biggest con

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may be the inability to use prerecorded audio - you may be adviced to sign up for Presedia Publisher Pro, the advanced version that does offer this option.

The basic Presedia Publisher version does have an option to choose either the 'Microphone' or 'Line In' port of your sound card to input sound - if you can manage to process prerecorded audio into your sound card's 'Line In' port, you may be able to overcome that frustration.

Publishing To Presedia

Presedia's publishing option is quick and simple. You log-in through your username and password - supplied to you when your account is set up.

Once your log-in is authenticated, you're presented with a folder-like view, not unlike those used by online file-sharing services like i-drive.

You can choose to make your presentation publicly available or to be accessed through a password.

Finally, Presdia uploads your presentation files to its servers. Once this is accomplished, you are asked to check your mailbox for the exact location to view and/or download your web enabled multimedia presentation.

The Results

My experience with Presedia was excellent. And the presentation ran very well on a dialup connection. For all practical purposes, Presedia is definitely the next logical extension for your PowerPoint experience.

There are a few things you should be careful about - if you are using any non-standard fonts, even embedding them within your PowerPoint presentation will not help. In my case, all instances of the Trebuchet typeface reproduced perfectly - although all instances of a non-standard typeface were substituted. Nevertheless, a reminder to the effect that any non-standard fonts, even embedded ones will not work within Presedia's wizard interface could prove to be a welcome feature.

Keith confirmed that uploading a presentation with embedded fonts will not allow a build of your presentation on Presedia's servers.

In all, Presedia is definitely not a mass level solution as PowerPoint itself is. Currently, you are not offered a full solution to output web presentations yourself - a continued dependence on the Presedia server

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solution means that you have to pay the Presedia organization for every presentation, although it may be wrong to criticize Presedia on that front - after all, the server solution is part of their business model. It may be worthwhile mentioning here that attractive volume discounts are available. Finally, and more significantly - the end result justifies the means.

Although a Presedia desktop edition would be definitely more welcome rather than the present solution, this does not undermine the fact that Presedia fills the holes which Microsoft forgot to cover when it comes to PowerPoint's distribution paucities.

Managing Your Presentations

Consequently, the repertoire of your Presedia-processed presentations may build up. It's good to know that Presedia provides a slew of options to manage your provided space on the Presedia servers. These options include options to:

- Modify or update additional presentation information.
- Delete presentations or folders.
- Add or delete Presedia Publisher users.
- Set permission levels for Presedia Publisher users.

These options are supplemented by dynamic reporting facilities which detail figures of access to your web presentations.

Support

What type of support does Presedia offer? My experience with their email support was good enough - with responses being received in under a day's time.

In all fairness, I did engage their support lines for this review - at most times there were 3 to 4 support queries forwarded to them - this maybe because I was trying out all possibilities.

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Pricing

There are two types of Presedia programs - the basic version and the Pro version. There are also two types of server solutions - self hosted and Presedia hosted. Naturally, the spectrum of rates changes according to your chosen plan.

Here is pricing information for Presedia Publisher:

Hosted Library Package:

US$ 60 per month per presentation.

This includes:

- Plug-in software for adding audio and synchronized animations to PowerPoint.
- Unlimited presentation conversions and updates.
- Unlimited users (both for viewing and producing).
- Web hosting with user security and usage reports.

Presentation Package:

Pricing starts at US$395 per presentation and allows customers to download converted presentations for hosting on their own servers (free updates are included for one year).

There are also volume discounts on both packages. Needless to add, all rates are subject to change and rather indicative than definite.

What Next?

What does a promising program like Presedia offer for the future? That's an interesting question. For one, Presedia even now is a sort of evolutionary program. It does so much in its sphere - and there's no visible competition. Yet, in a way, it does whet your appetite - it increases possibilities, in a way it's like a fulcrum - your horizons increase, so you want more.

My first question was if Presedia planned a desktop version - happily the response was in the affirmative. Here's the scoop:

A desktop version is certainly on our roadmap, however it has not been scheduled.

Other looking-forward-to developments:

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- *Full screen mode for presentation viewing.*
- *Browser interface for viewing the entire library. This will allow our hosted customers to provide their viewers with access to the entire library. Viewers can navigate to the presentation they want to view.*
- *Search feature to find a presentation.*
- *Email a presentation link with a return receipt option.*
- *Options to add a photo or summary description to the presentation.*
- *Video support.*
- *Support for the Pocket PC.*
- *A desktop version.*

Conclusion

All in all, Presedia is an excellent solution.

Its nearest rival seems to be impatica - but that's a Java based solution and Presedia is a Flash based one. Presedia's Flash leanings do provide it with a considerable advantage. impatica however has a desktop version available, Presedia lacks on that account - at least presently.

Until now, PowerPoint's web delivery options were severely limited - its been more than five years now that new solutions for delivering PowerPoint presentations have been cropping up with unfailing regularity. Maybe, it will be the ultimate honour to the Presedia people to accede that no other solution for delivering PowerPoint presentations over the web before has been half as good as theirs.

On the other hand, one cannot overlook the fact that Presedia could do much more than it already does - and it is actually wonderful to note the fact that the team at Presedia is aware of this and going full steam ahead to meet the challenges.

And yes, before I forget - you may want to view a sample Presedia presentation. I'm sure you'll enjoy viewing it:

http://demo.presedia.com/p3

http://content.presedia.com/indezine/p19845277/

Finally, do visit the Presedia site for more information:

http://www.presedia.com/

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