workshop

Photoshop Elements tips & tricks

You've invested in a digital camera and have spent the last month snapping to your heart's content. What now? Alistair Dabbs shows you how to use Adobe's relatively inexpensive Photoshop Elements package, an ideal image perfecting tool for quick picture fixes and efficient printing

Whether you use a scanner or a digital camera, transferring your pictures on to your system is merely a job half done. Armed with photo-editing software, you can really put that PC to work by correcting, retouching, enhancing and generally being creative with your images.

Digital photography will take over from film one day – already around 10 percent of all new cameras purchased are digital. In the US, these handy devices now account for 15 percent of camera sales; in Japan it's considerably more. By 2005, it is estimated that 44 million people will own a digital camera or

scanner – or even both. But those pioneering days when it was considered a marvel simply to display a photograph on a PC screen are long gone. If you care at all about your pictures you should be using your computer to improve them, not just to display and print them.

Over the next few pages we'll investigate the creative possibilities of inexpensive but powerful photo-editing software. The good news is that, perhaps surprisingly, you don't always need a high-spec PC to get the results you want. Unlike digital video and 3D, digital images can be handled on just about any Pentium PC running Windows 98, albeit preferably

ILLUSTRATION: NATALIE WINTER

Build a panorama
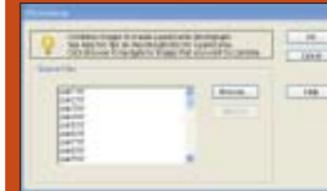
1 With a steady hand or the help of a tripod, take a sequence of photos all around you, ensuring a slight overlap between consecutive shots to allow for better image stitching later on. Once the pictures are on your hard disk, choose the Create Photomerge command from Photoshop Elements 2.0's File menu. Use the Browse button in the Photomerge dialog window to select only those pictures you wish to include, then click ok

2 Photoshop Elements 2.0 attempts to match up the shots into a wide-angle panorama. Once it has done its best, you can then pick up and drop each shot in place as preferred. Unallocated shots are held in a filmstrip area at the top of the Photomerge window: just drag and drop them to and from the main editing area. Tick Advanced Blending to make colour and exposure more consistent between then click ok to produce the final single-image panorama

with 128MB of RAM and enough disk space to hold the actual image files.

It's more important to choose the right digital camera to suit your style – whether semi-professional or unabashed amateur – and a decent photo-quality colour printer, almost certainly one of the many modern inkjet devices. (Peruse our digital cameras and personal inkjets charts on pages 130, 134 and 136 for specific buying advice.) Even if you own a digital camera, investing in a scanner will also pay dividends as it means you can digitise many years of archived photos that have spent the past 20-odd years gathering dust in your loft.

The right stuff

Just as you have chosen your imaging hardware according to budget and ability, you should also select photo-editing software that's appropriate for the task rather than the best or cheapest package you can buy. Let professional photographers and creative designers work with their high-end packages, but equally you might want to avoid the basic, entry-level products that tend to be aimed at undemanding home use. These packages often come with overly cute interfaces that are intended to appeal to children.

If you're reading this, you're an amateur photographer or maybe even a

semi-professional snapper who wants to get more out of digital imaging than the raw pictures. So the principal task you will be interested in is image enhancement.

At the most basic level this means salvaging duff shots suffering from underexposure, colour imbalance or the wrong white point (if the camera erroneously thinks the lightest point is white and calculates other shades accordingly) and lightening the overall image if the flash gun didn't fire.

Taking this further, you might want to give a picture new life by changing it more radically – for example, making a pale sky appear blue or a midday shot seem as though it was captured at sunset.

A touch of frost

Equally important for many photo hobbyists is the task of retouching. For scanner owners, this typically involves 'cleaning' old photo prints that have been torn, creased or attracted dirt over the years. It can also mean colourising black and white shots or altering fine detail in an image, such as eliminating red-eye resulting from flash photography. Retouching can also involve removing unwanted image elements, such as a face in the crowd, or adding new ones such as multiplying the number of trees in the background.

Finally, photo-editing software enables you to be creative with your pictures, from applying a simple special-effects filter to a single image to layering photo montages to create unusual designs or even faked results that look like original photos. Such visual trickery is only as good as the results produced, so you will want software that offers enhanced printing options and the ability to export to web-compatible formats for uploading to the internet.

Software choice

The buyer of so-called mid-range photo-editing software has plenty of choice. Arguably the biggest name in this area for the past 10 years has been Jasc's Paint Shop Pro, currently in version 7.0 (£79.95 ex VAT). This package has consistently been the first to market with new ideas such as a built-in picture browser, vector graphics alongside bitmap images and the inclusion of a utility for generating animated GIFs for the web. Another popular choice is Ulead's Photo Impact 7.0 (£89 ex VAT), which is directly aimed at serious digital photographers, but with extras thrown in for creative graphics and web furniture (buttons, backgrounds and so on).

