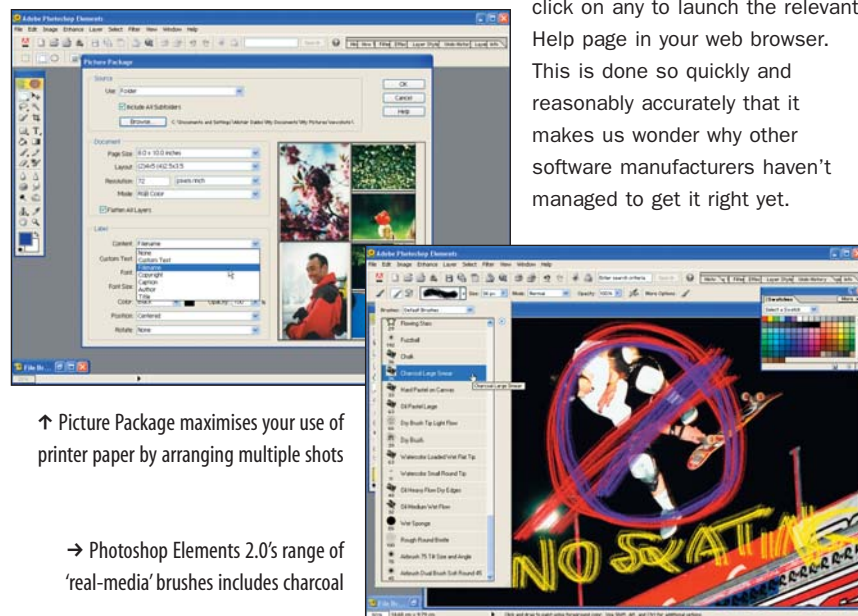Photo-editing software

Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0 beta

Between the last two releases of Photoshop, Adobe launched a lower cost photo-editing software package on to an unsuspecting market, known as Photoshop Elements. More than merely a cut-down version of the best-selling Photoshop 6.0 product, Elements showcased some of the new features which would eventually appear in Photoshop 7.0. Now Adobe has updated the package to make it more powerful and even easier to use and, judging by the beta release we tested, has made a pretty good job of it too.
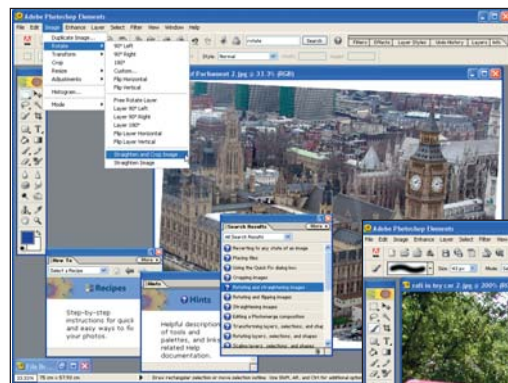
Photoshop Elements 2.0 is targeted at the semi-professional and serious hobbyist photographer. To this extent, it competes head-on with products such as Ulead Photo Impact and Jasc Paint Shop Pro rather than ultra-cheap entry-level utilities for home users such as Microsoft Picture It or Roxio PhotoSuite. Elements 2.0 also comes the closest yet to killing off the childish Adobe PhotoDeluxe and identity-confused Photoshop LE, except perhaps in certain scanner bundles.

Of course you could push the boat out and purchase Adobe Photoshop 7.0, but deep down you'd know that its advanced prepress and web animation features would be wasted – Elements 2.0 is really the program that you need.

← Photoshop Elements 2.0 can straighten and recrop badly scanned images in one go

↓ Create selections using an intuitive brush tool instead of the conventional marquees
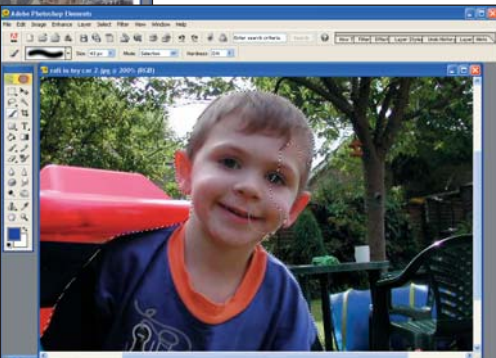
Looks familiar

Apart from the addition of a Shortcuts button bar, the Elements interface is almost identical to Photoshop 7.0's, complete with Options bar, Palette well and, of course, Adobe's familiar floating-and-docking palette design. That's not to say the interface is terribly intuitive to someone who's never used a photo-editing package before, so Adobe has built in a number of Help extras. A new Hints palette provides information on the currently active tool and how to use it, and a How To palette contains suggestions for photo projects (Adobe calls them Recipes) along with tutorials on how to use them.

