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Review

The DTS Pro Series Surround Encoder A Must-Have Solution.

By Bobby Owsinski
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Hallelujah! For us Mac guys that do authoring, Apple's latest DVD-Studio Pro 3 finally gives us the one feature so sorely lacking compared to higher-end systems--DTS file support. And while that may be well and good, the next biggest problem for the vast majority of DVDSP authors is: "Now that I can actually import them, how do I encode DTS files?" Until now, unless you had a DTS hardware encoder, you were mostly out of luck.

Three Apps, One Package

The DTS Pro Series Surround Encoder is actually three applications within the same package: the DTS Encoder application, the File Packer utility, and the Encryption utility. Both Mac and PC versions come on the same disc, and are protected via a USB license dongle.

The File Packer is actually the first part of the application that needs to be used before encoding. The purpose of the Packer is to bring all the source files together into a single file. The Packer then checks that the sample rate (anything from 44.1 to 96 kHz), bit depth (16 to 24), and the duration are all the same. Although all files must be identical in the previous regard, the Packer can mix AIFF and Wave files together (although I can't think of a situation where that might happen).

The Packer provides parameters for output channel mapping (everything from Lt/Rt, stereo, dual mono, LCRS, 5.1 and 6.1 discrete or matrixed DTS-ES), the frame rate, and timecode start and end times. The channel mapping allows for front and rear channel mapping separately. The encoder will also accept stereo files, allowing you to choose only one channel or both for encoding.

When you've gotten this far, the Packer will then give you the choice of packing only (outputting a .agm file) or packing and encoding. If "Packing and Encoding" is selected, then the DTS Encoder application is automatically launched and a new window pops up on the screen. DTS Encoder has all the same parameters as Packer and inherits most of the same settings from Packer when selected. There are a few additional parameters, though. The ability to choose the output bit rate (either low or high--the actual rate varies for each sample rate), and Dialog Normalization (anywhere from -1 to -31 with -31 being the loudest).

Another parameter of the Pro Series Surround Encoder is the ability to select the output file type. You are given the choice of either a .wav, .dts or .cpt file type. Generally speaking, most newer professional authoring workstations (including DVDSP) prefer the .cpt file type, which is somewhat compacted compared to the .dts file, which is padded with zeros and available more for legacy authoring workstations like MEI or Toshiba. The .cpt file has a marker for the start time of the project; usually meaning that the start of the audio file must exactly match the video file in order to stay in sync. The .wav files are primarily intended for stand-alone audio discs to be used as 5.1 music discs or check discs instead of going through the trouble of authoring a DVD.

When encoding is complete, a prompt will pop up declaring if it was successful or if there were any errors. The encoder can also be used in a stand-alone mode, but the files must be packed first for a successful encode.

The package also comes with an Encryptor which is used to encrypt an .agm packed file for sending over an unsecured network to another location. The parameters are the same as above with the exception of additional Password and Confirm Password boxes. Upon receiving an encrypted file, Encryptor will automatically de-crypt it as soon as the password is entered.

In Use

The DTS encoder is dead easy to use. Select the files, set the parameters, and sit back and wait. And the wait isn't that long either. I encoded a nearly 24-minute episode of an Anime series that we were working on.

The packing took a little over two minutes and the encoding took another 10 or so, which ended up being a bit under twice as fast as the program. And, most satisfying, every file imported into DVDSP, and played back later, without a hitch. About the only thing I had a bit of a hard time with was the file system,

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which is very PC-centric and not nearly as intuitive as the rest of the program. Other than that, it's a piece of cake.

The DTS Pro Series Surround Encoder, is a bit pricey at \$1199, but if you're going to do any serious DVD authoring, it's a long awaited must have.

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