Here, though, we'll concentrate on Adobe's newly released Photoshop Elements 2.0 (£79 ex VAT).

Easy editing

Borrowing vast chunks from the flagship £500 Photoshop 7.0, this mid-range program is designed to be as productive as the competition but easier to use. To this end, Adobe has combined its familiar palette-style interface with a bunch of automated features and simplified approaches that take the effort out of major image editing.

To help you on your way, Photoshop Elements 2.0 introduces a new How To palette which contains suggestions for photo projects (Adobe calls them recipes), along with tutorials on how to complete them. A floating Hints palette provides information and user hints on the currently active tool – a far cry from basic status-bar feedback in other graphics programs. If you're still stuck, you can type any word or phrase in a Search field in the Options bar to call up an instant suggestions palette. Click on any one to launch the relevant Help page in your web browser.

Turn a bad photo into smart art

1 Poor, blurry or low-resolution pictures can still be of use in ways you may not have thought possible. This out-of-focus, grainy shot hardly epitomises the trendy theme of snowboarding, but you can give it a completely new treatment with effects filters. Open the Filters palette and double-click on any filter name to try it out (you can always click Undo afterwards). Many filters, such as Accented Edges shown here, provide intuitive slider controls and a real-time preview panel

2 By applying the filter we have turned the grainy photo into something that looks more like hand-drawn artwork. Bold colours have been emphasised, creating a neon-like effect in the detail. You can now push the special effects further by applying additional filters to enhance (or purposely destroy) the image in other ways. The subject remains recognisable, but now it's more interesting and no longer just a bad photo

Tools and features

The main tools in Photoshop Elements let you enhance and retouch images individually or combine them creatively across multiple transparent layers. Key to making this work in any photo-editing package is a good set of selection and brush tools, which Photoshop Elements 2.0 provides in abundance.

In addition to clever paint-on tools for fixing red-eye and the selective application of blurs, sharpens, burns and dodges, the program comes with a new art engine which produces the effect of realistic paintbrush strokes. This means that as well as working on photos you can apply what appears to be oil paint, watercolours, chalks and so on, either on top of existing pictures or as a wholly original piece of digital artwork on a fresh canvas.

With more than a nod to digital camera owners, Photoshop Elements 2.0 can now use Exif (exchangeable image file format) information, which is assigned to pictures taken with modern digital cameras to automate a great deal of image enhancement. All camera information is saved alongside the photos on your PC and is viewable in the enhanced File browser. The program also makes it easy to grab single frames from digital video captured to your hard disk from a camcorder.

next month or so is support for the Jpeg 2000 format which will introduce intelligent image data compression for the first time to mainstream photo-editing software.
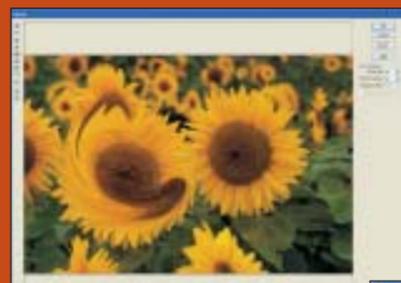
Working with the flow

Some of the enhancements to Elements 2.0 are aimed at simplifying the workflow on long or repetitive tasks. Most important of these are the Batch command (File, Batch Processing) which can automatically convert multiple images to the same file format, size or resolution. With the right plug-in for a scanner or camera, you can even perform these operations as you transfer images on to your hard drive.

Working with Adobe's PDF (portable document format) can also make image editing much easier, particularly if you wish to transfer your files to other users for printing or trouble-free viewing on another computer. Saving PDFs is extremely simple, requiring no more than selecting the right format when using the Save As command.

You can save files to a PDF slideshow by going to File, Automation Tools, PDF Slideshow. The dialog box for this feature allows you to specify the speed for your slideshow, basic transitions and whether the images will loop or not. Finally, there is a useful tool to convert PDF files to Photoshop's PSD format, making them easier to edit in Elements.