The Options bar now sports a Search field for finding a palette of Help locations; click on any to launch the relevant Help page in your web browser. This is done so quickly and reasonably accurately that it makes us wonder why other software manufacturers haven't managed to get it right yet.

Brushed up

The star new feature of Photoshop Elements 2.0 is the Selection brush, a tool that lets you 'paint' to designate a selected area in an image. Previously, you would have to use marquee, lasso or magic wand tools, or paint a mask and convert it to a selection afterwards. This simple facility will save hours of fiddling when compositing multiple images. It even doubles up as a masking brush, and you can toggle back and forth between both modes at any time without having to restart from scratch.

The hands-on user who likes to work with brush tools will appreciate the inclusion of a number of 'real-media' effect brushes similar to those in Photoshop 7.0. These are tools which produce the effect of oil paints, charcoal, chalks, watercolours and pastels, in addition to the existing range of airbrushes and party shapes. All you have to do is choose the brush style you want from a drop-down list in the Options bar.

The effects are nowhere nearly as realistic as those created using a dedicated package such as Corel Painter

↑ Picture Package maximises your use of printer paper by arranging multiple shots

→ Photoshop Elements 2.0's range of 'real-media' brushes includes charcoal

See our digital imaging tips & tricks tutorial on page 190 for hints on using Adobe Photoshop Elements
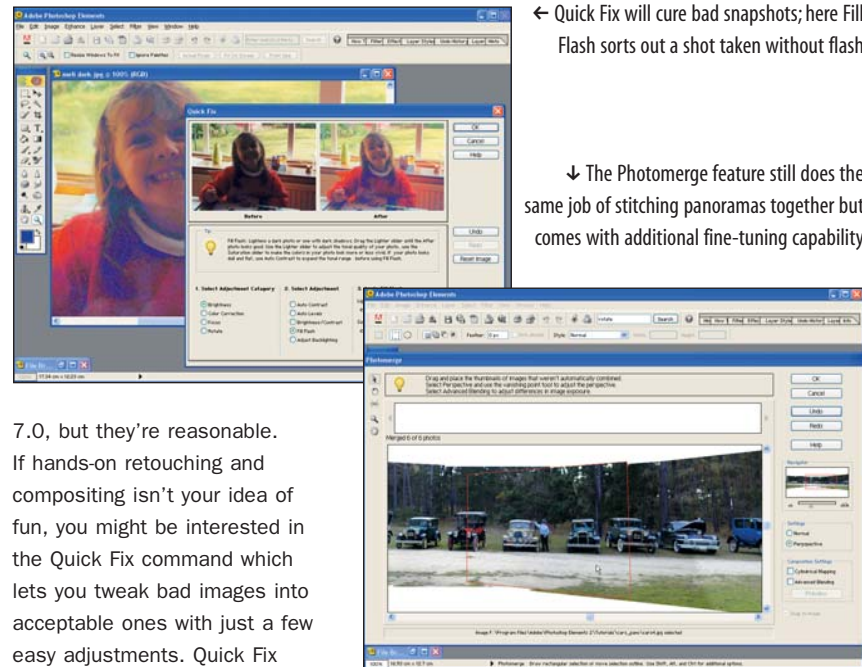
← Quick Fix will cure bad snapshots; here Fill Flash sorts out a shot taken without flash

↓ The Photomerge feature still does the same job of stitching panoramas together but comes with additional fine-tuning capability

7.0, but they're reasonable. If hands-on retouching and compositing isn't your idea of fun, you might be interested in the Quick Fix command which lets you tweak bad images into acceptable ones with just a few easy adjustments. Quick Fix presents a before-and-after dialog window along with a small number of colour enhancement options and sliders. The idea is to offer the frequently used commands for correcting the most common problems in a photo, such as white balance, lack of focus, overexposure or the classic scenario where your camera flash fails to trigger.

