

DVD authoring software round-up

With standalone DVD players gradually replacing VHS recorders in the living room, more of us are dabbling with DVD authoring – making DVDs from digital video footage. Armed with a La Cie combination CD-RW/DVD-RW drive (www.lacie.co.uk) and four DVD authoring packages to try out, we plugged in a digital camcorder and set about making movies.

Adaptec DVpics Plus

This is the true all-in-one approach to DVD: a three-port FireWire capture card, video-editing program and authoring tool bundled together. As such, it's sure to appeal to anyone who has a digital camcorder but no way to transfer footage to a computer.

The video capture and editing component is a cut-down version of MGI VideoWave 4.0. It lacks advanced features like TimeWarp and Chroma Keying, but is still perfectly capable and easy to use. Its simple storyline approach – just drag and drop edited clips into the right order – is ideal for beginners.

Sonic MyDVD 3.0 is also bundled. This straightforward, if rather limited, authoring tool supports both Mini DVD (DVD content on a CD-R) and DVD formats. You start by designing a title page for your digital video project. The templates are universally cheesy, although you can create your own unique designs. Next, you import the video clips from your hard disk and link them to menu buttons.



DVpics Plus includes a software DVD player, so that every time you burn a Mini DVD project it can be played on any CD-ROM drive. Smart thinking, but it's a pity that VCD (video CD) format isn't supported (the packaging mistakenly claims that it is). There's also no disguising the awkward lack of integration between VideoWave and MyDVD.

MGI VideoWave 5.0

This is precisely why MGI's VideoWave 5.0 package is so appealing. Here, DVD authoring is an integral part of the main program. Simply capture digital video from a camcorder, edit and apply special effects and titles, 'produce' the finished movie in an appropriate format – usually Mpeg-1 or Mpeg-2 – and burn it straight to a CD-R or DVD-R disc.

VCD, Mini DVD and DVD formats are supported, but not SVCD (super video CD). If you already have a collection of Mpeg or AVI clips saved on your hard drive, VideoWave cleverly converts them into the appropriate format on the fly during the production or authoring process.

There are fairly basic options for customising menus. For instance, a button can display any frame from the clip it's linked to, and a background image and soundtrack can be added to liven up the presentation. It's also possible to split clips into shorter chapters to help a standalone DVD player navigate to specific sections. However, this is only achieved by manually scrolling through the movie and hitting the Add Chapter button at roughly the appropriate points – a rather clunky affair.

One worrying point: try as we might – and we experimented with various CD-RW drives as well as the La Cie DVD model –

← Create customised title pages with Sonic MyDVD 3.0, featured in DVpics Plus



↑ DVD authoring is a straightforward procedure in MGI VideoWave 5.0

we couldn't get VideoWave 5.0 to burn a VCD file successfully. The developer is aware of compatibility problems with some drives and is working towards a fix.

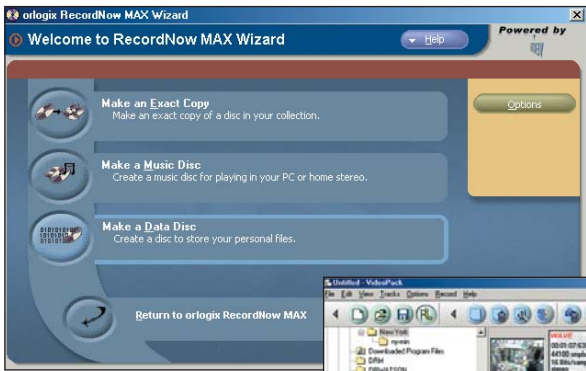
Roxio VideoPack 5.0

Roxio VideoPack supports VCD, SVCD and DVD but not, surprisingly, Mini DVD. There are no video capture or editing tools, but you can work with video clips in just about any format. Similar to VideoWave 5.0, VideoPack transcodes them for the job in hand during authoring.

We were particularly taken with the virtual disc image feature, which lets you save and play back an entire project from the hard drive before committing it to disc. With blank DVD-R media still costing a packet, it's an eminently sensible way of checking that everything works as it should, particularly navigation between the main menu, submenus and video clips.

In fact, a tree-like menu structure is automatically created as you drag and drop clips, still images and soundtracks into the project window. It's similar to building a hyperlinked website: very useful for more complex projects, but overkill if all you want to do is showcase your summer holiday footage.

Animated buttons on the DVD title page play scaled-down versions of the clips to which they link, and the package includes software DVD and VCD players for previewing finished projects on your PC. We found the entire authoring process intuitive, rewarding and as flexible as you could wish for.



← RecordNow MAX is a powerful recorder but unfortunately lacks video support

↓ Roxio VideoPack 5.0 brings near-professional flexibility to DVD authoring

Overall, we were very impressed with Roxio VideoPack 5.0. However, at just under £300, it prices itself out of the beginner market.

Veritas RecordNow MAX

You would think that a product claiming an ability to 'create video CDs and DVDs' would be capable of authoring proper DVD video. We certainly did, but searched in vain for such a feature on RecordNow MAX. Rather, this Veritas package is an advanced CD and DVD recording utility with a bit of VCD support thrown in as an afterthought.

After some perseverance, we figured out that RecordNow treats a VCD project like a data CD: you simply burn a fully prepared and correctly formatted Mpeg-1 video file straight to CD-R – or that's the theory. In practice, the program rejected every file we threw at it, even when we used VideoWave to produce video files that exactly matched the VCD standard. A frustrating business, all for the want of a format conversion utility.

On the upside, it's as easy to burn files to DVD-R/RW media as it is to CD-R/RW. Packet-writing software lets you treat the discs like floppies, which is useful for regular data archival. What you

explicitly cannot do, though, is design and author a DVD video project.

Verdict

DVD authoring is an immature market – and it shows. Not one of these software packages performed flawlessly in our tests, and there are no guarantees that they will work with your existing hardware (or indeed that your standalone DVD player will be able to play the resulting discs).

That said, we'd use VideoPack 5.0 for advanced DVD authoring – although it is priced for the professional user. DVpics Plus may lack sophisticated editing and VCD support, but the bundled FireWire card makes it a sound option for beginners. Overall, though, VideoWave 5.0 wins due to its powerful editing and logical integration of DVD authoring within the program interface. Let's hope that MGI overcomes the VCD problems. ■

Kyle MacRae

Digital video authoring formats

- DVD Video **High-quality film on DVD-R media, playable in most standalone DVD players.**
- Mini DVD **Top-quality film on CD-R (maximum 20 minutes), but almost no DVD players can play them.**
- SVCD (super video CD) **This format is better quality than VCD (see below). Also uses CD-R media but fewer DVD players recognise the discs.**
- VCD (video CD) **VHS-quality film recorded on CD-R media. Playable on any computer and many standalone DVD players.**

DVD authoring software round-up

Adaptec DVpics Plus

System requirements: 350MHz PII; Windows 98 SE/2000/Me; 128MB RAM; 250MB hard disk space; 200MB per minute of captured digital video; free PCI slot; CD/DVD-R/RW.

Adaptec: 01276 854 500

Website: www.adaptec-uk.com

Price: £55

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

MGI VideoWave 5.0

System requirements: 500MHz PIII; Windows 98 SE/2000/Me/XP; 64MB RAM; 110MB hard disk space; 200MB per minute of captured digital video; CD/DVD-R/RW.

MGI: 0800 973 830

Website: www.mgieurope.com

Price: £77

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

Roxio VideoPack 5.0

System requirements: 400MHz PIII; Windows 98 SE/2000/Me; 64MB RAM; 300MB hard disk space; 200MB per minute captured digital video; CD/DVD-R/RW.

Roxio: 00 49 8382 275 641

Website: www.roxio.com

Price: £297

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

Veritas RecordNow MAX

System requirements: 300MHz PII, Windows 98 SE/2000/Me/XP; 32MB RAM; 10MB hard disk space; 200MB per minute captured digital video; CD/DVD-R/RW.

Orlogix: 00 35 361 702 106

Website: <http://veritas.softline.ie>

Price: £55

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

Picture Publisher 10.0

Photo-editing software



↑ Give each slice of an image its own optimisation properties and hyperlink before exporting it to a ready-made HTML table

Despite being around for many years and enjoying a loyal user base, Picture Publisher has never been given the credit it deserves. It was always the kind of photo-editing and paint package you upgrade to when you hit the limitations of low-end programs bundled with your digital camera or scanner. The improvements in this latest version – 10.0 – make Publisher a serious contender.

It has all the core features you'd expect from a decent bitmap program, including layer-based editing, colour enhancement and image-correction tools. There's also a variety of paint brushes and support for a vast number of file formats. In addition, Picture Publisher is a nifty web graphics processor, both for optimising file size as well as generating image maps and rollovers. Indeed, its web slice tools are possibly the most intuitive we have seen.

Picture Publisher's effects filters are the best feature in this package, not least because they come by the shovel-load. The new lightening and particle-studio effects are surprisingly effective, and the inclusion of directional lighting, better gradients and significantly improved blurs puts the program into the major league. Our only disappointment is with the text object tools, which don't show your changes until you deselect the text.

Picture Publisher comes with PhotoAlbum, an image-management and browsing utility with some extra functions. You can even make colour enhancements within PhotoAlbum without firing up Picture Publisher. Both programs are compelling just for their straightforward, intuitive interfaces.

Verdict Digital photographers and anyone serious about photo-editing will find Picture Publisher 10.0 a versatile alternative to Jasc's Paint Shop Pro. The filter effects and new web features are great, too. Powerful photo-editing has never been so easy. ■

Alistair Dabbs

Picture Publisher 10.0

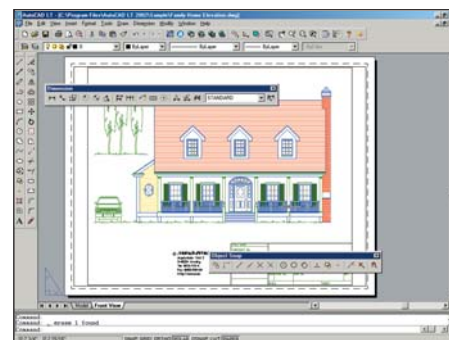
System requirements: Pentium processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP/NT 4.0; 64MB RAM; 200MB hard disk space.

Micrografx: 01483 747 526
Website: www.micrografx.com/uk
Price: £85, upgrade £43

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

AutoCAD LT 2002

Computer-aided design software



↑ Dimensioning of the model can be carried out while in Paperspace mode

AutoCAD LT 2002 is the latest lite version of AutoCAD. This scaled-down release offers all AutoCAD 2002's 2D drawing capabilities at a quarter of its price. Thankfully, LT 2002's most important changes are in the two areas that have caused the most frustration for draughtsmen: dimensioning and Paperspace mode.

Paperspace is a plot preview mode that allows you to lay out a drawing prior to plotting, thanks to its variety of handy tools. It can also select different areas of the drawing for plotting at various scales. Basically, Paperspace gives complete control over how a drawing will look on the printed page.

The dimensioning tools have improved dramatically in the last two versions, and this trend continues with the new 'geometry-driven associative dimensioning'. This feature enables an object to retain its dimensions while it is relocated in the drawing, so it doesn't lose its geometry. Still lacking, though, is the ability to have dimension changes reflected in the geometry.

The Paperspace improvement is also related to dimensioning. Up until now, Paperspace dimensioning has been less than helpful. Do you dimension in Model space, Paperspace or both? The new 'trans-spatial dimensioning' mode allows the Model space geometry to be dimensioned while in Paperspace.

Other changes are minor, but welcome. The web drawing format DWF supports higher quality drawing display. While eTransmit compresses and securely emails a drawing and its supporting files such as Xrefs and plot styles.

Verdict If you use Paperspace, or if you are still working with LT 98 (or earlier), then an upgrade to AutoCAD LT 2002 is worth considering. Otherwise, though, you can probably give it a miss. ■

Paul Whelan

AutoCAD LT 2002

System requirements: 450MHz processor; Windows 98/2000/Me/NT 4.0; 128MB RAM; 200MB hard disk space.

Autodesk: 0118 934 6121
Website: www.autodesk.co.uk
Price: £595

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

Serif Draw & Design and Serif Photo & Paint

Image-editing/design software

Exploding sales of digital cameras have meant increased demand for functional, low-cost image-editing programs. But if consumer choice is more varied than ever, there are few standout applications. Serif is making a fresh bid to capture attention by taking its popular, if overlooked, image- and vector-editing programs, PhotoPlus 7.0 and DrawPlus 6.0, and bundling them with add-on CDs to serve as complete digital solutions. Serif Draw & Design consists of DrawPlus 6.0 and assorted discs (including a resource CD, various clip art and photo CDs). The Photo & Paint package comprises PhotoPlus 7.0 and a resource CD.

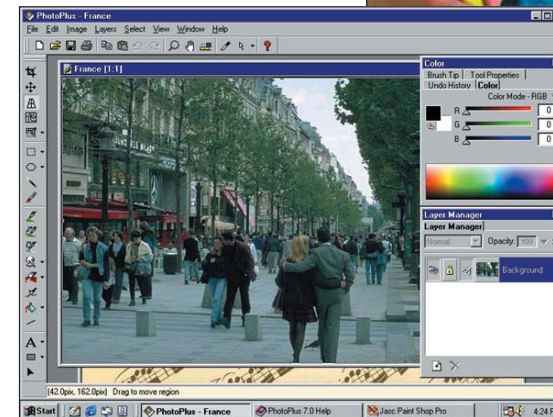
Simple design

The programs adhere to the golden rule of any low-cost design software: make it easy to use. Both packages boast a learning curve as flat as The Fens, with excellent online help and task-based wizards to take you through common functions. If there is room for improvement it lies in their unintuitive interfaces. For example, it's difficult to understand the strained logic behind the decision to isolate powerful web image slicing and mapping tools on a standard toolbar at the top of the main window, while the rest of the editing tools are located on the Tools toolbar on the left.

If beginners are an obvious target market, Serif is also pitching these products at professional users – and it isn't just marketing hyperbole. There are some features present – such as CMYK support and EPS export – that would theoretically allow either program to send native output to prepress print houses.

The range of filters in PhotoPlus is nothing special, but image layer support – vital for creating montages or complex artwork – is excellent. You can now add adjustment layers, so you can apply and adjust changes to images, such as alterations to colour and brightness, without permanently altering original artwork. Just as impressive is the fact that

→ Ease of use is helped by a wizard-based interface in both programs



← A drab interface at least leaves plenty of space for editing

text-based layers remain editable even after they have been rotated or resized.

Support for a well implemented magnetic lasso tool, a feature seen in Adobe's Photoshop Elements, makes it easier to isolate image elements from their backgrounds. Both programs also incorporate a Layer Manager tabbed palette for organising and tracking layers.

Valuable art?

The improvements made to DrawPlus include new perspective and filter effects, as well as an autotrace function that converts bitmap images to vector-based drawings. Without doubt the most useful addition has been borrowed from the desktop publishing world: a portfolio tool that allows you to store commonly used drawing objects in a single library. Other additions, such as the ability to work on multiple open documents, are painfully overdue.

The Photo & Paint software bundle takes the shape of a single resource CD containing tutorials, images and web buttons. Draw & Design offers better value in terms of quantity: an additional half-dozen supporting discs holding 100,000 graphics images and 400 fonts are included.

However, the retail price of both packages is significantly more than their standalone siblings, so the value of these extras is arguable. The only weaknesses relate to getting images in and out of both programs – while you can export to a range of formats, you can only save in native PhotoPlus or DrawPlus formats.

Verdict Students of digital imaging might be better off with the similarly priced Adobe Photoshop Elements, but Serif's Studio bundles are still competitively priced. If you don't need the added extras, the standalone products are better value. ■

Tom Gorham

Serif Draw & Design and Serif Photo & Paint

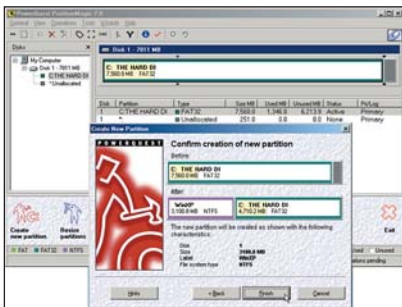
System requirements: Pentium processor; Windows 95/98/2000/Me/NT; 32MB RAM; 60MB hard disk space.

Serif: 0800 376 7070
Website: www.serif.com
Price: each bundle £68

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

PartitionMagic 7.0

Disk partitioning utility software



↑ You can manage hard disk partitions within Windows from within PartitionMagic 7.0

Partitioning is the process of splitting a single hard disk into two or more virtual disks. This means that you can install and run multiple operating systems on one PC – each operating entirely independently of the others. Alternatively,

you can protect important files and backups by keeping them on a separate partition that's unaffected by even the most catastrophic Windows crash.

It sounds simple enough and, with the right software, it can be. One main attraction of PartitionMagic is that it lets you resize, merge, delete and otherwise play around with disk partitions without affecting the data stored on them – something that isn't possible with Fdisk, the free DOS-based partitioning utility included with Windows.

PartitionMagic ships with BootMagic, an invaluable boot manager that lets you choose between various operating systems each time you start your PC. BootMagic includes a useful tool called DriveMapper which monitors changes to drive letters. It also updates shortcuts and the Registry accordingly (a CD-ROM drive formerly known as 'D' becomes 'E' when you partition your C drive). Most importantly, though, PartitionMagic makes the potentially fraught and dangerous business of disk partitioning logical and reasonably intuitive.

So what's new in version 7.0? In truth, not a great deal. NTFS (NT file system) partitions – as used by Windows NT, 2000 and XP – can now be merged as easily as FAT partitions. Drives up to 80GB can be partitioned and external USB drives are recognised. It also supports Windows XP, and that in itself is sufficient reason to get a copy if you wish to experiment with the new OS.

Verdict

PartitionMagic 7.0 is still the most flexible partitioning utility, but its XP support is the only reason to upgrade. ■

Kyle MacRae

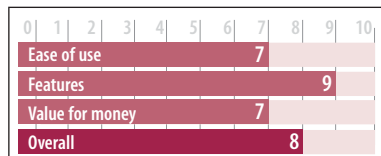
PartitionMagic 7.0

System requirements: 133MHz Pentium processor; Windows 9x/2000/XP/NT; 32MB RAM; 50MB hard disk space.

PowerQuest: 020 7341 5517

Website: www.powerquest.com

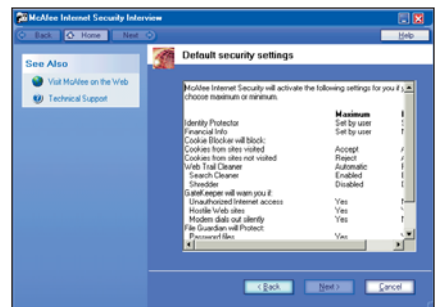
Price: £43, upgrade £34



McAfee Internet Security 4.0

Firewall and antivirus software

The internet is not the safest place for your PC, whether you've got a broadband connection or just a humble dialup. New viruses appear on an almost daily basis and even home users are targets for hackers.



↑ McAfee Internet Security provides comprehensive protection from hackers and web viruses

Internet Security is a simplified, one-box defence against online threats. It's essentially a combination of Norton's firewall and excellent antivirus application, VirusScan 6.0. The idea is that by linking security against hackers and viruses into one interface, users can automate their defences and get on with surfing the web.

Both packages work well: VirusScan will protect both email and internet activity, while the firewall secures against incoming dangers. Not only this, it also defends your sensitive information, preventing applications on your hard drive secretly sending personal data across the web. This will stop malicious Trojans opening a back door into your system, although you would be surprised at how many seemingly 'innocent' programs regularly connect to remote sites to update themselves invisibly or transmit information on how they are used.

Demand for Internet Security 4.0 may be limited in the face of basic firewall protection in Windows XP, but it has been designed with this OS in mind (as well as other flavours of Windows) and offers considerably more sophisticated defences.

Verdict

Everyone who uses the web should have antivirus protection and a software firewall on their PC. The latter is not an infallible solution, but McAfee has the wisdom to offer a quick link to online updates. Although reasonably priced, it still seems expensive when you consider free firewall and antivirus solutions, such as ZoneAlarm and AVG are available and would do the same job. ■

Jason Whittaker

McAfee Internet Security 4.0

System requirements: Pentium 100 processor; Windows 9x/Me/2000/XP/NT; 32MB RAM; 60MB hard disk space.

Network Associates: 01753 217 920

Website: www.mcafee.com

Price: £49.99

