eview by Erik J. Barzeski

Title: Adrenaline Charts Pro
Version: 1.03
Developer: Adrenaline Software, Inc.
Price: $399.99 ($99 academic)
Contact Info: http://www.chartspro.com/
Genre: Charting software
System Requirements: PowerPC, Mac OS 7.5.3 or later, 32 MB RAM, 10 MB free disk space, QuickTime 3.0 or later (on CD-ROM). **Recommended:** PowerPC 604e 120 MHz or faster, System 8.0 or later, 64MB of RAM, QuickDraw 3D hardware acceleration

Brief Introduction

The characters of Scott Adams' Dilbert comic strip would love Adrenaline Charts Pro. With such a powerful weapon, the Pointy-Haired Boss would be nothing more than putty in their hands. That is, until he figured out that his laptop was an Etch-a-Sketch...

Charts Pro chucks a whole lot of pizzazz into what could otherwise be a boring project: making charts. Never before have charts looked this darn good. This software's so nifty your boss might promote you just for using it.

Yes, this application is geared towards folks that, no surprise, need to make charts. Whether you're a home-office worker who needs to impress your vast clientele or a cubicle rat who needs to impress your version of the PHB,

Charts Pro can do it (and more so than AppleWorks or Excel).

et It In, Get It Out

As a scientist, I've spent a great deal of my time working with various charts and graphs. I know the frustration of getting Excel or AppleWorks (née ClarisWorks) spreadsheet data in the right column or row in order to produce a good graph.

Though Charts Pro won't eliminate all data-management hassles, it does make dealing with data a fairly simple proposition. To import data, you can drag an Excel, AppleWorks, or other spreadsheet file to Charts Pro's graph window; you can import it from a text file; or you can simply select a range of cells and copy/paste them in. In any case, a graph magically appears!

Because a plain graph is boring, and because we're Mac users, we like to use graphics to spice up our otherwise dull assignments. Charts Pro enables users to add textures, colors, transparency, background pictures, and much more to charts of all kinds. It can import all QuickTime-compatible images and movies — PICT, TIFF, GIF, JPEG, Photoshop, QuickTime, MPEG, TARGA, SGI, BMP, PNG, and MacPaint. Getting these files into your chart is as easy as drag and drop.

Once you've manipulated the data, added a few cool pictures and textures, and had a heck of a good time doing it, you'll no doubt want to export your chart for use in presentations or other files. Aside from the standard save feature, which saves what could be called your chart "workspace," Charts Pro offers a versatile package of export filters. Charts can be exported as PICT files (with ColorSync profiles, if you choose), JPEG, Photoshop, EPS, QuickTime (movie), or 3DMF. Options allow you to choose your resolution (72-300 dpi) and the Photoshop export saves the file with layers, allowing you to easily incorporate charts into far more elaborate graphics.

Get it in, get it out: that's the key to effective data management. Charts Pro does it as well as any other application I've seen.

alk About Tools!

nlike Excel or even AppleWorks, Charts Pro's interface is not overrun with toolbars. Each of the three toolbars, such as the Tool

palette at right, contains a few, easy-to-understand buttons that perform precise, comprehensible tasks. The buttons in the palette shown here, from top to bottom, select items, rotate the chart, zoom in or out, move the chart, add text, modify light sources, and move the camera viewpoint.

Other toolbars include the Chart Types palette, which allows you to choose from 23 different chart types, including 2D and 3D bar, pyramid, ribbon, line, layer, step, bagel, pie, and esoterica (surface) charts. After you've got the right chart type, the Appearance palette lets you adjust things like axis scale, light intensity, labels and legends, color and transparency, and much more.

In fact, the number of actions and "wow, that's so cool" things you can do may make you the most unproductive employee your company has ever seen! From personal experience, I spent three hours creating a report that I could've done in 30 minutes with AppleWorks. The wasted time was not because I was frustrated with the software, but because I just had to see if I could make my graph even cooler!

This "aw shucks" approach to good interface carries over to the excellent user manual as well. Though Charts Pro has an excellent AppleGuide help system (old style, not the new HTML variety), you should hardly ever need it. After flipping through the user manual a few times, you'll be creating charts with the best of 'em.

utting the Azz in Pizzazz

Charts are boring, right? Business has taught us this; Ross Perot has taught us this. Who are these Adrenaline folks trying to fool? Mac users, that's who — and they do a bang-up job of it, too. Charts Pro, which just so happens to be Mac-only, has more creative pizzazz than should be legal.

Textures
Flat color is boring. Even transparency is boring after a while. Adrenaline Charts Pro comes with over 150 gradients, textures, and tiles. Textures range in style from Canvas, Gradients, Granite, Liquid, Materials, Stone, Tilable, Wild, and Wood. Needless to say, the textures hiding inside the "Wild" folder are my favorites.

Adding textures, like many other things in Charts Pro, is as simple as dragging and dropping the texture file onto the appropriate bar, pie slice, or whatever piece of the chart you wish to embellish. Holding down the

command key while dragging applies the texture to a series of chart items, and holding down option applies it across the column. Textures can be rotated, scaled, and otherwise modified. Creating your own texture file is as simple as creating and saving a PICT file, though careful people will want to create textures which tile well.

D Objects
Charts Pro wouldn't be nearly the product it is without its ability to use 3DMF files as bars. Imagine a bar graph of Babe Ruth's yearly home run totals in which 3-dimensional bats take the place of standard (or even textured) bars. Charts Pro can do it. Over 120 3DMF files are included on the CD-ROM, 55 of which are the flags of various countries. Go ahead, use a DNA strand in your next bar graph! Adrenaline dares you!

he Nags

Though Charts Pro can do a whole heckuva lot of stuff, it does have its drawbacks.

Gimme RAM! Gimme Money!

At nearly $400, I would have trouble recommending this software to anyone that didn't make at least one chart a week. And I wouldn't recommend it to anyone with less than a 120 MHz 604e chip and 64 MB RAM. Academic pricing is available, so if you're eligible, look into it!

Rendering Speed and Artifacts
Rendering speed, using the built-in Adrenaline engine (which also happens to be the best), is best described as slow. Exporting a fairly small movie file took over 10 minutes on a G3/300 with plenty of RAM. Simply Exporting a 300 dpi PICT file may be enough to bring your computer to its whimpering knees. A small price to pay? I guess…

Legends Remain Texture-Less
If you apply a texture to part of a pie graph, the legend doesn't update — it continues to display the single color version. How are you to tell that your zebra portion is actually purple in the legend?

Reset Your Values
Every time you create a new chart, open an existing chart, or otherwise do seemingly anything other than work with your current chart, you've got to reset a couple things: the rendering engine (and if you choose Adrenaline's built-in engine, you've got to reset the quality level) and image size.

Text, Dangit!
Though axes can be labeled and text can be added, it lacks a whole lot of flair. Text is limited to 90˚ angles — it can't match the angle of an axis and it often looks out of place. The best work-around? Just add text in Photoshop. A pain? You betcha.

hat About Wraps It Up

Charts Pro is an awesome, multimedia-packed 3D charting package that blows AppleWorks and Excel out of the water. It's got an intuitive interface, great textures and 3D objects, and can import and export everything you'll ever need.

Unfortunately, it's expensive and requires a bit of patience. The choice is simple: if you've got a fast computer and need awesome charts (or if you've got a slow computer and a lot of patience), grab this software. If you're borderline, check out the Adrenaline website at http://www.chartspro.com/ and download the demo version and some sample charts. Happy charting!

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