Limited additions

Adobe has added several smaller new features to the mix which may or may not be of use to you. For example, you can now scrub through a video file and capture individual movie stills for editing. There's an Attach To Email command which handles the rescaling and compression issues for you automatically – just as well since you can't actually customise them yourself.

Beyond this, the upgrade largely consists of small enhancements to existing features to make them more functional or easier to use. The File browser now sports full metadata and digital camera EXIF information, turning it from a basic thumbnail viewer into something more like an image database. It even supports batch commands so, for example, you can rename large numbers of selected image files to a certain naming convention in a single automated process. The File browser floats independently of the main program window, by the way, which makes it very handy for anyone with a large display.

Another significant improvement can be found in the
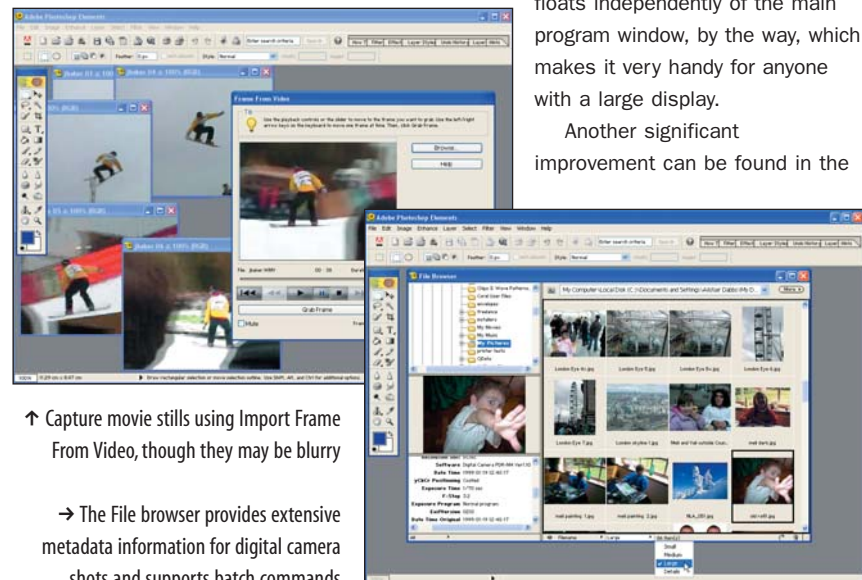
↑ Capture movie stills using Import Frame From Video, though they may be blurry

→ The File browser provides extensive metadata information for digital camera shots and supports batch commands

Photomerge command for combining multiple images into a single panorama. Although the initial stitching process is automated, you are allowed more scope for fine-tuning the stitch, so avoiding the problems of mismatches and ghosting.

The Picture Package function feels more intuitive and customisable, and we see this as an important part of the program. Picture Package arranges multiple images (or multiple sizes of the same image) on one canvas to allow efficient printouts on to expensive photo paper. As well as seeing a clear thumbnail preview of the page, you simply click on each image area to change it to something else interactively, and you can switch between a large number of layout templates on the fly. Our only concern was that you can't specify your own paper size, but must choose from a hard-coded pop-up list. Other new features include additional web photo galleries, the ability to generate Acrobat PDF (portable document format) slideshows, and more effects, filters and layer styles.

As a fresh purchase, Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0 is exactly what the photographer on a budget needs, being both powerful and easy to use. As an upgrade, we're not so sure, especially with no reduced upgrade price on offer.

Verdict

Providing everything from special brush effects to layer styles, Photoshop Elements 2.0 is as close as you'll get to your own copy of Photoshop at one sixth of the price. As well as being more powerful, it is also far easier to use than similarly priced software aimed at hobbyist photographers. It's no toy, but using it is child's play. ■

Alistair Dabbs

Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0 beta

System requirements: Pentium-compatible processor; 128MB RAM; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 150MB hard disk space.