It's well worth taking the time to play around with the output options in Photoshop Elements 2.0, including the additional Web Photo Galleries and the ability to generate Acrobat PDF slideshows. There's even a one-click Attach To Email command which handles the rescaling and compression issues involved for you. Also promised as a free download within the

Applying filters

1 Many of the filters included with Elements 2.0 have been updated and enhanced. The Liquify filter (Filter, Distort, Liquify), for example, now supports pressure-sensitive drawing tablets, enabling you to change the amount of distortion within a picture as you trace your stylus across the tablet. The range of distortions available has also been extended in version 2.0
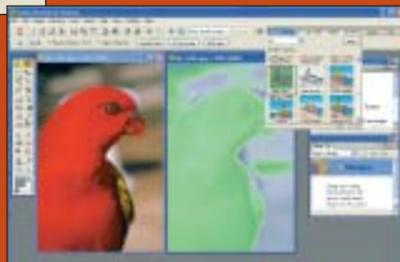
2 Filters are available from the menu or the Filters tab in the Shortcut bar. The advantage of the latter is that it gives you a quick view of the type of effect that will be achieved when you select a particular filter. The filters themselves are divided into a number of categories, such as Artistic, Blur or Stylise, and you can make further changes from the Effects and Layer Styles tabs

Selective enhancement

1 Let's say you'd like to brighten this image so the girl's face isn't hidden in shadow, but doing so would bleach out other parts of the image near the window. Hone your selection by painting over the girl with Photoshop Elements 2.0's new Selection brush. This is easier to do than tracing around the girl with a lasso and quicker than painting a mask channel and then converting it to a selection afterwards

2 Click on the Quick Fix button on the Options bar. Select Brightness as the Adjustment Category (column 1), then Fill Flash for the Adjustment itself (column 2). Increasing the Lighter slider (column 3) will produce an effect as if you had fired a flashgun on the selected area. Click ok when you are happy. Because the Selection brush has feathered edges, you won't notice any ugly join between the girl and the background

There are two other tools aimed at saving you time: the Graphics File Association Manager and the Create Photo Web Gallery. The first, which works alongside the File Browser, means that rather than having to guess which applications will open your images, you can specify those images that will open with Elements 2.0.

The Photo Web Gallery can take a folder of images and quickly convert these into a web page, complete with thumbnails. A number of readymade themes are available or you can specify features such as colour, image size and personal information. The Create Photo Web Gallery option allows you to specify subfolders as well, making website creation easier than ever.

Fun with filters

Photoshop kickstarted the market for filters – that is, software plug-ins that can be used to apply a number of preset or interactive special effects to an image. Nearly 100 are supplied as part of the basic package. In addition, layer styles enable you add a variety of effects, such as bevels, insets and embosses to different layers – something particularly useful for button effects. The simplest way to use filters is to click on the Filters tab in the Shortcut

bar, which offers a drop-down menu that also gives you a quick view of the type of effect a filter will achieve. You will also find the Effects (used for applying frames and textures to images) and Layer Styles tabs here.

When using a filter or effect, select the one you need and click the Apply button. Changes will be applied immediately or,

if the filter is interactive, a dialog box will appear outlining the different gradations of effect that you can achieve.

Layer Styles are slightly more complex – they can only be applied to layers (go to Window, Layers to view these). If you draw a circular button, for example, creating it in its own layer means that you can then select options to bevel and emboss it, creating the effect of 3D with one click.

Layer effects remain live as long as you edit an image, so they can be changed, removed or hidden simply by going to the Layer, Layer Style menu. Layers means you can explore complex compositions, building up images that consist of separate entities.

Make it easy

The trick to using Elements 2.0 is to keep in mind that it's supposed to make difficult tasks simple. If things are becoming complicated, you're probably doing something the wrong way. Just let one of the automated tool functions or the Help systems put you back on track and you'll soon be manipulating photos like a master. ■

For more hints on photo editing, plus tips for Windows, hardware, the internet and more, don't miss the latest issue of Tips & Tricks, out now

Save photo paper
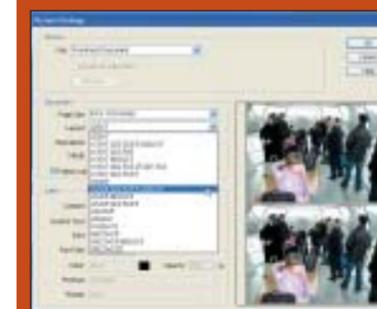
1 Glossy photo paper is expensive, so use Elements to make the most of every sheet. Open an image and choose the Picture Package command under the Print Layouts menu in the File menu. By default, the program assumes you want to print two copies of that picture on a single sheet. We have left the Page Size at 8x10in because this will print okay without cropping edges on an A4 sheet

2 Choose a different option from the Layout drop-down list in order to fit more copies of that image at varying sizes on that sheet. Double-click on any of the identical pictures to call up a browse window where you can choose a different image to replace it with. This way you can fill a single sheet with multiple images at various sizes, compacted automatically to make the best use of the sheet