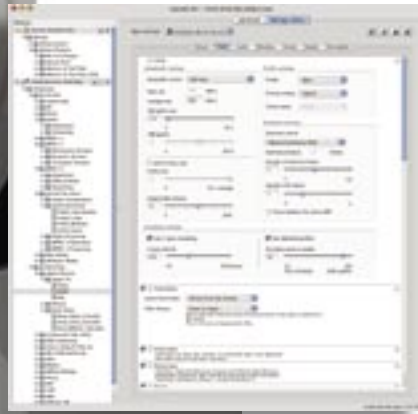


Telestream Episode Pro 4.4.1 offers a huge number of presets on the left side and on the right, a large number of parameters to be tweaked: It has all the bases covered when it comes to encoding options.



easily export output from Apple Final Cut Pro to any format, either through the built-in QuickTime encoder or by moving the project into Apple Compressor.

Telestream Episode Pro has been gaining a lot of positive reviews and momentum as a premier encoder for the Mac, with more than 20 formats and 500 templates—making it easy to compress just about anything you or your

clients can think of. Timely updates from developer Flip4Mac (you probably have its WMV player for Mac installed) ensure that the program is up to spec and up to date with all current standards. We'll look at how the program shapes up as an all-inclusive encoder and how it may or may not justify its \$995 asking price.

The number of output formats is amazingly comprehensive: The program includes all QuickTime formats, Windows Media 9, VC-1, WMV, Intelstream MBR, MPEG-4, H.264, ACC, Apple TV, iPod, iPhone, IPTV, HD DVD, Flash 8, and many more. The software offers a clean Mac interface, with easy drag-and-drop options (drag in a clip, drag in a preset, and go), so there is almost no learning curve. With other compression programs, the interface can really be hit or miss, but Episode Pro gets it right. Batch support means you can run as many jobs as you like, and you can also adjust settings for CPU priority and memory usage. Additionally, you can add in more jobs even if you currently have several files compressing. You can do A/B preview comparisons, add bumpers/trailers in Episode Pro to your movies, overlay a watermark logo or animation, adjust color hues, filter and adjust audio, and add hinting for streaming formats. Other options include bitrate analysis, timecode and metadata support, alpha channels, professional de-interlacing, field-order handling, pull-down and frame-rate conversion, and inverse telecine. I've been looking, but I have yet to find a glaring omission of something that Episode actually doesn't offer.

As the newest version of the program, 4.4.1 brings a host of new added features. You can pretty much tell just from the version-naming conventions that Flip4Mac has been diligent about expanding and upgrading this version 4 program. There is a new two-pass mode for H.264, which is welcome news—I almost always use two-pass for encoding, and the lon-

Telestream Episode Pro 4.4.1

Update offers encoding for numerous parameters and non-standard formats.

REVIEWER: FRANKLIN MCMAHON

I think I've used almost every encoder out there for both Mac and Windows—not just recently, but over the years, starting with the golden age of streaming via RealMedia and Windows Video up until now. A lot of my studio business has always involved deploying video on the Web—streaming in the early days; MPEG, QuickTime, and podcasts now. Things I always look for in a program are ease of use, a rich array of presets that I don't necessarily have to tweak to get great results, and—of course—speed. On the Mac side, I need a reason to use a separate program, because I can

bottomline

Company: Telestream

www.telestream.net

Product: Episode Pro 4.4.1

Assets: New version adds two-pass mode for H.264 and host of extra features.

Caveats: Extras may slow encoding.

Demographic: Video professionals who want control over every conceivable encoding parameter.

PRICE: \$995

ger render time does typically create better-looking files. You can now work with the time-code from a QuickTime file, so if it's already in the reference movie, it will be in Episode Pro as well. For AVI files, there is now support for YUY2/4:2:2 formats, and you can add GOP headers in H.264. Better conversion quality going from NTSC to PAL (and back) is included, as well as the option to split PCM-audio channels over several tracks when exporting to QuickTime. There are new templates for HD DVD and more metadata tags in MP3 files, as well as some new added classic formats such as Sorenson, Cinepak, and Photo JPEG. In addition, there is a selection of basic bug fixes and tweaks throughout the program.

I typically don't like to do benchmarks—only because there is so much variance on different machines with different configurations. So I thought I'd just see if Episode felt faster than exporting right with the QuickTime engine on the Mac, which is the kind of encoding I typically do. It didn't. It seemed like Episode was taking as long or longer. The caveat is that this can often be expected with encoding programs, because exporting in a program is often quick and dirty, while a standalone program has the parameters to really increase quality, as well as render time. The company touts that the program is “eight times faster than Autodesk Cleaner.” If you've used Cleaner this may provoke a chuckle, since Cleaner has a notoriously slow renderer. OK, OK. I'll benchmark. I ended up breaking out my iPhone stopwatch and putting the program to the test.

I encode primarily on two machines: a Apple PowerPC G5 and, while on the road, an Intel-powered MacBook. A lot of the encoding I do is for the Web and iPod/Apple TV, so that is exactly how I tested. I first converted a one-minute 1080i clip using the iPod template that ships with Episode. I found it odd that the templates were listed in 4:3 modes (such as 640x480). Even iMovie knows to encode a 16:9 clip at 640x360. No matter. I went with it. I encoded, and the resulting file was indeed 640x480 with the sides of the widescreen image lopped off. Not good. I decided to switch to Apple Compressor (which ships with Final Cut Studio). Episode Pro not only works as a standalone program, but its engine and all its presets are available within Compressor as well. I again chose the standard iPod set-

ting. This time, the widescreen 16:9 image was squeezed into a 640x480 size—again unusable. After some digging, I found some other presets that were more in line with the iPod specs; however, I found it odd that the actual iPod templates did not work as they should.

But on to the benchmarking. I skipped the iPod templates and used the Apple TV templates, which seemed to work fine. On the G5, a one-minute HD clip exported to Apple TV format encoded in 6 minutes, 11 seconds. A standard Apple TV QuickTime export (using QuickTime Pro) on the G5 exported in 4 minutes, 39 seconds. On the Intel Mac, Episode Pro did the same clip in 4 minutes, 43 seconds, with the QuickTime export coming in at a minute less. I tried various presets, and the results were similar on the two machines. So no surprise—there is a speed improvement on Intel machines (the program supports multicore and multiprocessor), and the slower speed may be attributed to Episode doing two-pass encoding. All outputs look comparable. Episode Pro does clean quality output, pretty much in line quality-wise with Apple's tools.

What you begin to realize is that once you go off the path of presets, you have a dizzying array of parameters that you can tweak and adjust. As with any encoding program, the more you tweak on the quality side, the more of a penalty you may get hit with on the rendering side. Obviously high-end, eight-core Macs packed with RAM are where Episode Pro is really going to fly. It's worth noting that the program also comes with a widget version—you set a preset on the widget version in your dashboard, then just drag a clip onto it. It worked fine, although I could not find a way to abort an encoding session, and there did not seem to be a way to estimate how long it would take, so although its neat, I can't see using it over the standalone Episode Pro program or via Apple Compressor.

Episode Pro is for control freaks. If you want every level of control over every conceivable encoding parameter, your program has arrived. Also, if there are some formats that you need to encode to and you just can't get them via the standard QuickTime toolset (AVI, WMV, Flash, etc.), then Episode is a must-have. If you are a typical Final Cut workflow kind of person, QuickTime Pro and Compressor may actually offer enough options to get you where you want to go without spending an extra grand for Episode Pro. But if you want it all, Episode Pro is a great program that's easy to use and offers just about every format and option all in one place. 