Adobe: 020 8606 4001
Website: www.adobe.co.uk
Price: £79

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use									8		
Features									8		
Value for money									8		
Overall									8		

Web graphics software
Xara Webstyle 3.0

There's nothing unique about a low-cost software utility that churns out web graphics. What makes Webstyle 3.0 special is that it handles everything from simple graphics processing to slick JavaScript-enhanced functions. The results are nothing less than fantastic, and it's so easy that a child could use it unaided.

Webstyle 3.0 is a natural progression from previous versions of the program – all the old features are still there, letting you generate various styled headings (including 3D), customise logos and trawl through templates for bullets, buttons, backgrounds and dividers. You'll also find the excellent banner ad creator, which provides a simple way of customising a large variety of generic readymade animations for style, content and speed, saving the result as highly compressed animated GIFs.

↑ You can produce a fully functional navigation bar with drop-down menus in under two minutes

→ No other program makes creating banner ads as easy as this

Easy access
New to this version is the NavBars and Menus section for producing DHTML (dynamic hypertext markup language) and JavaScript-enabled navigation bars for your entire website, complete with animated drop-down menus. This can be a challenge in most web design packages, but Webstyle 3.0 makes it incredibly simple – pick one of the templates, enter your headings and menu texts, style them up and try them out. If you don't like the style, you change it with a single click, instantly updating all your headings.

For the ultimate code-free approach, Webstyle can be launched from within Macromedia Dreamweaver and Microsoft FrontPage. It inserts the code in your HTML file and saves the graphics in your project folder – no copy-and-paste required.

Also new to this release are some photo-editing tools. These are extremely basic, but that's the whole point: you enhance pictures with simple slider controls and save them at any size with good compression rates. There's also a function for creating thumbnail versions of your images, so you can prepare web pages with the thumbnails which then link

to the full-size pictures. Webstyle 3.0 even generates the page code required to open the pop-up window when the thumbnails are clicked.

User-friendly
Throughout, Webstyle's program interface is striking in its clarity and usability. It's all a matter of picking templates and styles, switching toggles on and off, selecting items from pop-ups and so on. Everything you do is previewed in real time at full rendered quality using Xara's cutting-edge vector graphics engine, so you don't have to keep jumping out to a web browser to see what you've done. It's hard to imagine how the interface could be improved, it really is that good.

But the real stunner is the quality of the graphics and animations you end up with. Contrary to expectations, for a £50 program, Webstyle 3.0's output is highly compressed and looks fantastic. Current Webstyle users should note that this version includes several hundred new templates and styles, plus some decent display fonts in TrueType format.

No other program makes it so quick and easy to build such professional web

graphics, animations and interactive site menus. It will save you days of work, not just hours. If it could export to Flash format too, we'd offer to have its babies.

Verdict
At last, a totally code-free way of producing advanced navigation bars, banners and rollovers plus a whole bunch of other web graphics. Webstyle 3.0 allows you to create websites with visual sparkle, without a team of professional designers to help out. And it's incredibly easy to do. ■

Richard Boardman

Xara Webstyle 3.0

System requirements: Pentium-compatible processor; Windows 95/98/NT 4.0/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 55MB hard disk space.

Xara: 01442 350 000
Website: www.xara.com
Price: £45, £52 with printed manual

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use										10
Features								8		
Value for money									9	
Overall									9	

Web design software
Discreet Plasma

If you already create 3D content for web pages, you're not only a rare commodity, you're clearly a designer of great patience. For there's little doubt that the main hurdle towards the adoption of 3D on the internet has been the labour-intensive and expensive authoring process involved.

However, this is all about to change, and soon there will be no excuse not to test the waters of this growing medium thanks to the arrival of Discreet Plasma. Plasma lets you create and export 3D directly to popular Flash and Director Shockwave formats without requiring skills in multiple applications.

Big brother studio
Although Plasma is Discreet's first offering targeted specifically at 3D web content creators, its interface and features are more than a nod towards the company's existing high-end 3D Studio Max 4.0 software. Scenes created in 3D Studio Max can even be opened in Plasma, although the reverse isn't yet possible.

Studio Max users – and the majority of 3D authors – will be most comfortable with the way the program works, but even beginners won't be overwhelmed. Plasma includes a range of standard and extended geometric primitives as a starting point for your artwork, although you can also base your design on imported AutoCAD, VRML and even Adobe Illustrator files. Modifiers, including basic deforms and mesh and spline editing, are applied to these from a basic panel at the window's side.

