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## **Sharpening Your Image: Photo Editing Programs**

By Michael Devitt

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the right picture on your website could be worth thousands of hits. Thanks to an abundance of news-related websites and personal photo galleries created by individual users, the number of pictures that are posted and viewed on line has exploded. As the digital camera market has started to grow and the prices of high-quality color scanners falling by the week, it's now easier than ever to take a picture, scan it and store it in your personal computer.

Scanned images are a great way to generate interest in your website. But what do you do if that new snapshot of your boss has an unsightly glare, or if the flash has left a red-eye effect, or the picture was taken at a crooked angle? And what if you want to combine two images to create a completely new photograph?

Until recently, if you wanted to achieve some of those editing effects you'd have to turn to an expensive, cumbersome application like Webtricity or QFX, or hire someone to edit the images. But now there is a new batch of inexpensive, easy-to-use photo editing programs available that allow even the most inexperienced computer user the ability to manipulate and save digital images to their liking. Among the best are Microsoft's Picture It 2.0, MicroGrafx's PhotoMagic 6.0, and Adobe's PhotoDeluxe 2.0.

### **Picture It 2.0 -- Easy and Friendly**

As if Bill Gates and his minions weren't raking in enough from Windows 95 and 98, now Microsoft has made its own splash into the image editing arena with the latest version of Picture It. The programmers from Redmond put a lot of thinking into this program, because they have produced one of the most inviting, easy-to-use image editing programs. With a wide assortment of special effects and filters, tools for implementing text and adding templates, and a great collection of help files and on-screen instructions, even a computer neophyte will be able to edit and store images without any difficulties.

The image window for Picture It is nearly flawless and user<sup>a</sup>friendly. On the left-hand side of the screen are a half-dozen or so tabs with commands such as "Get Picture" and "Paint & Color Effects." To the right of that is a work area where pictures appear to be edited or touched up; below that is an electronic filmstrip that users can select pictures from. Once you select a task, the program provides you with a number of options and menus to help you accomplish your task.

One of the nice options about photo editors is that most of them come with predesigned templates. Picture It really shines in this area, with dozens of ready-made templates that users can incorporate to create greeting cards, party invitations, certificates, borders and backgrounds for web pages. Another strong point about the program is the set of Smart Task buttons that automatically correct red-eye, tint, brightness and contrast with the click of a mouse. And Picture It makes your job of creating composite photographs and collages much easier than most photo editors, because it treats each element you place together as a separate, selectable object.

There are some limitations to Picture It. Users can only save files in a GIF or JPEG format. There is no unlimited undo feature with Picture It, instead there are a number of step-by-step wizards which can help users cancel certain functions or mistakes they've made. Aside from these minor issues, Picture It is a solid program that should be able to handle most of the average computer user's image editing and storage needs.

### **PhotoMagic 6.0 -- Pricey, but Worth It**

Another good program for new users is MicroGrafx's PhotoMagic 6.0, part of a collection of editing programs. More than just an image editor, PhotoMagic includes tools for drawing your own pictures, media management and website graphics. While these extra features may hurt a customer in the pocketbook, they make up the difference with the number of options they offer to new and advanced users.

If you're looking for a program to retouch images to your liking, they don't get much better than PhotoMagic. The program comes with a number of customizable brushes that let a user lighten, darken, sharpen and smooth individual parts of a photograph. One can remove wrinkles and get rid of gray hair without affecting the rest of the image.

Another nice feature is the amount of help files and wizards included in the program. PhotoMagic comes with an abundant set of tutorials and predefined macros which could save users hours of time and guesswork. One of those, the Effects browser, allows users to preview dozens of special effects before

applying them to a picture. This is an important feature, because like most other photo editors, PhotoMagic doesn't have an unlimited undo option.

One downside to PhotoMagic is that it isn't sold as a stand alone product. It's incorporated into a suite of programs called Windows Draw 6.0 Premier Edition Print Studio, which includes other applications for drawing, 3-D graphics and image management. PhotoMagic cost more than the other two products, about \$99 versus \$40-50 for PhotoDeluxe or Picture It.

PhotoMagic doesn't offer some options seen in other programs, such as creating templates and heavy-duty image management, however, these features are found in other programs included in the Print Studio suite. The program does contain a few unique options: color optimization and creating image maps for a web page. If you're willing to pay more and spend a little more time learning a program, PhotoMagic could be a good choice for many users, especially those who are interested in posting pictures to the Internet.

### **Adobe PhotoDeluxe 2.0 -- Great Features, Great Price**

Years ago, Adobe set the standard for professional-quality photo applications with its award-winning PhotoShop software. Now comes PhotoDeluxe, which may be the best entry-level photo editor currently on the market. With its combination of tools, ease of use and special effects options, it's the perfect program for novices who are just getting their feet wet with editing images, yet it's still powerful enough to handle most of the tasks required by more advanced users.

