MadWorld 2017 Review

By JAYNA LOCKE

ATTENDING A CONFERENCE is a perk that every writer should experience on occasion to increase knowledge and exchange ideas with like-minded souls. MadWorld 2017 reminded me of this fact, as it was rejuvenating in many tangible and intangible ways. This was my third year at the conference, and I was there both as an attendee and a presenter this year.

The topics at the heart of the conference are MadCap Software's growing arsenal of products designed to ease the burdens we bear in the process of authoring user documentation and training. If you are reading this, you know the burdens of which I speak—the numerous challenges involved in developing intelligent, well-organized content that is easy to manipulate, single-source, publish, and translate on our end of the content chain, and easy to search and navigate on the user's end.

I'll return to the intangible benefits of the MadWorld experience later. The most palpable benefit is the knowledge gained. You can attend presentations by real experts with deep understanding of the tools who provide tips, best practices, and cool secrets that you may or may not figure out on your own. Some of these can be huge time savers in practice. In the hospitality lounge, working with the MadCap Technical Support team you will get answers to your in-depth questions.

Why We Attended MadWorld 2017

My team adopted MadCap's primary offering, MadCap Flare, about a year and a half ago, and we have been getting to know its vast inner workings ever since. You can learn the tool to the point of being effective in a day or two, which belies its power. Really developing expertise is a matter of time and familiarity. And we are getting there, but there is always more to learn.

Three of us attended MadWorld 2017 from my team, and therefore we were able to get fairly optimal coverage of the event's proceedings. The challenge was that there were few presentations that weren't relevant to my interests, and I wanted to attend them all. Imagine having to choose between "Tips for a Successful Content Audit," "Tips for Enhancing Your Authoring Experience," "MadCap Central: Project and Task Management," and "Employing User Experience Concepts and Design Methodologies in Your Documentation." It was an embarrassment of riches.

Fortunately, MadCap captured an audio recording of each presentation. The question and answer sessions provide a gold mine of wisdom, and of course those are captured in the audio. What you won't get from the post-conference materials are the live demos. A number of presenters stepped out of their PowerPoints and got into the tool to demo specific features in depth, which means you simply have to be there.

Key Takeaways

You can tailor your experience at MadWorld, choosing from the sessions most relevant to you, so the takeaways are highly individualized. Of course, this almost goes without saying, and is not unique to MadWorld, but I experienced

this very keenly at this particular conference. My two team members and I created a combined calendar with our selected sessions, so we had it all planned in advance. I created a content strategy track, and my team members selected the presentations relevant to their needs and interests, as one of them is an experienced user and the other has only been using the tools for a few months.

Here are a few takeaways from our collected notes:

‣ Create snippets for table styles you use regularly. Drop in the snippet then convert it to text. (Presenter: Nita Beck)

‣ Use a shortcut to access styles. Do Ctrl-Shift-H to pull up the style list. Start typing the style name, and select it from the list. (Presenter: Derek Warren)

‣ Use MadCap Analyzer not only to clean up your project (e.g., find topics in your project that are not in your TOC), but also to check files in and out of source control. (Presenter: Denise Peña)

‣ Create tag clouds of related topics, using a MadCap Flare plug-in, instead of maintaining relationship tables. (Presenter: Scott DeLoach)

‣ Use conditions to tag content for a range of reasons, such as critical "must fix" items and "triage" items that require additional research or SME assistance. (Presenter: Denise Kadilak)

View from the Pulpit

Presenting for the first time at MadWorld was a great experience, and I hope to do so again. I presented two case studies from my team's journey. One focused on how and why we chose MadCap tools over another solution, along with the money and teeth-gnashing spared in the process. The second presentation covered our combined use of MadCap Flare and Confluence for collaborative development in our global, agile environment.

The coolest thing about this experience was the confirmation that others in tech comm are leaping over the same hurdles as we are. I think I learned as much from my presentation attendees in the rich Q & A at the end of my sessions as they learned from me.

It was also tremendous fun to get to know the other presenters. These are all lively, interesting, down-to-earth people who are passionate about sharing knowledge and helping others to succeed.

The Venue

Let me start by saying that MadWorld takes place in San Diego in April, and there are far worse places and seasons to travel. I will not, for example, suffer Las Vegas in the summer months. But I digress. San Diego is lovely and is graced by both the Pacific Ocean and the enormous

Mission Bay. You can traverse the city very easily via Lyft, and it's virtually impossible not to have an awesome time.

Each year that I have attended MadWorld, the venue has changed because the number of attendees increases, requiring a larger location each year. This year we were at the Hard Rock Hotel, which is festooned with rock and roll memorabilia and pictures. Our one poor experience was with the hotel's handling of guests who arrive for early check-in. My two team members were given erroneous time estimates on the availability of their rooms and wasted hours waiting for a text message that never came. Had they known it would be a four-hour wait, they would have gone out to enjoy the city.

The Intangible Benefits of MadWorld

I love this conference for many reasons, not the least of which is putting on capris and getting my feet in the sand in early April, which is still winter where I hail from (Minneapolis). It's also a really great event. The MadCap team treats the conference attendees to buffets of excellent food, regular breaks for pick-me-up goodies and coffee, and after-hours social events, not to mention the little boxes of gummy bears we found on our pillows one night. As an attendee, you never need to spend a dime on food from the moment the conference begins until the final social.

Most importantly, these events offer the opportunity to network and exchange ideas with colleagues and tool experts, and shake off the cobwebs.

We have a fairly solitary line of work, as tech comm professionals. The result is that in the normal course of doing business, it can be very challenging to gain perspective. Attending the occasional conference where you can rub elbows with other career technical writers is an excellent antidote. If you are a current or potential MadCap Software user, MadWorld is an opportunity to talk with other writers and tool nerds, get ideas, and even rethink some of your own practices and methodologies.

Also, until they achieve full celebrity status and require bodyguards, you can have a beer with long-time MadCap Flare trainers like Scott DeLoach and Neil Perlin and say, "Tell me more about that cool tag cloud plug-in."

For more information, including the 2018 Call for Papers, visit www.madcapsoftware.com/events/madworld/. 🄸

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