Remember back when KPT 1.0 was released? It was heralded as the most advanced filtering package ever designed for Photoshop plug-in compatible imaging software. Shortly thereafter, KPT 2.1 was released, and again, the masses drooled over the plethora of capabilities it featured. Now MetaTools (formerly HSC Software) has floored us again, this time with KPT 3.0. Not only has MetaTools improved upon an almost perfect piece of software, but it's added a whole host of breathtaking features, once again proving those folks over at MetaTools are among the most innovative software designers ever assembled.

Before getting into the software's capabilities, let's take a brief look at the interfaces incorporated into the various modules. Each new module is larger for easier navigation and the preview screens have received   facelifts, themselves becoming larger and easier to work with. One thing that has remained the same is the somewhat surrealistic design of each module interface. As with the previous versions of KPT, Kai Krause is responsible for the superb artwork incorporated into the new modules.

Personally speaking, I highly appreciate the modern, surrealistic look and feel of Kai's interfaces. I find them exceedingly easy to work and deal with. While indeed far from the norm, Kai's interfaces have found a way of endearing themselves to the millions of people who use them on a daily basis. One can only hope Kai continues producing such far out, easy-to-navigate interfaces; they're part of what make MetaTools products so superb.

The all new KPT Spheroid Designer is the flagship module of KPT 3.0. It's a module that not only lets the user create amazingly real-looking spheres, but allows for the creation of both single and multiple spheres, in addition to providing control over various light sources, bump mapping, curvature, opacity, ambience, gloss, and mutation, among other things.

KPT Gradient Designer is easily the most advanced gradient tool ever created for the computer. It allows the user to create gradients having 512 separate colors and 256 levels of opacity, topped off with built-in channel operations and multiple repetitions. This newest version of KPT Gradient Designer features many new improvements. In addition to the previously mentioned larger preview window, Gradient Designer provides tweaking control over hue, blur, saturation, brightness, contrast, squeeze, and rotate. The user also has the ability to load and replace specific channels from other gradients into the gradient they are working on, meaning an infinite number of gradients can be created from those built into Gradient Designer.

KPT Texture Explorer is a nifty and highly sophisticated texture generator which allows the user to create an infinite number of textures all based on highly complex mathematical algorithms. For KPT 3.0, Texture Explorer has had tweaking controls incorporated into it. These controls offer the same control over hue, saturation, brightness, etc., as in KPT

Gradient Designer. Also new is the increased number of texture derivative panels. In the last version of KPT Texture Explorer, there were 12 derivative texture panels surrounding the central texture panel. In this newest version, the number of derivative texture panels has grown to 16 and the central texture panel is now much larger, making it easier to work with.

Another new addition to KPT 3.0 is KPT Interform. Interform works by taking two Gradient Designer presets and combining them in either a static mode or animated QuickTime movie format. The user sets the Mother and Father panels to the gradients they wish to use and the results are displayed in the Offspring panel. In addition to setting the gradients, the user has control over animation of both the Mother and Father panels. Moveover, the user can easily control the influence of the Offspring, making the texture appear more maternal or paternal, simply by pressing on the Offspring panel and dragging the mouse to the left or right for maternal and paternal influence respectively.

n addition to these main modules, KPT 3.0 sports a variety of f/x modules such as Lens f/x, Blur f/x, etc. Each of these mini-modules allow the user to perform filtering functions directly on the image itself, without having to resort to a separate KPT interface.

The user's manual accompanying KPT 3.0 is nicely written and well detailed. However, in addition to the well-written instructions found inside this manual, the reader is also presented with many light-hearted sidenotes. These small gems make the manual much more entertaining and whimsical. For example, check out these two quotes for the KPT 3.0 Explorer Guide:

"I remember one time when we were kids and we went to visit our grandparents
    in Georgia, my sister got this tick on her arm and it was sucking blood and stuff
    and my grandfather said to not pull it out 'cause its head would still be in her so
    we didn't and he got some oil and a lighter and made it hot so the tick let go and fell
    off. That was the only cool thing that happened during the whole trip."

"At first glance, the Spheroid Designer interface may seem like a bunch of balls
    dropped into a pile of mud. This would, of course, be both a hasty and unflattering
    judgment, revealing to all the world your own lack of understanding in the realm
    of user interface design. The Spheroid Designer is actually a bunch of spheres
    dropped onto an old, stale brownie. Duh."