When it comes to animating your objects, the powerful Track view gives you excellent control over your animation settings, using a familiar timeline display to track and edit keyframes over the course of the animation. It allows you to include other multimedia elements, such as sound too. The Track view is also home to the Function Curve Editor, which lets you adjust the way an object changes its value over time in a realistic manner.

Plasma supports standard 3D animation techniques, including forward and inverse kinematic animation, so you can establish the position of a linked

→ You can easily extrude text typed directly into the program's main window

↓ Modifiers are applied to objects from a pane on the right
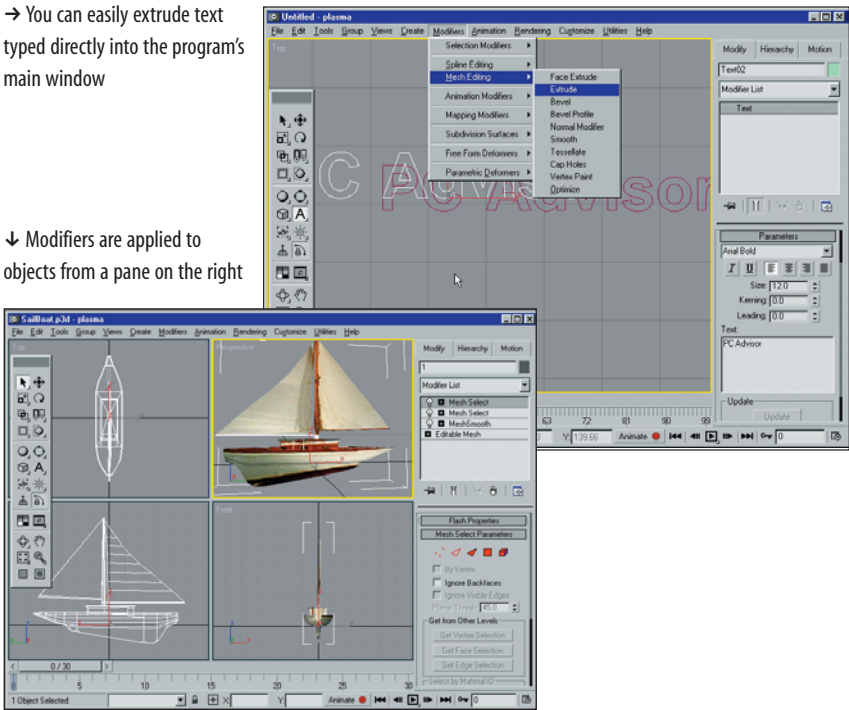
object in relation to the angles of other joints. There's also support for 'skin and bones' functionality, which alters the behaviour of an object's skin according to the position of the bones beneath it.

Discreet Plasma includes a Havok dynamics plug-in that lets you add realistic behaviour to your animations. As skinning and Havok dynamics are exportable to Macromedia's Shockwave Studio, this allows for the creation of powerful interactive productions.

Quick as a flash
We were most impressed with Plasma's built-in Flash rendering engine. It's surprisingly powerful, offering a choice between Flash and bitmap rendering, and supporting cartoon, gradient and flat vector shading styles. It's also pleasingly fast, although it occasionally choked on more complex animations.

The price of the package, though hardly dropping into the budget range, compares well with other 3D applications – for example, it's less than a fifth of the cost of 3D Studio Max. But its relative value for money doesn't exclude one significant drawback: its dire documentation. Aside

from the flimsy installation guide, the only printed material is a 150-page tutorial guide, which doesn't explain the range of the program's features adequately. Another limitation is that it only supports Windows 2000 and 98, although in testing it worked fine under Windows XP.

Verdict
Although hindered by poor documentation, Discreet Plasma is both intuitive and powerful. It provides the best method yet for Flash and Shockwave authors to add quality 3D content to their sites. ■

Tom Gorham

Discreet Plasma

System requirements: 300MHz Pentium-compatible processor; Windows 98/2000; 128MB RAM; 300MB hard disk space.

