

Digidesign Pro Tools 6.0

It's the latest in the line of a veritable dynasty as Tools 6 goes OSX. Are we looking at an improvement in the breed or a stepping stone towards the future? **GEORGE SHILLING** asks the questions.

ALTHOUGH PRO TOOLS 6.0 is evolutionary in terms of additional features added to version 5.x, the whole look of the program has undergone a major revision to take advantage of the newest Mac OS platform. The much-vaunted OSX is finally a viable music production platform. Apart from the graphics, the benefits include a more stable environment, and the promise that if the application crashes, a reboot is not usually necessary. However, in these early days I have witnessed both types of crash already.

Digidesign has sensibly engineered PT6.0 to do pretty much everything 5.x did, but running in OSX and looking more elegant. A number of new features comprise extra functions that in theory could have been achieved under OS9, but perhaps for political rather than technical reasons have been saved up for this release, particularly for the LE version. Users of older Macs should note that version 6 is not approved for G3s, or older G4s which use a PCI graphics system: only AGP machines are officially endorsed, meaning a new Mac is required for some in order to run version 6.

Installation of Pro Tools 6.0 requires OS10.2.3 and is painless. No longer must you assign memory to DAE and Pro Tools applications – the separate DAE program is gone, and OSX handles memory management. However, to avoid corrupting 5.x plug-in authorisation, it is recommended you only install 6.0 on a physically separate drive.

Version 6 now uses both processors in dual processor machines, which is of great benefit. You can now set the CPU limit to 99%, which assigns a whole processor to Pro Tools, enabling far more processing power to be available for plug-ins.

The Mix, Edit and Transport windows contain all the features of version 5.x, with enhancements mainly graphical, such as 3D shading for buttons, coloured Solo, Mute and Record buttons (when activated), and relocation of a few tools and selectors at the top of the Edit screen. Nudge and Grid selection has been moved to a new bar under the tool selectors, along with dropdown menus for selecting Ruler views and Track views of I-O, Inserts, and so on.

The enhancements look modern and appealing, combined with the cute OSX animations and fading menus. The idea of coloured buttons is sensible, but



part of Pro Tools' appeal has always been its simplicity of appearance, and some shading initially seems to make everything look slightly more complex. And there is now a wasted area of nothingness in the top right hand corner of the Edit screen. However, in time we will no doubt all get used to it and think 5.x looks old-fashioned.

A major addition of practical use is the Digibase File Management system. This introduces several new Windows that are essentially enhanced Finder windows, with many features useful for managing projects. The Project Browser shows the current Session files, while the Workplace Browser shows all available drives and partitions. This system helps keeps tabs on where everything is filed, and even shows graphical representation of audio files that can be instantly auditioned with a mouse click-hold.

Items found in the Browser windows can be dragged and dropped into the Timeline or Regions list, making fiddly importing a thing of the past. File copying and other tasks can also now take place in the background while playing the session, so there is less waiting around while importing large files. I was immediately able to play a file dragged into the Timeline from another Session on a different drive.

MIDI is one area that has undergone substantial enhancement, not least by the demise of the obsolete OMS system. It is replaced by AMS (Apple MIDI System) which looks and feels much like the OMS Studio Setup, and unfortunately so far seems only to include a similarly outdated and limited set of devices to OMS – for example, the ubiquitous Roland XV range is completely absent. But playback via my USB MIDI

interface was measurably quicker to respond and less jittery, and, with a compatible device, MIDI time stamping is available for sample-accurate playback.

This obviously includes the Digidesign MIDI device, but as to which other manufacturers' interfaces are, or will be, compatible I was unable to ascertain. However, some important enhancements have been added to make the MIDI editing more usable for those wanting to keep everything under one roof rather than running another application for MIDI. The new features are hardly revolutionary, adding such functions as Groove Quantize and separate Quantize Undo – things we were doing 10 years ago in Atari Cubase (*And before that on Creator Ed*). Nevertheless, they are very welcome here.

Plug-in authorisation has finally been rationalised by the implementation of the iLok dongle. This is a USB key that plugs in to the computer and stores authorisations for all purchased plug-ins for PT6 – floppy authorisation is finally buried. Plug-ins can now usefully be activated during playback – LE users could do this with some plug-ins previously, but this should in theory now work with all plug-ins on all systems, with certain provisos.

