Themes in iMovie HD 6

Philip Roy spends some quality time with themes in iMovie HD 6, part of the new iLife '06 suite

It's become an annual event that has not failed to disappoint over the past few years. Each year, MacWorld Expo in San Francisco has seen new versions of the iLife suite released with great new features in this superb multimedia bundle. In particular, since version 4 of iLife, I've been very pleased with improvements in iMovie and iDVD, so waiting and hoping for version 6 was unbearable.

A lot has been written on the web about the various applications in iLife '06 – there are several simple tweaks, interface changes, a new application (iWeb) and more. Here I'll focus on one interesting addition to iMovie that really caught my eye.

The concept of themes is not new (check out www.dvdthemepak.com/idvd.html for some great commercial and free themes for iDVD), but now you can also apply themes to your movies as you edit them.

It's all about style

The concept of a theme in iMovie is a little hard to describe as there are differences to iDVD themes, or to Keynote themes for that matter. For a moment, think about a television documentary and what goes into the creation of the 'look and feel' as the final editing takes place.

Obviously, TV producers will need an opening sequence, which they might hire a graphics studio to develop for them. It might incorporate a concept that relates to the footage, some custom graphics and even custom fonts. Then, the end credits of the programme need to be considered. How are they going to differ, but at the same time, associate themselves with the opening sequence and graphic style of the programme?

And then there are all those annoying commercial breaks. Coming back from them, producers will want some sort of small graphic sequence to give people an indication of just where the programme is up to. They also might want it broken up into a series of vignettes, each starting off with a recurring (but slight variation) of a standard style or theme.

This is what has just come to iMovie HD 6. While it will take a little getting used to, it's also going to allow you to create some incredibly professional and visually stunning movies.

So what do you get?

iMovie HD 6 comes with just five themes – Travel, Road Trip, Pass Through, and black and white versions of Reflection.

A moderate start for the first-time themes has been included, but Apple always seems to better itself with themes in subsequent releases, so look out for commercial themes

and also iMovie HD 7 in a year's time.

When you delve into the iMovie '06 themes, you'll discover some aspects are quite complex, while other components are reasonably basic.

Each theme has a series of scenes, backgrounds and/or overlays with a common style to them that can be incorporated into your movie. Better still, all the themes can be used in widescreen or standard TV format (iDVD finally makes genuine widescreen DVDs with this release) and similar themes exist in iDVD so a consistent look and feel can be carried into all aspects of your project.

The elements of each theme include drop zones for movies and photos and, because of how complex theme development is, iMovie HD 6 includes the introduction of a new drop-zone floating palette.

Your movies can now include opening sequences, transitions, graphic overlays, credits and 'lower-third' titling, all produced though drag and drop. It's important to spend some time thinking just how you're going to use these themes because of the impact they have on your movie.

Screen time and screen real estate

Using the themes is going to affect your movies in two ways: by extending movie length through introduction of new clips, and by covering up some items on screen in a way you may not have experienced.

Themes include components for an opening sequence, chapter introductions, lower-third lay-overs and, in some cases, additional sequences known as 'Bumpers', which can be used to add onto other sections of your movie. When using themes, select them and a drop-zone palette appears. You drag images or movie clips onto this palette, make some changes to tiles that appear and then 'Apply' these effects.

I personally feel this button should be labelled 'Create'... a trivial point but one that reflects the fact that these themes are not so much 'applied' to your movie as created and added to your timeline.

The images and/or clips you selected are generated into a stunning animated sequence based on the theme and added into your timeline.

This additional clip is now part of your movie and in that respect you should not consider these themes' components as anything other than additions to your movies. This is also the case of the credits, chapter and bumper components.

With the lower-thirds components in themes, it's slightly different: these components, when added, can make use of your timeline video so they can be

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incorporated into an existing clip. But it's not quite that easy and you need to be careful.

Lower thirds

Lower-third components in a theme can best be described as animated overlays that take up (no surprise) the lower third of the screen. They're a little like the animations you see appearing at the bottom of documentaries when someone or something is being introduced. For example the Travel lower third comprises a small graphic of a torn map, an animation of a point being highlighted on the map and a place for some text.

The first thing to keep in mind is that the lower portion of your clip is going to be obscured. Next, remember the animation is not only great, but also slightly distracting. The animation takes up time (five to six seconds usually), so don't be harsh with editing the beginning of your clips, but perhaps leave a few seconds of movie to allow the animation to play in.

When using lower third titling and attaching it to a movie clip, the nice thing is that (again) iMovie generates a new clip, comprised of the lower third animation and part of the movie. This means you might end up with five seconds of movie including the lower-third, but then also you get those five seconds as an untouched movie that is part of the original clip.

Unlike transitions, part of your clip isn't destroyed. But it also means you are going to have to remove five seconds from the start of the subsequent clip. While this might seem a lot of work, it means that if you want to alter the use of the lower third, your movie hasn't been harmed in any way.

The good and bad news

We could argue for days as to whether lower-third generation (producing a new clip) is the right approach, given that this doesn't happen with transitions, but it's an argument that has no solution. When you take into account just how much work goes into creating and generating a theme clip as part of your movie, it's easy to understand it would have been too complex for Apple to allow you to edit these complex animations repeatedly. Having to start the process again if you're not happy with the outcome can be seen as frustrating, but just something we need to put up with for now.

Perhaps the real bad news is that your Mac needs to be pretty up-to-date to handle iMovie HD 6 and other iLife applications – a G4 or above is needed, with iDVD requiring a 733MHz processor minimum.

For themes in iMovie HD 6 and some other aspects of iLife, your Mac needs to be using the very latest version of Mac OS X (10.4.4) or else you simply can't take advantage of the functionality.

For those wanting a further professional edge to your video, I have no doubt the upgrade is well worth it. It will be great when more themes are added (my wish would be for at least a couple more themes to be released free mid year), but this may have to wait until another MacWorld.

In the meantime, get creating!

Oh, here's one final hint: once you've made a chapter or bumper clip, try reversing it to create new versions of the animations.

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