Discreet: 020 7851 8000
Website: www.discreet.com
Price: £525

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use								8		
Features									9	
Value for money								8		
Overall								8		

Video-editing software
Adobe Premiere 6.5

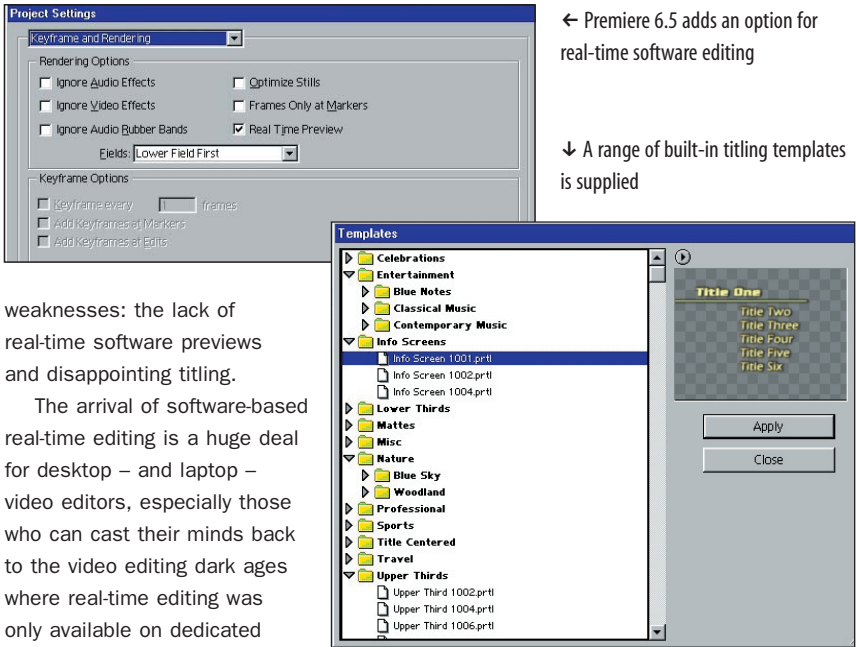← Premiere 6.5 adds an option for real-time software editing

↓ A range of built-in titling templates is supplied

If there is one rule of software development that can be gleaned from recent history, it's this: never stop innovating. From Lotus 1-2-3 to WordPerfect, the PC software landscape is littered with applications that slowed their pace of development and let others usurp their once-dominant position – you stay at the front on merit not status.

In the video-editing field, Adobe Premiere illustrates what can happen when you stop trying quite as hard. When this application arrived on the embryonic mid-range video-editing scene in the mid-90s, it quickly assumed pole position. Then it performed the software equivalent of navel-gazing by leaving increasing gaps between disappointing updates. It was posted missing at the beginning of the digital video boom that revolutionised the video-editing market and a host of competing products, such as Avid Express and Ulead Media Studio Pro, ate away at its lead.

Making the transition
But Premiere at last managed to recover, version 6.0 providing belated but vital support for FireWire and DV (digital video)-enabled hardware. Although it's only a year since that timely return to form, this new version addresses two remaining major weaknesses: the lack of real-time software previews and disappointing titling.

The arrival of software-based real-time editing is a huge deal for desktop – and laptop – video editors, especially those who can cast their minds back to the video editing dark ages where real-time editing was only available on dedicated systems costing five-figure sums. Desktop PC users had to wait an age for transitions to render, or employ expensive add-on cards.

Real-time playback – which can be toggled on and off via a dialog box – removes the need for extra hardware. Effects, transitions and edits are all shown in real time on your monitor or external video display. However, this function won't be for every Premiere user as you need a high-end PC to benefit significantly.

Entitled to praise
Another increasingly glaring weakness of previous versions was Premiere's impotent titling facilities, which hadn't seen a facelift since version 4.0. If you wanted to add decent-looking titles to a Premiere-created movie, it meant a trip to a third-party application. Well, not any more – Premiere 6.5's new Title Designer feature takes care of the vast majority of titling needs. Its window shares similarities with other Adobe graphics applications. By selecting the Text tool from a floating palette, titles are added to a central text input area and the video background can be toggled on and off to preview the effect. Saved titles are then stored in the project window and dragged into the timeline in the same way as other media elements.

