

ADOBE PHOTOSHOP ELEMENTS 2.0

by Gordon Woolf

Photoshop is still the program to which most would-be graphic artists aspire. But it is now a \$1500 program and I find it hard enough to find the three hundred dollars or so for every second upgrade.

So what does Photoshop Elements offer at around half the price for just an upgrade to the program it is modelled on?

It may offer all you'll ever need, and, here's the surprising part, a number of extras which cut down on Photoshop's steep learning curve. Forget the idea that this is a dumbed-down Photoshop.

Elements is being marketed as a middle-of-the-road image editor aimed at the gap between entry level programs of the kind which come with scanners and digital cameras and the professional programs for those who spend all day every day at this kind of work.

It offers several levels of step-by-step help without presenting it in a way which will make the user ashamed to have someone looking over his or her shoulder. It certainly works that way for me. I spend most of my time at the computer in layout programs such as InDesign or PageMaker, or in a web program like GoLive or FrontPage, so when I go to Photoshop for all but the most common tasks, I find myself struggling to work out what to do.

Therefore, surprising myself, I have found myself opening Photoshop Elements as a first choice. It shares the internal (.psd) file format of Photoshop, and shares many of the highend tools and third-party filters.

I have switched off the initial welcome screen, with its choices of new file, browsing, connect to camera or scanner etc. but there is plenty of less obvious "novice" help.

First up it looks like Photoshop, and the two best sources of help -- the Hints palette and the Recipes palette -- look exactly like Photoshop palettes. The Hints palette changes every time you click on a tool, giving a brief description and one or more links to greater help. The Recipes palette lists steps to do tasks and for many it offers "do this step for me" options, though again it is discreet. It never shouts "look how easy this is".

When you click on a tool, all the options are in the option bar near the top of the screen -- and change to suit the tool.

Dialog tips are to be found throughout the program, discreetly at the top of dialog boxes and "Smart Messages" almost make it a pleasure to do something wrong -- at last someone has taken the trouble to write meaningful error messages, that tell you what you've done wrong, and link to more extensive help. I don't mind being told, for example "Could not complete your request because the area to clone has not been defined (control-click to define a source point)" with the word "clone" linking to a definition of that process.

Take the example of colour management -- a daunting task which scares me. Elements doesn't take the easy way out -- full colour management is still built in -- but there's a midway choice: "Limited color management -- optimised for web graphics" with some well written advice available from the Help button on the dialog box which offers that as one of three choices.

There are a range of dialogs to change photos, and there is also a Quick Fix dialog which combines many of the possible adjustments with before and after views, and, again, plenty of hints and tooltips.

The Color Variations dialog now includes a wide choice of thumbnails of possible

changes as well as larger before and after miniatures.

The "redeye" brush also works on the green eye reflections of pets, but don't expect this or other tools to always be right first time. On the other hand, they do offer a good deal of flexibility that is lacking in many lesser programs.

Trying to achieve a mask to work on parts of a picture or to achieve a cut-out background is achieved in Photoshop with a variety of tools but many professional users fall back on the Quick Mask, which applies a red semi-transparent overlay to the non-selected part of the picture. This works well because professionals have been brought up against a background of the Rubylith overlay which was manually cut away with a scalpel. In Elements the same effect is achieved with the Selection Brush which allows the user to paint in a selection, or to switch to the mask mode and paint a selection mask. Again it is Photoshop simplified but in an understandable way.

Among other tools added in Elements is the Photomerge command for combining pictures into a panorama. It was there in version one, but, to be honest, it now works, with automatic or semiautomatiuc straightening or cropping.

The File Browser is somewhat slow in comparison to IrfinView which is on every MelbPC CD of the month, but it will do a few things that program won't do, like giving details (though not a preview) of PDF and EPS (postscript) images and allowing these to be opened in the program by rasterising the image (i.e. changing it from a possibly vector image, a drawing, into an image made up of dots like any other photo -- and you can do this at any resolution (or number of dots per inch).

What Elements does not have is the ability to work in CMYK, although it will open CMYK images in a conversion to RGB. This limits the program's use for high quality printed output, and is the reason why the professional will pay for the full program. But photo prints from generally available inkjet printers are likely to work in RGB mode anyway and the web is all RGB.

Even so, this program may suit the small business user who is aware that your printer or print designer will need to convert any picture files you output and that there may be slight colour shifts in the process.

Elements does not have the ImageReady program, once idependent but now bundled with Photoshop, but it does come with a Save for Web dialog which allows most of the optimisation of images possible with ImageReady, even to a limited ability to create animated web images. It also does not create clipping paths such as can be created in Photoshop itself but you do have tools to get rid of backgrounds, and the file formats intended for web use offer transparency without resorting to the hard edged option of clipping paths.

Street price of Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0 is around \$179 but watch for some special offers and for bundling with scanners or cameras.

Those mysterious letters

CMYK, RGB -- what does it mean?

The colours you see on screen are created with three beams of light -- red, green and blue (RGB) -- which, when all are on, produce white light, and when all are off, produce black as an absence of light. Various mixes of all three produce imitations of most other colours which our eyes can see. This is called subtractive colour because in the total you have white and you produce the other colours by taking something away.

Colours on paper or any solid surface, are usually produced by also using three colours, but in this case they are cyan, magenta and yellow, which, in theory add together to produce black. In reality they produce a dark muddy brown, so black is

used to add depth and create a real black with various systems of replacing combinations of the other colours with a percentage of black to avoid putting too much ink on the paper. Black is referred to by its final letter, K, to avoid confusion with blue and so is referred to as the Key.

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captions:

browser.tif

The file browser of Photoshop Elements opens from the palette dock, or as a separate floating dialog.

dock.tif

The palette dock puts the many palettes away neatly but quickly available -- palettes such as the file browser, undo history, filters, effects and layers. Click a tab to open the palette from the well, or drag it out to keep it open as an independent palette.

hints.tif

As you click on a tool, advice is available in the hints palette with links to more detail.

quickfix.tif

The quick fix dialog brings many of the available photo modifications together in one place.

recipes.tif

The recipes palette gives step by step instructions on enhancing text, colouring pictures, creating a colouring book, a web photo album or exporting a picture to email or to a Palm device, among many other choices.

saveweb.tif

The dialog which opens when you select "Save for Web" from the File menu.
