ShowMacster for iChat

Philip Roy found this quality program on the net – is it worth the download?

We all know Apple iChat is an exceptionally useful and easy-to-use program. But with a raft of other chat programs out there, there are times we wish iChat could do more. Probably the most useful feature we'd like to see (and probably one we're not likely to get for some time) is connectivity with other chat programs.

ShowMacster is an enhancement to iChat developed by a German software company that easily answers the question we might have about what else is missing in iChat AV. In fact, they've done it so well I have slight worries about their future, particularly with recent rumours suggesting the next version of the Mac OS (Leopard) is set to have more collaborative features included. If that is the case, then Apple needs to go no further than ShowMacster to see how collaboration in iChat could be accomplished.

Videoconferencing for the best of us

ShowMacster is a piece of software best described as an iChat plug-in. It integrates itself into iChat program, providing it (or wrapping around it) with new and handy features in video chats. ShowMacster runs on Mac OS X 10.3 and Mac OS X 10.4 with iChat AV and a built-in iSight camera, or a connected FireWire web-cam (www.showmacster.com, about NZ$32 at time of writing).

After installation iChat will look exactly the same, but when you go to video chat a new button will appear in the video window, with a new drawer attached to the window. This drawer features the ability to store media files for use within a conference (these can be placed into categories for easier management), broadcast an area of your screen, use a Quickdrop feature to add media and movies quickly into a discussion (as opposed to storing them in the media drawer) or open the Sketchboard tool and draw images for your conference buddies to see.

ShowMacster can be used with other users who have the default iChat AV installed as it sends all media through the standard video stream of iChat AV. The video window is also where any movies, images or whiteboard drawings are displayed. Whilst this integration is seamless, you also have to keep in mind that it is going to impact on the performance of iChat.

So how much can it broadcast?

So although the ShowMacster people say that it is possible to stream a DVD to a friend with the product, they also stress that in order for this to work well, you'd need an extremely powerful Mac and a good internet connection. This is because anything sent through the system has to be reduced (compressed) to iChats's default transmission resolution and then sent across the net; an exercise that might seem interesting but would certainly chew up most of the processing power of even the hardiest machine.

These limitations (actually a limitation of iChat itself) are readily evident when you broadcast movies or go to use the sketchbook. The sketchbook window, for example, will not resize to anything larger than the default, as there is little point in it being bigger. iChat simply won't broadcast a larger image; instead scaling images of lower resolution.

That said, I can't see why the sketchbook/whiteboard window couldn't be resizable from a users perspective, even if it achieves nothing in terms of the quality of what is broadcast. It would just make drawing easier for those of us wanting to refine our work.

The drawer within ShowMacster is useful for organising media but can be avoided if you don't feel organised enough. Instead, the Quickdrop option provides a hotspot that you can drop files onto and have them appear immediately in the conference instead of having to place them in the drawer at first. Drop a lot of files (or even a whole folder of files) onto the Quickdrop zone and ShowMacster starts a slideshow you can control.

The Sketchbook tool is effectively a small whiteboard that streams within the video conference environment. While you see the whiteboard as a separate window and are able to pre-prepare your sketch before adding it into the conference (by changing the whiteboard from 'Stand By' to 'On Air') it must be noted that users cannot draw on the board along with you.

Your desktop's showing!

One feature that blew me away was the ability to broadcast a portion of your desktop straight into iChat. It's a little quirky to do and at first all I thought all ShowMacster had done was take a screen shot. Using the "Add live capture" option you are asked to select an area of your screen to capture. You then drag out a selection area (remembering to keep it small because of bandwidth) and ShowMacster creates a small capture file in your iChat drawer.

This is where I got disappointed for a few seconds... then noticed that this file in the drawer had a Play

button. Clicking on this had me broadcasting that area of my desktop straight into iChat's video stream. Amazing! Even more cool is that the file stays in the drawer...so if you're going to be broadcasting a certain area of your desktop repeatedly via iChat, it can stay in the drawer as a preset to use.

It's important to realise that the functionality mentioned is for one license and so therefore is understandably one-way. The sketchbook feature is a nice idea and it's great that you can import an image into the background of the board (so you could upload a map and draw over it for example) but the choice of only free drawing and one stylised circle is disappointing.

Options such as an eraser, pen size and colour choice are good, but a more advanced toolset is needed.

Running the program across a network using Bonjour produced good results for video obviously, but the ShowMacster people don't expect the system to be able to handle high quality video. In fact, they suggest movie clips with a maximum resolution of 320x240, 5-10 fps and a codec such as the Motion JPEG codec (tiny huh?) because iChat broadcasts in a very low resolution. Another quirk I didn't immediately pick up on is that the audio of a movie clip is not broadcast by ShowMacster, but is left to your own Mac speakers (playing the clip) and microphone to broadcast the sound through to users.

ShowMacster – chat different

It's easy to find a number of products to enhance your iChat experience. iChatter brings in text-to-voice functionality and iglasses allows you to play with the image broadcast in iChat (both from www.ecamm.com), whilst iChatExtender (http://improvpastence.com/ichatextender/) changes icons. The popular Chax (www.ksuther.com/chax/) freeware offers a wide variety of small improvements to iChat. However none really offer the potential to make iChat far more collaborative in the way that ShowMacster does.

There is no doubt that the toolset within ShowMacster is useful if you use iChat a lot and shows what I hope iChat would eventually evolve into. In fact, given that it's not uncommon for companies to buy or license enhancements to their own software (Microsoft licensed a Windows Media Plugin for QuickTime, for example) there's no reason why Apple shouldn't do the decent thing, acknowledge the work that the ShowMacster developers have done and buy the product up...lock, stock and barrel. Apple should congratulate ShowMacster's makers for the innovative use of iChat and then bring this functionality into iChat for everyone.

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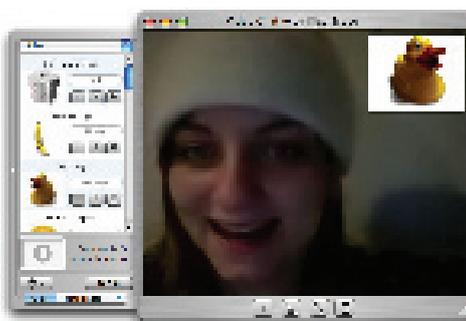

The sketchbook/white-board drawings appear within the video stream and have very basic drawing tools

Look closely and you'll see that a small area of my screen is highlighted and being broadcast into iChat. The image is flipped as standard convention in iChat but will appear the right way for others

The sketchbook with a drawer full of movie clips all inside the ShowMacster window. The image is flipped as standard convention in iChat but will appear the right way for others

Icons/images can be displayed from the drawer or dropped into the Quickdrop area

PROBLEMS WITH ICHAT?

In trying to test the software I had some issues with trying to carry out a video chat. This wasn't related to the software but to iChat and is a common situation that can occur. Unfortunately if the simple solutions suggested by Apple (www.apple.com/support/ichat/) didn't work, there could be a wide range of complex issues that may need looking into. On looking at these issues I discovered a superb resource at Ralph John's iChat Pages (www.ralphjohnsuk.dsl.pipex.com/). With a massive array of knowledge and even links to fake robotic iChat users you can connect to in order to test connections (but be warned, these connections often work while others fail) the site is a superb resource. In the end, my issue appears to be one related to ports and is going to take further work to resolve.