The usual Digirack selection is included: the Delays are now the new type which include tempo-based settings. Additionally, the D-Fx suite, DPP-1 and D-Verb AudioSuite are now included. And an entirely new plug-in is introduced, 'Click', which provides an audio click track with a selection of sounds that is integrated into Pro Tools through Digidesign's DirectMIDI protocol for exact timing with no MIDI delay. For third-party plug ins, as with the introduction of HDTDM, there will inevitably be a time lag while software houses rewrite

their code. Digidesign promises that this is a simpler operation than the HD rewrite, and does not envisage a long wait for most plugs.

It is also hinting at some interesting new plug-ins appearing in the near future, and the current buzz is around Sony Oxford's new Inflator. Direct Connect has apparently been abandoned, Digidesign preferring third parties to provide such things as softsynths as plug-ins, which is always more elegant. The good news is that it is working with Propellerheads to provide Rewire2 later this year, finally providing a solution for the many Reason users wanting to integrate it properly with Pro Tools.

There are some small editing enhancements. In the Edit Window, Relative Grid mode now enables nudging Regions by set grid amounts even when they do not start in line with the Grid. Very handy. The Selector can

now be dragged across multiple tracks to make selections. A useful Playback Cursor Locator button appears at the top to instantly move the visible area to the current position when the cursor disappears off the screen. And Grid Mode can now be temporarily changed to slip by holding Command when trimming regions.

Thankfully, Pro Tools 6.0 appears to save files in the 5.1 format, enabling easy transference between versions. Plug-ins aside, there seems to be no problem opening sessions created in 5.x, and 5.2.1 certainly seemed to have no problem opening 6.0 created sessions.

I found few irritations: the most annoying was that the scrolling wheel on my trackball did nothing in the Digibase Browser windows (despite its OSX driver happily enabling scrolling in the Finder) or the Edit Window (where I use it for scrolling up and down the

track displays in 5.x.)

However, I'm sure every user will find one or two different niggles. All in all, Digidesign has done an excellent job of porting Pro Tools to OSX, enabling familiar users to get straight on and work (as soon as the plug-ins come through) and new users to find the same easy to learn working environment. I'd love to have punch-ins work as smoothly as they do with, say, a RADAR recorder without having to patch up and/or crossfade every join. I'd also like to be able to activate Sends and select Pre/Postfade on the fly. And I'd like keyboard shortcuts for the new Playback Cursor Locator, and to scroll the screen view left and right. But when looking at the overall picture, 6.0 is surely the basis for a happy future for the Pro Tools fraternity. ■

WHAT IS AVAILABLE?

PT6.0 for Mac OS10.2.3 is available currently for TDM systems and LE systems on the Mbox and Digi 001. The version for the 002 is promised in the next few months, and Windows versions later in the year.

LE ONLY

The LE version now includes some previously TDM-only features. **Command Focus is the system of one-key shortcuts (although a set of stickers for the keyboard as supplied with TDM Systems would be handy). Increased and voiceable tracks: while limited to 32 audio playback tracks, you can now load or create sessions with up to 128 tracks with voicing set to Auto or Off on a track by track basis – excellent for bringing TDM recorded sessions home to fiddle. The Time Trim tool now includes the (formerly TDM only) option of dragging a region's start or end to time – compress or expand the region.**

TDM ONLY

A number of advanced improvements are available only on TDM systems. There are new Beat Detective



features including a system of 'DigiGroove' templates enabling clever analysing of audio with respect to timing and accents, enabling the feel of a region to be superimposed on an entirely different piece of audio. Digibase Pro further enhances Digibase with the ability to create and share custom catalogues of files, and view, search and spot files from offline volumes. A number of enhancements to do with time code and synchronisation are provided, including a redesigned Session Setup Window with settings for time code and offsets.

PROS

New look; dual processor support; OSX stability; 5.1 file format; LE enhancements.

CONS

New Look; plug-in upgrades required and not all available yet; still crashes occasionally!

Contact

DIGIDESIGN,US:

Website: www.digidesign.com