

DVD authoring software

Adaptec MyDVD Media Suite, Magix Movies on CD & DVD, Magix Photos on CD & DVD and Ulead DVD PictureShow 2.0

It's been a long time coming but the DVD revolution has finally arrived. DVD movies are fast overtaking VHS in terms of sales and rentals, and you'd be hard pressed to find a new PC which doesn't have a DVD-ROM drive for movie playback and data access. But despite this ubiquity, the ability to create your own DVDs is still a relatively new concept. There's a wide choice of internal and external recordable DVD drives that you can add to your PC, but you'll also need software to make the most of your new multimedia creation tool. To see what's on offer we took a look at some of the latest DVD authoring packages.

Note that most DVD recorders come with their own software bundle. But these often feature older versions or cut-down products, so you'll probably want to get your hands on some additional authoring tools.

DVD recorders – we use the generic term because there are a number of different types of drive (see *Compatibility and competing DVD standards* below) – are versatile machines. Not only can you create video and picture discs, but you can also use DVD media as a high-capacity replacement for CD-R: a blank DVD holds 4.7GB of data compared to 650MB on a CD.

Adaptec MyDVD Media Suite

Adaptec's MyDVD Media Suite is a collection of packages, mostly developed by DVD specialist Sonic, designed to let you get the most from your DVD recorder. The main application is MyDVD, which is what you use for actually recording video footage and photo slideshows to DVD. It's also bundled with ArcSoft ShowBiz, a full-featured video editing package.

Chiefly concerned with the creation of the interface for your DVD, the MyDVD application itself is relatively simple. You can capture movies from your camcorder and add them straight into the project, or import files from elsewhere. The package is integrated with ShowBiz, so that if you select Edit Video, the file will open in ShowBiz where you have an impressive set of tools for editing your footage, overlaying text, applying effects and so on. When you're finished you can then send it back to MyDVD.

MyDVD has support for some advanced features such as displaying a movie as a menu background although, frustratingly, previewing the motion menus is a little laborious as you have to wait for MyDVD to render the footage first. You can easily set up collections of settings as styles to be applied to other menu screens or separate projects, or apply any of a large library of preinstalled styles. The software also has basic support for burning photo slideshows to DVD, although the options available are limited.

Included in the bundle is Sonic's RecordNow, which is used for burning music or data on to a DVD, or for simple duplication of discs. Sonic DLA is a utility which allows you to copy data to discs simply by dragging and dropping files from the desktop, so they effectively work like giant floppy discs. There's also a DVD movie playback application, Sonic CinePlayer, and even a program for designing CD and DVD labels, called SureThing CD Labeler SE.



↑ Adaptec MyDVD Media Suite: an uncluttered interface makes it easy to capture movies and produce professional-looking DVDs

Adaptec MyDVD Media Suite

- ☐ FastTrak: 01923 495 496
- ☐ www.magix.com
- ☐ £68 ex VAT

System requirements

600MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; AGP graphics card with 8MB RAM; DVD recorder

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Magix Movies on CD & DVD

- ☐ FastTrak: 01923 495 496
- ☐ www.magix.com
- ☐ £26 ex VAT

System requirements

400MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; DVD recorder

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Compatibility and competing DVD standards

Before you rush out and get a DVD recorder and loads of authoring software, it's worth bearing in mind that homemade DVDs will not play back on all consumer DVD players. Most modern home systems should recognise the discs, as will DVD-ROM drives in PCs and Macs, but you may have problems with older DVD players and games consoles. The manufacturers of most DVD recorders publish a list of compatible players on their websites.

One reason for this lack of compatibility is the plethora of competing DVD standards. These can be broken down into two main categories: DVD-RW and DVD+RW. Supporters of both standards claim theirs is the more compatible technology, but in practice both are as susceptible to compatibility issues. All the software we tested works equally well with DVD-RW and DVD+RW drives. For further information, visit www.dvdrhelp.com.



↑ Magix Movies on CD & DVD: movie editing and DVD menu creation are unified in a single package



↑ Magix Photos on CD & DVD: this bears more than a passing resemblance to its movie-editing counterpart, in both appearance and functionality



↑ Ulead DVD PictureShow 2.0: although PictureShow looks very different to the Magix product, they both produce similar results

Magix Movies on CD & DVD

If you are particularly interested in creating movie DVDs, then take a look at Magix Movies on CD & DVD, a full-featured package for less than £30. This application effectively combines the key points of MyDVD and ShowBiz into a single, intuitive interface.

