

Video-editing software

Mindscape Moviestop Deluxe

Into the already crowded budget video-editing software market steps Mindscape with its Moviestop Deluxe package. On the surface Moviestop offers very little to distinguish itself from the rest of the pack, although its interface is friendlier and more intuitive than some other editing products.

Easy does it

Video editing can be a notoriously complex process, but Moviestop is aimed squarely at beginners. Mindscape has done its best to simplify matters so that those with little or no experience can cut together their holiday, wedding or family footage with relative ease.

Starting a fresh project, for instance, is as simple as choosing the quality level that you want to work at – DV, DVD, VCD, Web Movie or Custom. There's no need to adjust an array of bewildering settings such as frame rates, compression and so on.

Moviestop works in the tried-and-tested manner that many video-editing programs favour. There's a media library to store clips, a storyboard to arrange them in and a preview window to view edits, effects and cuts.

Interestingly, Moviestop features both a simple storyboard and a more detailed timeline simultaneously. The timeline offers up to 10 layers of video, audio, graphics and titles at once but you can only ever view one layer at a time which is occasionally frustrating. Generally, however, Moviestop's system is fairly successful and there are plenty of helpful prompts that guide you through the process.

And the down side...

Moviestop Deluxe isn't without its bad points, however. During installation, for example, the DVD authoring tool NeoDVD required a serial number that we couldn't find anywhere. None of the bundled documentation referred to this and, at the time of writing, there was little online support for Moviestop.

In the end we had to call the Mindscape technical helpline, at a cost of 25p per minute, to help solve the problem.

There are also moments when the user manual is more confusing than helpful. It assumes, for instance, that you are working with NTSC video footage – NTSC is the TV standard favoured in the US whereas we Brits use PAL. Bizarrely, it often encourages you to upgrade to the full version of Moviestop – the version that you are already using.

→ Moviestop Deluxe works in the same way as many other video-editing programs but is simpler to use than most

How low can you go

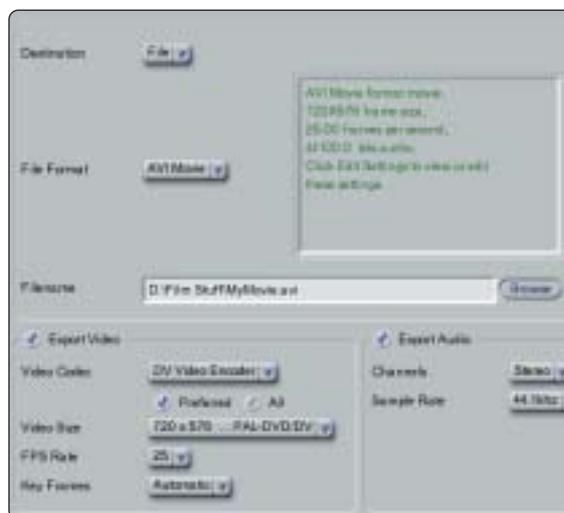
While many other similar video-editing applications need a high-spec PC, Moviestop's relatively modest system requirements mean that anybody who has bought their computer in the last four or five years will be able to edit their footage comfortably.

Obviously, though, the more powerful your PC the better Moviestop will perform. The claimed real-time preview functions, for instance, only work properly if your processor is 1.1GHz or faster. You'll also need bags of hard disk space to store your captured video clips – particularly if you're planning on editing at full quality and outputting to DVD.

And it doesn't stop there – to get the most out of Moviestop you'll need to invest in some extra hardware. Digital camcorder owners must equip their PC with a FireWire port, which may mean investing in (and installing) a PCI card. Analogue camcorder owners, on the other hand, are advised to check the Moviestop website for an up-to-date list of compatible capture cards.

Verdict

Moviestop Deluxe may not stand head and shoulders above the rest of the video-editing crowd, but it is a relatively competent and certainly inexpensive application for capturing, editing and outputting your video to tape, disc or even the web. ■



↑ More complex settings remain hidden but can be accessed and tweaked if you so wish

Mindscape Moviestop Deluxe

- Mindscape: 01293 651 300
- www.mindscape.com
- £26 ex VAT

System requirements

550MHz Pentium III processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 256MB RAM; 160MB hard disk space; 16bit colour display; sound card

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



James Bennett

Graphics software Corel Painter 8.0

Most photo-editing and paint programs are bundled with brush tools, but none comes close to Corel Painter's real-media brushes. More than painting digitally on screen, Corel's app produces brushstrokes that genuinely look like wet watercolours, thick oils, crumbly crayons and so on.

Keeping it simple

Previous versions of Painter filled the screen with palettes, while brushes needed to be chosen and customised using fiddly animated drawers and separate dialog windows. In this new release Corel has simplified the interface to two pop-up lists: one for brush type (oils, pencils and so on) and another for variant presets (brush shape and behaviour). Just pick a type, select a brush, choose a colour then get creative.

You can finetune features such as brush size and opacity using the context-sensitive Property bar across the top of the screen – similar to Photoshop's Options bar. There's also a new Brush Creator feature and a clever Transposer tool that lets you combine aspects of two existing brushes to produce a unique stroke.