The quality of the titled text itself is also a vast improvement. Full DTP-level typographical styling is available, including pixel-level tracking and kerning. Nearly 100 extra fonts are bundled with the program – although not all are really suitable for titling purposes. A Styles window below the text input area allows you to choose from a range of special text styles, including a configurable level of drop shadow and emboss effects, with adjustable opacity. Usefully, formatting attributes can be stored for future use, so you can build up an effective titling library of your own.

The Title Designer's Tools palette also includes rudimentary drawing tools,

↑ Titled text can be adjusted using a range of DTP-style controls

→ Title Designer's interface resembles that of other Adobe graphics applications

among them a Bezier pen and a selection of basic geometric shapes that can be dragged over the titling window. Adobe Illustrator it isn't, but it's a pleasantly easy method of spicing up an otherwise bland title track. The titling isn't static either: you can crawl titles horizontally across the screen or roll them vertically with adjustable speed settings.

Alongside a batch of still images suitable for backgrounds, Title Designer includes 170 titling templates, created for various environments, including business, nature and travel. If undeniably biased towards an American market, they do at least allow for swiftly produced and professional-looking results.

Production values
Another area that Adobe has looked at is DVD output. DVD is now a standard video format, and Premiere has added support for DVD authoring in the shape of a new Mpeg encoder. The encoder isn't restricted to Mpeg-2, the format used by DVD discs, and it also encodes to Mpeg-1, suitable for Video CD authoring.

Mpeg-2 files can be seamlessly exported into a bundled third-party DVD authoring application, Sonic's DVDit LE, which lacks only a few features of the full version such as the ability to create chapter points. Most users will find it perfectly capable.

Premiere has kept an eye on the audio side of things by adding three DirectX plug-ins that improve sound quality, a boon if you're recording video using a built-in microphone that picks up extraneous audio or cancels noise automatically. The EQ adjuster lets you emphasise particular audio elements, while the Dynamics plug-in evens out peaks and troughs in sound
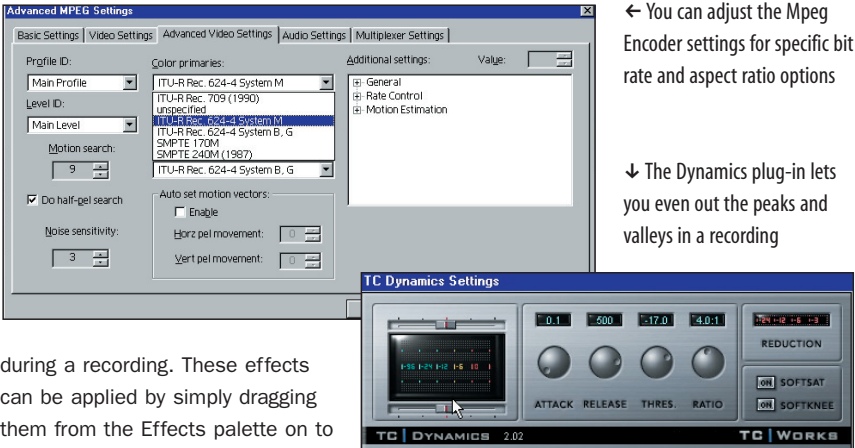
← You can adjust the Mpeg Encoder settings for specific bit rate and aspect ratio options

↓ The Dynamics plug-in lets you even out the peaks and valleys in a recording

during a recording. These effects can be applied by simply dragging them from the Effects palette on to the timeline.

While these major amendments deserve to hog the headlines, Premiere, now fully Windows XP savvy, has also made less immediately obvious improvements, including ever-widening support for digital video hardware. Premiere 6.5 also adds the ability to import audio and video in Windows Media format and a handful of extra After Effects filters.

Further deal-sweetening includes an upgrade of the bundled SmartSound Quicktracks utility, which lets you produce royalty-free soundtracks, to add more than a dozen new source tracks. Amid these changes, Premiere has resisted the temptation to tamper with the program's interface and it remains virtually identical to previous editions – no bad thing as the Premiere workspace is streets ahead of its competitors.