It comprises a number of panes, each dedicated to an individual stage of the DVD creation process. The Capture pane is where you can download footage from your camcorder, or import video that's already on your hard drive. You use the Edit Movie pane to knock your footage into shape, adding effects and transitions, overlaying soundtracks and so on.

The Make Disc pane is where you create an interface for your DVD with menu buttons, text and backgrounds. The process is template-driven so there's not a great deal of scope to do things your own way, but they are professionally designed and there's plenty of flexibility. Neither the video editing or DVD creation features are as advanced as those in the Adaptec package, but most home users will cope just fine without that level of sophistication.

As with all movie DVD packages, you should be prepared for long waits while you burn your disc. Firstly DVD recorder speeds are slower than those of CD drives, because a significantly larger amount of data is involved. Secondly, video files have to be encoded into the appropriate format (Mpeg-2) before they can be written to the disc, and this is a slow process, although it will benefit from having a fast processor.

Magix Photos on CD & DVD

DVD is also an excellent way to share your digital photo albums. Most people have a home DVD player so you can easily send a disc to friends or family. And by using a DVD rather than CD-ROM, you can add transitions, effects and a soundtrack to your photo album for extra impact.

Magix has applied the winning formula of its movie creation software to Photos on CD & DVD. In fact the interface is almost identical, which may seem like overkill for a photo slideshow package but it provides an impressive level of flexibility. The transitions between each picture can be customised, as can the titles, soundtracks, and voiceover annotations. Once you're happy with the slideshow, you create a DVD menu in the same way as with Movies on CD & DVD, and burn to a DVD.

Ulead DVD PictureShow 2.0

DVD PictureShow 2.0 takes a very different approach, providing much more step-by-step guidance to the whole process. It's another powerful tool, although we found its interface rather unintuitive and a little awkward. You can have multiple slideshows on a disc, and each slideshow can have customised settings – applied to the transitions between pictures or the background music, for example. Once all the shows are set up, you then create a menu screen selecting from a wide range of templates. The process is pretty straightforward, which should appeal to novices.

Verdict

All the products we looked at had their own strengths, although none was perfect. Adaptec's MyDVD suite was versatile, but its huge array of applications and features could be daunting. The Magix movie package was easy-to-use but a little limited while the photo app felt too similar to its video counterpart and therefore inappropriate for photo slideshows. Ulead DVD PictureShow produced good results but would have benefitted from a more user-friendly interface. But the key factor is that all of these packages succeed in bringing the DVD authoring juggernaut to the masses. It's time to jump on board. ■

Alex Katz

Magix Photos on CD & DVD

- FastTrak: 01923 495 496
- www.magix.com
- £26 ex VAT

System requirements

266MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; DVD recorder

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Ulead DVD PictureShow 2.0

- Ulead: 00 49 221 310 8830
- www.ulead.co.uk
- £31 ex VAT

System requirements

Pentium III processor; Windows 98/2000/Me/XP; 64MB RAM; DVD recorder

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Many thanks to HP for providing us with a DVD300e DVD+RW drive for testing and to Sony for supplying the DVD-RW media.

- HP DVD300e: 0845 270 4222; www.hp.com/uk; £254
- Sony DVD+RW media: 020 7365 2947; www.sony.co.uk; £7 per disc

Legal software Desktop Lawyer



Desktop Lawyer gives access to a whole range of legal documents without charging extortionate solicitors fees. It allows you to produce legally binding documents with minimal effort, and a questioning system guides you through filling in each document to ensure you don't miss out any important data.

As you'd expect with anything as serious as the law, the package is fairly bland, wordy and offers little help and advice – unless you want to fork out extra for the helpline. The initial contents page made us want to switch off straight away, but once you get past the text-heavy layout and start developing your own contracts and forms the benefits of the package become clear.

There is a pretty extensive database of contracts, from landlord and tenant agreements to employment and terms and conditions forms. By clicking on the area you want, you will be guided to a series of relevant contracts. Click again to fill in the blanks (or red sections) and then print. It couldn't be simpler.