Technical support for KPT 3.0 is, as usual with MetaTools, free and extremely high in quality. KPT 3.0 also comes with a bonus CD-ROM which includes tips and techniques for using Kai's Power Tools, images composed with Kai's Power Tools, online help and special offers.

nce again, MetaTools has marvelled the Macintosh community. KPT 3.0 is, without a doubt, the best Photoshop plug-in filtering package ever conceived. Not only is it a very useful tool for enhancing and creating fascinating computer art—it's downright fun. Users will find themselves getting lost in the rich feature set of this exceptional product. If you're at all interested in image enhancement and creation, KPT 3.0 will
surely satisfy your artistic whims. If you're a professional image editor,
KPT 3.0 is one set of tools you cannot do without.

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oftKey International, Inc. Price: $40 US.
equirements: System 6.X with 2MB of RAM, System
7.X with 4MB of RAM, 500KB hard disk space for
Talking Dictionary application, 15MB hard disk space
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Demonstrating an excellent command of the english
language is not an easy task for many individuals. With
the english language being among the most difficult on
earth to master, it's no wonder. Good spelling abilities
are a must, and so too is a broad understanding of word definitions. And as if all this weren't enough, a large vocabulary base is required to engineer well written and intelligent documents.

Of course, a good hardcover dictionary and thesaurus are indispensable tools toward good writing, but they're inconvenient and disturb the flow of one's work. SoftKey International, recognizing the need for a well-constructed dictionary and thesaurus combination, offers the American Heritage Talking Dictionary.

The Talking Dictionary contains over 200,000 words, each complete with definitions, proper usage techniques, hyphenation, idioms, synonyms, homographs, pronunciations, inflections, abbreviations, and sample sentences. On top of all that, the Talking Dictionary actually pronounces the word when it first comes up on the screen. This feature is exceedingly useful, especially when using unfamiliar words and for those new to the english language. The Talking Dictionary also gives users the ability of hearing the proper pronunciation of the word anytime they wish simply by clicking on a speaker icon positioned next to the word. And perhaps best of all are the pleasant human voices used to speak each word. No

synthetic computer voices here—only the real thing: some male, some female, each randomly selected every time the Talking Dictionary is launched.

Another nice feature of the Talking Dictionary is the WordHunter. WordHunter allows you to find a word simply by typing a partial or complete definition. Type the definition in your own words, and WordHunter will search for all words fitting within the parameters of the definition you typed. Once the search is complete, all words which fit the definition parameters will be displayed for you to select from. This feature alone makes the Talking Dictionary well worth every penny of its retail price.

The anagram feature is great for those who enjoy word scramble puzzles. It allows the user to either scramble or de-scramble words. While many would consider this cheating in the great world of word puzzle games, I'd argue the Talking Dictionary is a great tool to have at your side. After all, what fun is a word puzzle if you never solve it?

The Talking Dictionary also comes with the Roget's Thesaurus containing over 1.5 million words. Having such a massive thesaurus is a real boon, especially for those who do a lot of writing. It's nice to have an almost infinite selection of words at one's fingertips.

The Talking Dictionary supports AppleEvents, which means it can be used in programs such as word processors that also support AppleEvents. WordPerfect, for example, can be set to use the American Heritage Talking Dictionary as its primary dictionary for spell checking. While this feature is indeed nice to have, using the Talking Dictionary in such a manner is painfully slow on some of the older CD-ROM drives. It takes forever just to spell check a single paragraph. With new quad-speed and faster CD-ROM drives or if the Talking Dictionary software is loaded directly onto your hard drive, however, the speed is acceptable.

The interface of the Talking Dictionary is rather sparse; no flashy graphics or icons can be found. This is rather strange in that the Windows version displays a very attractive GUI. Instead, the Mac version of the Talking Dictionary requires the use of standard pull-down menus in order to launch its various commands. This shortcoming aside, the Talking Dictionary is a very well laid-out piece of software, capable of providing practically everything anyone would ever need from an online dictionary/thesaurus.