It's still uniquely versatile: not only can you adjust and store your workspaces, but you can also choose between timeline editing modes. Single-track editing, in which clips and transitions appear in a single video track, tends to be favoured by professionals, while A/B editing, which splits transitions and video tracks, is ideal for beginners. By offering a choice of both, Premiere's appeal is extended across the broadest spectrum of video editors.

There are still a few things Premiere could do better. Other Adobe applications have been plundered in the past for excellent features, such as the History palette that allows you to return to previous editing states. An easy-to-use macro-recording tool, such as that which already appears in Photoshop and Illustrator, would make common editing tasks much less of a chore.
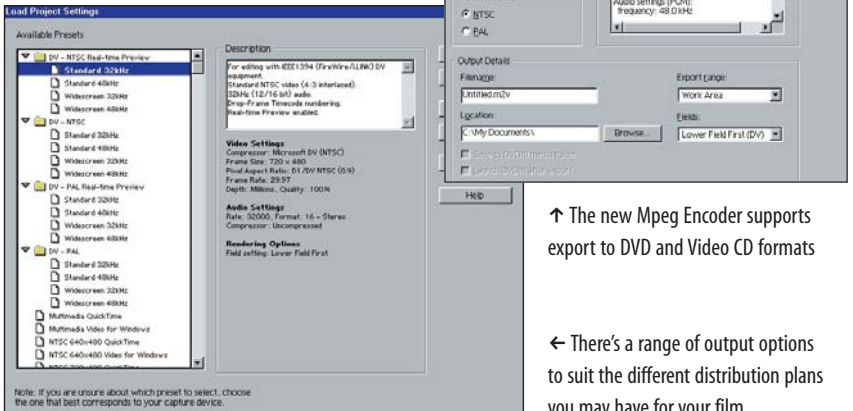
Verdict
The addition of real-time software editing and a long-awaited titling feature make this a must-have upgrade. Although still priced out of the range of consumer's pocket, this release ensures that Premiere remains the application of choice for PC video editors. ■

Tom Gorham
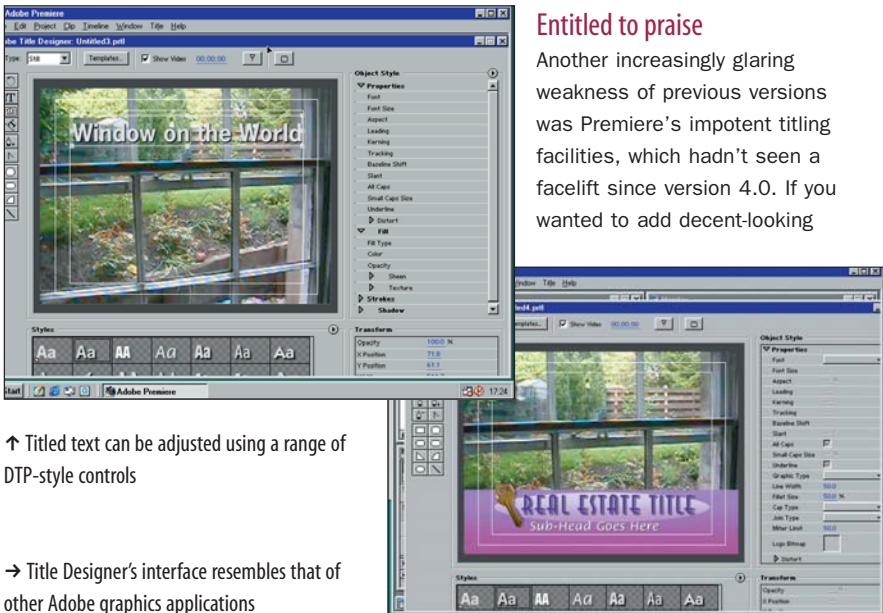
↑ The new Mpeg Encoder supports export to DVD and Video CD formats

← There's a range of output options to suit the different distribution plans you may have for your film

Adobe Premiere 6.5

System requirements: 500MHz Pentium; Windows 98 SE/2000/Me/XP; 128MB RAM; 100MB hard disk space.

Adobe: 020 8606 4001
Website: www.adobe.com/premiere
Price: TBA (US $549, upgrades $199)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use									9	
Features									9	
Value for money								8		
Overall									9	