From a price point of view, £26 for the Home edition or £43 for the Business version, is certainly a darn site cheaper than lawyers' fees so for simple terms and conditions or debt collection forms it's definitely worth the money. The difference between the two packages lies in the documents you get – the home edition focuses on personal matters, while the business edition is more work related.

If, despite the software's hand-holding, you are still a little cautious about compiling complex tenancy and partnership agreements or divorce papers without any legal knowledge at all, a button allows you to click straight through to Desktop Lawyer's team of legal experts.

Verdict

Overall the program is pretty useful and will certainly save a few trips to your solicitor, which can't be bad on the wallet. ■

Wendy Brewer

↑ No need to shell out for lawyer's fees: fill in the red sections to complete a legally binding document

Desktop Lawyer

- FastTrak: 01923 495 496
- www.fasttrak.co.uk
- Home edition £26; Business edition £43 ex VAT

System requirements

486MHz processor; Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP; 32MB RAM; 10MB hard disk space

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Security utility PAL Computer Surveillance System 2003



← An administrator can configure PAL to monitor just about every activity that takes place on a PC

With the rapid expansion of the PC setup into more offices and homes, followed in the late 90s by the internet, concern about what people are doing with their computers has never been higher.

PAL CSS (Computer Surveillance System) is targeted at two main groups of users: businesses who wish to monitor employees' use (or misuse) of facilities like the web and company data, and parents who wish to block certain sites to protect their children online.

As there are simpler alternatives for parents wishing to restrict internet use, this is probably better suited for businesses. Even here, however, companies should be aware that monitoring employees under the recent Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act, means monitoring cannot take place indiscriminately.

Although CSS requires some technical skill to achieve the best results, its monitoring activities are comprehensive. Rather than simply tracking URL addresses or keywords (which is how most filtering software works), it records all keyboard activity and even takes periodic screenshots of PC activity in addition to blocking certain websites and keywords.

What this means, for example, is that you will have a log of content typed in a chatroom, or which programs have been opened and what is done with files. This activity, as is to be expected, is hidden from the user, and you can even set up CSS to email you a report periodically or on a specific event.

Verdict

This Computer Surveillance System is wide-ranging in terms of activities monitored. For home users, there are simpler systems around – and to encourage good use of the internet and computers in general it is perhaps better to use software that openly discourages certain sites rather than spyware that records every activity. Nonetheless, while there are cheaper options available, for a technically astute user CSS offers a suite of very effective tools. ■

Jason Whittaker

PAL CSS 2003

- PAL: 01484 483 121
- www.palsol.com
- \$30 download only (approx £20 ex VAT)

System requirements

Pentium 90; Windows 9x/Me/NT4.0/2000/XP; 16MB RAM; 5MB hard disk space; IE 4.01 or later

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Graphics software
Corel Designer 10.0

Corel's 2001 acquisition of Micrograph Designer raised clear doubts about the program's future as a stablemate of rival vector-editing application CorelDraw. We needn't have worried. Not only does the appearance of Designer 10.0 put rumours of the program's demise comprehensively to rest, its future has ironically never looked rosier.

In Micrografx's hands, Designer was never sure whether it was a high-end tool for creative artists or a mainstay of the CAD market and ended up satisfying neither. With Designer 10.0, the program is more sensibly aimed directly at technical illustrators rather than artists. Cynics might suggest that this refocus is prompted by an inability to match the creative options of vector-editing applications such as Adobe Illustrator, but whatever the reasons, the program has benefitted from it.