The Talking Dictionary comes with its user's manual on the CD-ROM. It's well laid out and provides adequate instruction for every facet of the Talking Dictionary. I actually would like to have seen a standard book-style user's manual. It's a pain having to switch back and forth between the application and manual in order to learn specific aspects of this software. Of course, the manual can be sent to a printer, but I find even this solution a bit irritating. After all, a product should be as easy and hassle-free to use as possible. Having to print a user's manual hardly meets those requirements—and it doesn't save any paper, either.

he American Heritage Talking Dictionary scores high points for its capabilities and many useful features. It gets a moderate score, however, for its bland interface and lack of a separate user's manual. Overall, the Talking Dictionary is a very worthwhile purchase. Users who write a lot will find it an indispensable vocabulary tool; puzzle solvers will welcome it when working on those difficult word and crossword puzzles. If I were the head honcho over at SoftKey International, however, I would make the sprucing up of the Talking Dictionary interface top priority. Doing so will go far toward making it the computer dictionary by which all others are judged.

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The Mac and graphics. As I've said a gazillion times
before, the two were made for each other. And as a
result of their obvious match, many different gra-
phic imaging packages have emerged over the last
few years—some quite good, and others quite bad.

One new imaging package is PhotoFix from MicroSpot. PhotoFix is an entry level graphics
imaging package intended for both novice and professional users. While PhotoFix might be
marginally fine for the neophyte and perhaps even the novice user, it's certainly not a
product for the professional graphic artist.

PhotoFix sports most tools available with high-end imaging software, such as dodge, burn,
crop, rubber stamp, magic wand, etc., but it lacks what have become basic abilities with
other imaging packages. For example, while PhotoFix supports many Photoshop compatible
plug-in modules, it only comes with one itself (that being raw export). As a result, users will
have to purchase additional software if they prefer a healthy library of filtering tools...and
most users do. And, while PhotoFix can use many Photoshop compatible plug-ins, it cannot
use those which come with Photoshop, such as lens flare and lighting effects.

To further limit PhotoFix's usefulness, sharpen and blur capabilities are extremely limited.
PhotoFix only supports 2 levels of sharpen and blur. Additionally, unsharp masking and
Gaussian blur capabilities are non-existent, making PhotoFix practically useless for any
image sharpening or softening task.

Tonal balance controls are also surprisingly missing from this product. Basic Levels and
Curves controls are not supported, resulting in the user having to resort to third party plug-in
modules to complete such tasks. And while PhotoFix supports masking to a degree, it does
not support channels or layers, again severely limiting its usefulness to serious graphic
artists.

PhotoFix supports RGB, grayscale, indexed and bitmap images, but it lacks support for Lab,
Duotone, MultiChannel and CMYK images—again resulting in a product which merits little
use among professional artists.

PhotoFix does incorporate some rather nice printing technology it refers to as HQP printing. HQP allows the user to select from different printed variations of an image, showing a range of Cyan, Magenta, and Yellow corrected images so the user can select the image demonstrating the best correction values. HQP also checks an image for its dominant colors and adjusts brightness, color and contrast to get the best results from the printer the image is being printed on. But, while this feature is indeed spiffy, it's overshadowed by the glaring inconsistencies evident throughout the rest of the software.

In order for PhotoFix to be considered even marginally useable by serious graphic artists, the user must add such software as Intellihance from Extensis for color correction work and KPT Convolver   from MetaTools for sharpening, blurring and a whole host of other detailed filtering work. And even still, PhotoFix has severe limitations that go far to irritate its users.

PhotoFix does comes with a bonus image CD-ROM and an image browser. These bonuses are nice, but rather useless when one looks at the package as a whole. The user manual accompanying PhotoFix is sparse and not well detailed at all. Technical support is satisfactory, however, and it is free.

hile perhaps a serious first effort, MicroSpot has severely missed the mark with this version of PhotoFix. It's not a product for the professional as MicroSpot claims; nor does it come close to being worth its $200 US price tag. Other imaging products, such as Color It! from MicroFrontier, are much more advanced and cost significantly less. If you're a neophyte or novice imaging artist, PhotoFix isn't going to assist you much with your efforts. And if you're a professional graphic artist, PhotoFix is completely unusable. Hopefully, MicroSpot will correct the deficiencies inherent with this product. Until then, buyers are best advised to look for another imaging product.

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