Hot Lava Mobile Tool Review (Jan 11)

Stephen Walsh, Wednesday, 12 January 2011

Theo Cardiff, Kineo's head of E-learning Development, does a temperature check on the Hot Lava mobile learning development tool. Will it love her Nokia or break its carbon heart?

I love software and I always want the latest version, but when it comes to hardware, I'm slow to adopt. I become attached to my laptop or phone and feel a sense of betrayal as I replace it with the new new thing.

So it's only recently that my faithful pay-as-you-go Nokia has given way to an all-singing-all-dancing iPhone. And wow, what a difference!

Good timing then, when OutStart contacted us and invited us to review the latest release of Hot Lava Mobile, a rapid authoring and delivery solution for mobile learning.

There are two key selling points for Hot Lava Mobile – it is extremely easy to author content and the Mobile Delivery Engine (MDE) enables you to deliver to any phone.

I began with the authoring. It is a PowerPoint add-in and it was a doddle to use. I quickly created sample content. I uploaded it to the MDE (less of a doddle, but I got there). It was time to check out the next selling point – delivery to any phone.

I rummaged through a drawer to retrieve my heart-broken Nokia, giving it false hope that our relationship wasn't through. I browsed to the m-learning and sure enough I could see the content clearly. Next I downloaded it to my all-singing-all-dancing iPhone – still there! On a Blackberry - yes!

So it does really seem that any phone means any phone. Great for the developer who doesn't want to get into the business of building multiple versions of content to suit all of the different devices lurking around your organisation.

The advantage of this approach is also a bit of a drawback though. To ensure that the single version works on any device, Hot Lava Mobile by default has to cater for the lowest common denominator – that's fine, of course, as long as you know that is going to mean design limitations as you won't be able out of the box to make it look like some amazing iPhone app (because it would fry your Nokia's brain). I was hoping to create something awesome, and I ended up with a series of text and graphic screens followed by a less than exhilarating assessment – but fair enough, it did work on every device, which is the real selling point.

Hot Lava includes a limited number of interactions for presenting and exploring content (e.g. assessments, quizzes, surveys, links to external resources and apparently soon branching) in order to provide broad device support. There could be more, but you'd run into the support issue – again, fair enough if you're trying to reach different devices. However, you are able to drop video into your presentations. In fact, having short videos followed by questions is a good design approach to use with this tool and gives some good design flexibility (and we'd argue that makes sense for mobile learning in general – you shouldn't be trying to faithfully reproduce full-blown e-learning courses on these devices - it's more about contextual performance support and reminders).

It brings us onto a bigger subject, probably worth covering separately – you wouldn't expect in a mobile authoring tool platform the same level of flexibility and topic handling that you'd find in a tool to output to the desktop and browser. So you have to think about these tools differently. You don't want your mobile learning to look and act the same as your e-learning – so you'd expect the tools to be different too.

Mobile content deliveryis managed by OutStart's Mobile Delivery Engine (MDE), which detects which phone is being used and optimises the content for that phone. The learner need never be aware of the MDE which is nice.

There are advantages to OutStart's strategy to support multiple platforms, although we wonder if a higher end/lower end option may make sense within the tool. This would enable you to target your audience more precisely to give them the best experience their phone is capable of delivering – though that would move the tool in a direction away from the build once and publish to many devices approach that is present at the moment.

OutStart is moving toward a "higher end option" by offering an application to optimise the experience for the Blackberry, with the ability to download and synchronize content with the Mobile server. They have similar applications for the iPhone and Android coming soon, with other devices in the works. These applications still follow the "build once and publish many" model, but they say it will present the content in a much more "native" way than is possible through a browser.

It's worth keeping an eye on how these applications evolve and if OutStart makes good trade-offs between multi-device support and the ability to deliver advanced solutions for specific devices

In summary, the Hot Lava Mobile solution is good for delivering to a large range of mobile platforms, so if you want to support multiple devices, and you don't want to get into targeting a specific platform, this is definitely worth looking at.

Overall: recommended for basic mobile learning

Hot Lava Mobile forces you to take a fairly basic approach to how you present your content right now, but it's practical for getting messages out there, and as we say, that may be just about plenty for your mobile learning. If you need everyone everywhere to see the content, and you're not too fussed if it's not very exciting content, this is a good solution. The next version needs to provide more opportunity to target specific platforms and show what's possible on higher spec devices like the iPhone.

Criteria	Rating	Comments
Ease of use	Good	The PowerPoint-based authoring tool is really intuitive and simple. The MDE was a bit less obvious.
Instructional design flexibility	Fine for basic mobile	Text and graphic, video and quiz. Good for surveys or quick knowledge tests – you can't do a lot more than this, but for basic mobile learning you probably don't want to. Would be good to see more higher end options in the future
Ability to incorporate existing content	Good	You can import video and audio, however it can only be delivered if the platform being delivered to supports it - not really HotLava's problem but they're working on a fix anyway.
Ability to publish SCORM/AICC compliant courses	Good	The MDE creates AICC compliant packages that sit on the LMS. AICC is preferred over SCORM because it means the MDE can be on a separate server to the LMS.
Technical support available	Good	You get training and a handbook as part of the initial set up after purchase. There is a forum for further questions. I didn't test to see how fast the response was.