New features

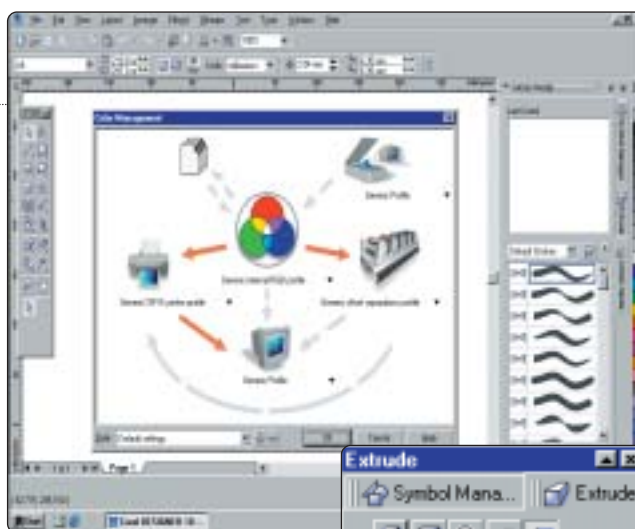
First, a number of timesaving features for technical drawings have been installed. The program adds gravity snapping, which automatically draws vector shapes towards defined gravity points on existing objects, such as nodes and intersections. Another significant new feature is the Virtual Segment Delete tool which lets you remove portions of objects between intersecting lines.

Many existing aspects have also been enhanced: for example the Callout tool – used to explain technical drawings with measurements and descriptions – now allows you to create multiple-leg callouts, with annotations that can be automatically incremented. That won't make much difference with simple designs, but for complex and crowded diagrams it's essential.

Designer's transfer to Corel has reaped immediate benefits. Aside from predictably improved integration with other Corel applications, such as WordPerfect, the program has borrowed wholesale its new owner's excellent Color Management system.

Another feature already seen elsewhere in the Corel stable, but adopted here for the first time, is support for reusable symbols. Items are described once in a document irrespective of the number of times they are used; the result – much smaller file sizes and drawings and the ability to globally update a symbol – will particularly benefit technical artists. As a further sweetener, Designer comes with a basketful of prebuilt standard industry symbols.

→ The program's new Color Management options are borrowed from other Corel applications



Docker windows

Visually, Designer has taken an ‘as you were’ approach – you can even set up the interface to mimic that of its predecessor – although you can modify your workspace to match your existing Illustrator or CorelDraw setups. One significant interface improvement is the addition of Docker windows, which let you group Control boxes, such as the Extrusion Tools and Symbols Manager in a single, tabbed window that sticks to the edge of the main application window. Dragging the Docker Window away from the edge turns it into a standard tabbed floating palette; double-clicking returns it to its docked state. It’s a neat compromise for ever-more crowded graphical windows.

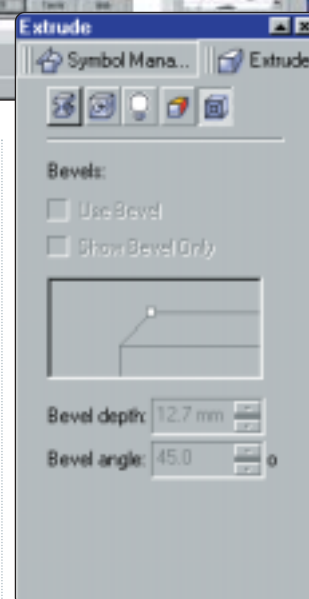
Designer 10.0, which also features VBA (Visual Basic for Applications) automation, now boasts support for up to 60 file formats – although most of these appear as mere updates, such as compatibility with the latest AutoCAD and Visio native files.

In a distinct sign Designer is moving away from its creative roots, version 10.0 is no longer bundled with the uninspiring Picture Publisher bitmap editor. Instead Twain-compatible CorelTrace, an application that converts bitmap images into editable vector files, fills the gap. It's a trade-off few will begrudge, particularly for digitising paper-based technical documents.

Verdict

Even if the new features don't qualify as groundbreaking, the changes in Designer 10.0 are at least universally positive and the new version represents better value for money if you're buying the program for the first time. If AutoCAD remains outside your budget, Designer 10.0 is worth a look. ■

Tom Gorham



↑ Docker windows can be dragged over the main window to form standard floating palettes

Corel Designer 10.0

- ☐ Corel: 0870 774 0202
- ☐ www.corel.com/designer10
- ☐ £299 ex VAT (upgrade £199)

System requirements

200MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/
NT4.0/2000/Me/XP; 128MB RAM;
215MB hard disk space

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



MP3 editing software MP3 Surgeon 2003 Pro



The handy MP3 file format has contributed to the ubiquity of digital music and the number of people with a growing collection of MP3s on their hard drives is ever increasing.