Two new palettes are worthy of mention. The Tracker palette keeps a list of the various brushes and their settings that you have used in a current session, while the Mixer palette is an artist's onscreen paint palette. Dab on spots of paint and mix them with a brush or knife then use them independently of the Colors palette.

Beside the interface changes, Corel has thrown a number of new tools and features into the mix too. The common process of using an edge finder filter to turn a photo into an outline drawing has been given its own Sketch command. There are 400 readymade brushes available, including a set of Digital Water Color brushes that are intended as a speedier, if less realistic, alternative to the rather slow existing watercolour media.



↑ A Sketch effect turns any photo into an outline pencil drawing, which you can then use as a guide for freehand painting



Layering is the key

Adobe Photoshop users will appreciate Painter 8.0's support for layer masks and alpha channels. Building your artwork over multiple transparent layers means you can repaint certain objects without affecting the others as well as combining effects across layers.

Painter 8.0 can open Photoshop-native PSD files that contain layers, masks and vectors, although it can't handle advanced content such as adjustment layers. Similarly, you can open basic Illustrator files but not those from Illustrator 9.0 and later (whose format are PDF-based). Oddly, there's no support for opening Corel's own CorelDraw or PhotoPaint formats.

Verdict

Whether you're turning photos into real-media effect artwork using cloning tools or creating original artwork by hand, nothing can match Painter 8.0 for realism or versatility. Not everyone will find the program easy – it requires a certain level of artistic skill after all – but it's far more accessible to beginners. Painter 8.0 is more than just clever – it's fun, versatile and satisfying, too. You won't want to put it down. ■

Alistair Dabbs

← Brushes are picked from this intuitive pop-up list

↑ Painter 8.0's Mixer window is the digital equivalent of an artist's traditional mixing palette, letting you dab and smudge key colours

Corel Painter 8.0

- ☐ Corel: 0870 774 0202
- ☐ www.corel.com/painter
- ☐ £259 ex VAT (all upgrades £149)

System requirements

200MHz Pentium processor;
Windows 2000/XP; 128MB RAM;
170MB hard disk space; Wacom
tablet recommended; 1,024x768
24bit display

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



DVD playback software CyberLink PowerDVD 5.0



PowerDVD has been one of the leading video and audio playback packages for some time now. While it may be difficult to get too excited about the improvements made to version 5.0, the program is both simple and powerful enough to be the first choice for most users.

With minimum changes to PowerDVD's interface, CyberLink has concentrated on improvements under the bonnet, particularly in terms of audio quality and wide-screen support. New features include the ability to rename personal bookmarks and pick up movies from where you left off as well as support for Divx, the popular format for distributing movies online.

But it's the improved video and audio quality that impressed us. Clev (CyberLink eagle vision) automatically changes brightness, contrast and saturation ratios to improve playback, but you'll need a 1GHz or faster processor for it to work effectively.

CLMEI (CyberLink multi-channel environment impression) converts a stereo output to multiple channels, taking advantage of a systems' surround-sound setup. You do have to experiment to get the most from CLMEI, but the effects can be stunning.

Finally, CLPV (CyberLink pano vision) uses a smart stretch option that creates full-screen video with minimum distortion – few users are likely to notice the difference.

Verdict

PowerDVD 5.0 performs well and remains one of the best players on the market, with a wide range of options to tweak your system. If this is bundled free with your DVD player then enjoy the experience. As with the majority of such DVD playback software, however, you have to be serious about your home cinema to make it worth upgrading. ■

Jason Whittaker

↑ PowerDVD includes just about every must-have home cinema feature, but be prepared to experiment

CyberLink PowerDVD 5.0

- www.gocyberlink.com/english
- £28 ex VAT

System requirements

350MHz Pentium II processor (1GHz rec); Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 40MB hard disk space

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Data security software Steganos Security Suite 5.0



← The Security Suite 5.0 Center provides one-click access to all the suite's data encryption tools

Steganos Security Suite is a collection of tools that promises to keep your data safer than the crown jewels. Steganos Safe creates a secured area on your hard drive, up to 1.2GB in size, which shows up as a virtual hard drive in Windows Explorer. Any data moved to it is automatically encrypted. Once you have copied across all your important files, simply 'close' the safe. The information remains inaccessible until unlocked with your password.

Portable Safe uses the same technology to enable you to secure data burned on to a CD or DVD-ROM. The data gets copied on to the disc along with the decryption software, so it is unreadable on any other computer without the password. If you don't want to encrypt entire volumes then Steganos File Manager allows you to set encryption options for individual files.

The E-mail Encryption tool saves the contents of an email as a self-extracting encrypted file. Provided the recipient knows the password and is running Windows, they will be able to open the file and read its contents. Of course, any encrypted data is only as secure as your password. Steganos Security Suite has a handy function that tells you how secure your password is and how likely it is to be cracked.

These data encryption utilities will be most useful to businesses, but there are three tools ideal for home users. The Password Manager provides a secure environment for you to keep track of online passwords, PIN numbers and so on. Internet Trace Destructor covers your tracks by destroying your browser's history and cache files. It also gets rid of cookies and protects some desktop functions such as the recently used files list and the Recycle Bin. The final tool, Steganos Shredder, erases files so they can't be retrieved by data recovery utilities.

Verdict

Steganos Security Suite is a powerful set of encryption and data protection tools that's extremely easy to use. If you've got confidential information to protect then this is the package for you. ■

Alex Katz

Steganos Security Suite 5.0

- Steganos: 00 8007 834 2667
- www.steganos.com
- £26 ex VAT

System requirements

Pentium processor; Windows 95/98/Me/NT 4.0/2000/XP; 32MB RAM; 15MB hard disk space

Ease of use



Features



Value for money

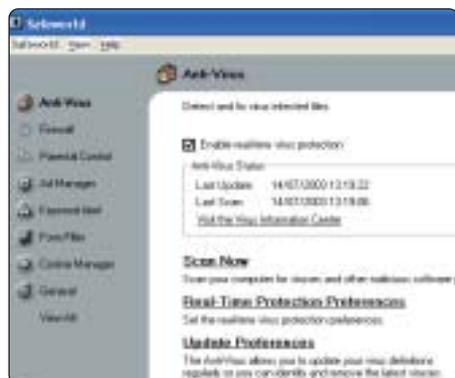


Overall rating



Antivirus software

Safeworld Anti-Virus 2003



← Safeworld Anti-Virus' focus is on ease of use, as illustrated by its uncluttered and intuitive interface

Everyone knows that using the internet places your PC at risk from viruses, but how do you choose between the multitude of protection packages available? Safeworld's Anti-Virus 2003 is a worthy contender, offering robust protection for a low price.

The software is extremely simple to use. Its interface resembles a web page with links to all the Safeworld functions. There's explanatory text underneath each option as well as clickthroughs to the built-in help system and Safeworld's support site.

Purchasing this software entitles you to a one-year subscription to Safeworld's Anti-Virus service. Every time an updated virus definition file is made available, Anti-Virus 2003 alerts you and offers to download it for you. When you approach the end of your year Safeworld will gently nudge you, or should that be continually poke you in the ribs, until you renew your subscription. Another annoying aspect is that its interface is basically one big ad for Safeworld's other products. Click on them and you are kindly invited to upgrade – a little too pushy for our liking.

The scanning process is straightforward and thorough. You can perform a manual scan or have Safeworld work in the background to monitor every file that comes in to your PC. If an infected file is found it can be disinfected automatically, and if you inadvertently try to access the file Safeworld will stop the virus from executing.

Most viruses work by replicating themselves and sending data on from your PC. Anti-Virus attempts to stop this activity. Keyword Alert prevents your personal data from being transmitted by scanning all outgoing data and alerting you if it finds particular information. You can then allow or block the transmission.

Verdict

Safeworld Anti-Virus might not have all the advanced features of some of the bigger-name packages, but it still provides thorough protection. It's a pleasure to use and good value to boot. Shame about the blatant advertising though. ■

Alex Katz

Safeworld Anti-Virus 2003

- Available from Amazon.co.uk
- www.safeworldsoftware.com
- £18 ex VAT

System requirements

233MHz Pentium; Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 45MB hard disk space; Internet Explorer 5.01 sp2



Data recovery utility

Ontrack EasyRecovery Lite



← Ontrack's EasyRecovery Lite offers a superb interface but its restrictions could become irritating

EasyRecovery has been available to PC users for some time, offering effective data recovery – but at a price. Costing six times less than its big brother, EasyRecovery Lite looks as though it could be the more realistic salvation for those of us with accidentally deleted or corrupted files.

Unfortunately, despite its wonderfully simple interface, the emphasis is on 'lite' rather than recovery. Each time you boot up the program you are helpfully informed that this version will only recover 25 files at a time – with a recommendation to upgrade to DataRecovery or EasyRecovery Professional. For most users, though, the Lite version is more than sufficient when one or two files need to be recovered urgently.

EasyRecovery offers some smart data recovery options – for example, ensuring that files are copied to an alternative drive so that other lost files are not needlessly overwritten. The Word and Zip repair features are also efficient, while the easy-to-use interface provides links to Ontrack's data repair centre. Even if EasyRecovery fails, Ontrack may still be able to salvage data via remote connection or at the company's labs.

EasyRecovery does, however, have its down sides. You cannot, for example, save scans with this version, meaning that if you need to recover more than 25 files you have to go through the whole process again. Too often this makes the application appear no more than an advert for its more powerful sibling.

Verdict

Ontrack has got the price right for EasyRecovery – but not for the cut-down version. Norton's Utilities or Ontrack's excellent SystemSuite offer comparable data recovery tools, and many additional utilities, for a similar price.

EasyRecovery Lite is as simple to use as the full version with some potentially excellent tools. Unfortunately, though, its limitations make it feel more like expensive shareware. ■

Jason Whittaker

Ontrack EasyRecovery Lite

- Ontrack: 01372 741 999
- www.ontrack.co.uk
- £40 ex VAT

System requirements

486 processor (Pentium rec); Windows 95/98/Me/NT 4.0/2000/XP 16MB RAM; 150MB hard disk space