Like Picture It, the main screen of PhotoDeluxe is a user-friendly setup that's easy to navigate. The upper left-hand side of the screen contains six self-explanatory buttons, such as "Get Photo" and "Send"; clicking on a button opens a series of tabs that lets users perform such functions as cutting and pasting a picture, resizing an image or adding text to a photograph. The program comes with a good amount of ready-made templates to create business, stationery, covers and other items.

There are a few other features that set PhotoDeluxe apart from the other image editing products mentioned. While most programs offer enough effects to keep the average user busy for a long time, PhotoDeluxe comes with nearly every image filter included in its larger, more expensive cousin, Photoshop. It also contains several easy-to-use features for removing red-eye and scratches from pictures and placing text inside photographs.

PhotoDeluxe can also save images in a number of formats (GIF, JPEG, TIFF, PNG, PCX, etc.), and is the only program of the three which can save files as transparent GIF images or progressive JPEG files. While it may not sound like much to the average user, these features can make a big difference in how your images look if they are published on line.

Transparent GIF images let you treat an object -- your spouse's head, for instance -- like a cutout, so that it will display on your Web browser without a background. Progressive JPEG files load into a web browser more conveniently than regular JPEG files because they load in as a low resolution photograph and then get sharpened (rather than having an image scroll in piece by piece). These file formats are important options for webmasters and others who would like to post their images on a website.

Like the other image editing programs mentioned here, PhotoDeluxe isn't perfect. You cannot manipulate text with an image or add any special effects to it, and there's no unlimited undo option. If you make a mistake, you'll have to revert back to the last saved image and start over. But when you consider the program's ease of use, the vast number of special effects and file formats, and the program's low price (\$34.99), it's hard to find a better image editor than PhotoDeluxe.

### **A Few Words of Advice**

Before going out and buying one of these products, make sure you have enough space on your hard drive. Each of the programs reviewed here can take 45 megabytes or more of your hard drive space. The fully-installed version of Picture It takes up 90 megabytes.

Also consider the speed of your computer's processor and the size of your PC's memory. Editor programs use large portions of both physical and virtual memory to produce the special effects to edit mages. All the programs reviewed in this article support the MMX multimedia extensions. If your processor is equipped with that technology, your photo editor will run faster than a non-MMX processor of the same speed.

### **A Final Word on Scanners**

It was brought to my attention that in the August 24th article on flatbed and sheetfed scanners that I did not mention any of the scanners produced by Hewlett-Packard, one of the largest makers of computer hardware. The omission of Hewlett-Packard was not intentional. The company does make a pair of scanners worth taking a look at.

The Hewlett-Packard scanner, the ScanJet5PSE, is a flatbed SCSI model that costs about \$250. As SCSI models go, it's easy to install, and Hewlett-Packard always does a good job with the documentation it includes with its products.

The ScanJet has a number of items in its favor. The ScanJet usually warms up and is ready to scan in 15 seconds or less; it scans images faster than the average SCSI scanner; and its software bundle (Photo-Paint Select, PaperPort, OmniPage and Corel WebGraphics) is impressive.

There are a couple of minor issues. The preview mode for scanning images has very few options. Users can only sharpen or crop images. Some images may need to be adjusted for changes in flesh tone and color after they've been scanned. Overall, the ScanJet 5PSE provides above-average performance and good scanning quality and would be an excellent choice for the home or small office.

Similarly-priced, but much easier to install, is HP's ScanJet 5100C, a parallel-port model that plugs into the back of a PC. Like the ScanJet5PSE, the 5100C comes with a great selection of software -- PrecisionScan and ScanJet Copy for scanning and on-screen controls; PageKeeper Lite for document management; and Adobe PhotoDeluxe for image editing.

The ScanJet 5100C also features a process called IST (intelligent scanning technology), which helps lessen the jaggedness of line scans and automatically adjusts the exposure and sharpness of scanned black-and-white and color photo images. The new technology helps speed up and simplify scanning while producing images that are hard to beat in terms of clarity and quality.

If there's a downside to the ScanJet 5100C, it's that it isn't compatible with some Hewlett-Packard DeskJet printers, particularly the DeskJet 690 series of desktop printers. Aside from that minor incompatibility problem, the ScanJet 5100C would be a great choice for users who want a dependable scanner with a wide variety of image and document management software.

In my next article, I'll begin a two part series on faster ways for computer users to access the Internet. Future articles will cover such topics as online auto repairs and updates on the millennium bug problem.

As always, your comments are welcomed. If you have any questions about the products mentioned in this article, feel free to contact me by e-mail or at the phone number below.

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