This popularity has created a need for MP3 editing software packages such as MP3 Surgeon 2003. While you can find most of the stuff on offer here in freeware downloads, it's nice to get all your editing needs met in one easy-to-use package.

The program couldn't be simpler to set up. It's only a 1.1MB download and it comes with helpful guides for first time users. Once on your PC you'll see the clear interface allows you to have a fair amount of editing and cleaning control over your MP3 files. You can split, join or trim tracks and apply fade effects – a good addition for making seamless connections between tunes if you intend to use the bundled MP3-to-WAV converter to make a CD.

A couple of things you've probably noticed in your MP3 collection are the disparity between volume on songs and incorrect information embedded in the MP3. We were impressed that MP3 Surgeon allows you to 'normalise' every MP3 on your hard drive. That is, you can level the volume of an MP3 and dictate what information is embedded in the track.

Previous versions of this software could only manipulate an MP3 of less than 4MB, so we are pleased to see that it now supports up to 4GB per MP3 – quite a lot to play with.

Verdict

This 2003 Pro version of MP3 Surgeon is a good improvement on the previous package and well worth a look for anyone with stacks of MP3s on their hard drive. It's pretty cheap so don't expect miracles, but for easy-to-use basic editing, you can't go wrong. ■

Spencer Dalziel

↑ The 2003 version of MP3 Surgeon is well worth a look for anyone with stacks of MP3s on their hard drive

MP3 Surgeon 2003 Pro

- www.mp3surgeon.com
- £13 ex VAT (available online only)

System requirements

233MHz Pentium; Windows 95/98/Me/NT/2000/XP; 16MB RAM; sound card; 1.1MB free hard disk space

Ease of use



Features



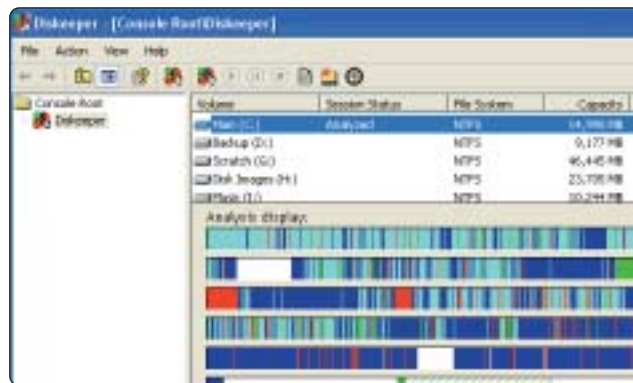
Value for money



Overall rating



Defragmentation utility Diskeeper 7.0 Home Edition



While Windows 9x has always included a defrag utility to optimise disk space, users of Windows NT may be familiar with Diskeeper, a third-party product from

Executive Software that filled a frag-sized hole left by Microsoft.

Fragmentation occurs when files are deleted from or saved to disk. Windows stores data at the earliest opportunity, often breaking up a file and scattering its parts across a hard drive. In time this can slow down your PC's performance, so the absence of a file defragmenter in Windows NT was a strange omission.

Microsoft soon learned from its mistake, however, and included a defrag utility with Windows XP – a cut-down version of Diskeeper, in fact. While that particular deal may have been good news for the company, it does make purchases of Diskeeper redundant for most people. So why should you be interested?

Well, the full version of Diskeeper is considerably faster than the one included with Windows. Claims that it's 300-500 percent faster need to be treated sceptically, but its performance is quick enough to consider the Set and Forget option, allowing your disk to be defragmented on a regular basis.

The console for Diskeeper includes a number of options not available in the version built in to Windows. For example, it's easier to maximise applications (shifting commonly used ones to the same point on the hard drive), or to maximise free space. It can also defrag page files and other system files during bootup.

Verdict

Diskeeper does what it says on the box, but you need to be really serious about defragging to consider spending £20 (and that's for the download version) to replace a free utility that most of us use once every six months or so. ■

Jason Whittaker

↑ You can set Diskeeper to optimise your hard drive's performance or maximise its space

Diskeeper 7.0 Home Edition

- Executive Software: 01342 327 477
- www.execsw.co.uk
- £23.99 ex VAT (£19.99 download)

System requirements

Windows 9x/Me/NT4.0/2000/XP; 5MB hard disk space

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating

