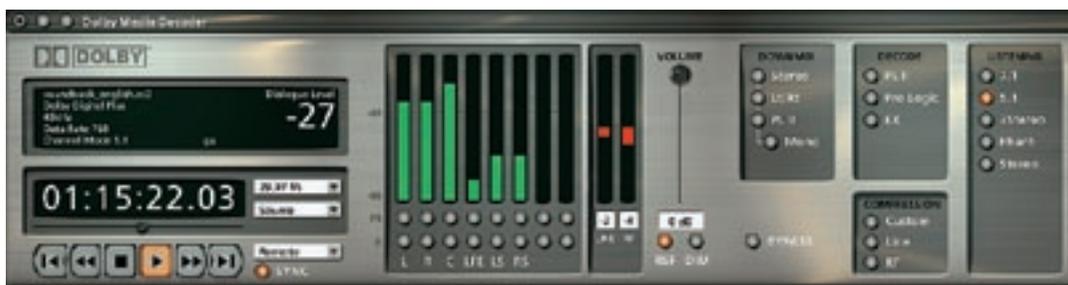# Dolby Media Producer

Software Dolby Digital encoding is nothing new, there are several third party encoders out there already, like the excellent Minnetonka Surrcode, for example. However, this is the first offering from Dolby. It adds the advantage of supporting all the new encoding technologies for HD DVD formats, plus some useful tools for editing and QCing encoded files.

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THE DOLBY MEDIA Producer package consists of four software elements that allow you to do just about any kind of Dolby encoding/decoding conceivable. Dolby Digital, Dolby Digital Plus, Dolby True HD and MLP encoding are all supported, as well as decoding of Pro Logic, Pro Logic II, Dolby Digital surround EX and even Dolby Headphone. It only runs on OSX and requires a G5 multiprocessor or Intel-based Mac.

DOLBY MEDIA ENCODER — The first two elements are actually both encoders, one is a client application that is used to make up settings and job lists that are then presented to the server encoder, which actually encodes the files. This is a great way of working as the server encoder can be on one central machine and various client workstations can prepare encoding jobs and queue them on the server. For large facilities doing multi-language DVD (or HD DVD) titles this is a very effective workflow.

As with all software encoders, I still think there is a need for real-time encoding and decoding to optimise metadata settings before batch encoding, but once this is done this type of encoding is perfect for high volume projects. There are three clients provided with the package, which allows enough encoding throughput for even the busiest facilities. More 'clients' can be purchased to increase the throughput even more if required.

When jobs are queued the priority can be set, allowing flexible project management. Timecode at all rates (including HD) can be embedded in the encoded

file from any starting value. Punch in and outs can also be performed on encoded files if changes occur in the source files after encoding.

As a side note, Dolby Digital Plus is the latest generation of Dolby Digital and standard for HD DVD (optional for Blu-Ray). It's a high data rate 'lossy' encoder, with full backwards compatibility with Dolby Digital decoders (up to 7.1). True HD on the other hand is a lossless compression system that requires a True HD decoder in the player to decode the audio.

DOLBY MEDIA DECODER — The decoder part of the package is a full blown Dolby digital decoder, supporting all consumer Dolby formats. It's basically a DP564 in software and when used with a multichannel audio card all six outputs can be fed to a monitoring system for real-time decoding. AC-3 files can be decoded in Dolby Digital EX or downmixed in mono, stereo, Pro logic, Pro logic II, which makes this identical to its hardware equivalent, but considerably cheaper (US$1900). A unique feature is that an AC-3 file can be synchronised to a QuickTime movie or even 9-pin control a deck. This is excellent for QCing AC-3 files against picture and a truly original feature for any Dolby decoder.

DOLBY MEDIA TOOLS — Media Tools allow you change metadata settings in an existing encoded file without the need to completely re-encode. This is the 'killer app' that can save amazing amounts of time and money because, although no-one would probably admit it, there is an amazing amount of re-encoding going on in this business! Apart from changing

metadata, Media Tools can also restripe timecode or trim the length of files, and the best part is, it's much faster than real-time.

So how does it all work together? I installed the software package onto a 2GHz Macbook with 1.5Gb of RAM. Installation couldn't be easier, just a case of opening the zip files and following the instructions. The installation only takes up 22Mb, which is amazing considering it costs a staggering US$11000. That's about $500 a Mb! I used an Emagic 2:6 (2-in 6-out) USB audio interface to output six channels from the decoder.

The decoder represents great value at $1900, especially if used with a digital multichannel interface, as it has all the features of its hardware equivalent, plus more. Unfortunately I didn't have the necessary USB to serial convertor to try it with a Digibeta deck (at this price I would expect a free one!) but I successfully synchronised a QuickTime movie with an AC-3 file. This is a very useful feature for pre-authoring QCing.

The Media Tools package is also very useful, although disappointingly not all metadata parameters are available. In fact the two most useful to edit — dialogue normalisation and compression mode — are not available. All the downmix levels are though, plus the ability to add or edit embedded timecode. I would like to see more tools added, such as the ability to level trim an AC-3 file (useful for DVD menu audio) and the inclusion of dialogue norm and compression editing. However, as a first release this is still quite a useful tool.

Despite the encoder being the most expensive element ($8000), there are some slightly confusing issues with the user interface. Channel modes seem to have been dropped completely, which means that terms like 3/2, 2/0, which we've all got used to over the years, are replaced with just a number of channel box and channel names. This might not seem like a big deal, but the channel modes were a clever way to see immediately what format you're encoding. I managed to encode some whacky 3/1 configurations from 5.1 audio without realising it.

My main issue is with the price. I cannot believe that the $8000 price is justified for essentially an 8Mb file and an iLok. At least third party developers have the excuse of a license fee, but Dolby owns this technology.

I also suspect they'll not be rushing to license DD Plus and True HD encoding to third parties either, meaning this is the only option to encode audio for HD DVD. However, interestingly, this time around Dolby is not the only option for HD DVD formats, so it'll be interesting to see how DTS prices its encoding tools.

All round though, this is a great package and if you have large volumes of encoding to do this is easily the best option. Generally a well thought out and long overdue set of tools. ■

PROS	Great batch encoding; very fast encoding; useful metadata and timecode editing; video sync built into the decoder.
CONS	Encoder GUI needs polishing up; lack of dialogue norm and compression metadata editing; no way to decode an AC-3 to files (WAV, AIFF, etc); the encoder price.

Contact

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