



● PHOTO EDITING

Adobe Photoshop Elements 4

PRICE £59 (£69 inc VAT)

UPGRADE N/A

SUPPLIER Adobe via website

INTERNET www.adobe.co.uk

VERDICT Improved image management, enhancement and sharing make a great product even better. Photoshop Elements retains its undisputed PC photography crown.

What a selfish company: not satisfied with dominating the field of professional photo editing with Photoshop, Adobe is gaining similar ascendancy when it comes to consumer-led PC photography. Elements 3 (see issue 122, p92) has fought off all opposition over the last 12 months, and Elements 4 looks likely to do the same.

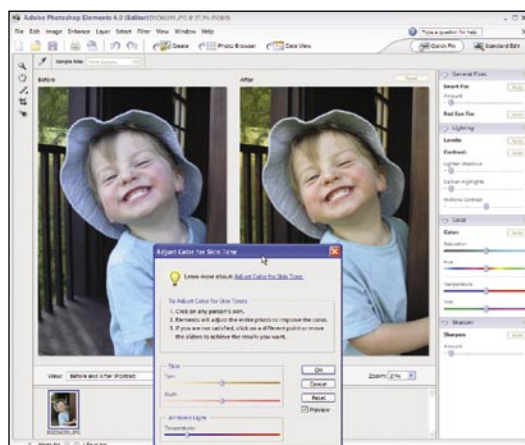
Key to Elements' success is its Organizer module, which provides dedicated image management. By default, the Organizer adds all imported images (and now PDFs) to a single central catalogue, though it also now offers a more traditional folder-tree view of your hard disk. This global approach has many advantages, but only if you can narrow things down to just those images you're currently interested in. This is most easily done based on the time your photos were taken, using either the timeline or the excellent calendar-based Date view. Alternatively, you can now use the new Find by Details command to find photos based on other metadata, such as flash status, exposure settings, resolution and orientation.

To really master your photo collection, you need to tag your photos with those details that are significant to you. Elements has always made this task as simple, visual and interactive as possible, but accurately tagging the subjects of dozens of photos is inevitably a chore up until now, as Elements 4 provides an extraordinary solution. Simply hit the new Find Faces for Tagging command and a new dialog presents a gallery of faces automatically picked out from all selected images and ready for drag-and-drop tagging. The underlying technology is jaw-dropping and the process is surprisingly efficient. The single fault we can find is that the recognition system only works accurately for subjects facing the camera.

After tagging, the next task in Elements is to make your photos look their best. The Auto Fix window has gone, replaced by a single one-click Auto Smart Fix command available from the Photo Browser. This certainly simplifies things for beginners, but it means you have to load up the Editor module even for the task of cropping. On the other hand, when removing red eye, users are now spared from even opening their photos,



Elements' Organizer includes a stunning face-recognition feature.



Advanced colour correction becomes child's play thanks to Elements' Editor window.

as the new Auto Red Eye Fix command works automatically; you can even automatically remove red eye from all images on import.

Automatic corrections are fine for most images, but to take control of the enhancement process you need to load up Elements' excellent Quick Fix window; this provides both automatic and slider-based control of the most important colour corrections. Previously, these Quick Fix corrections could only be applied globally, but now the window adds two selection tools that let you confine enhancements to particular areas of the image. The Selection Brush tool allows you to build up a selection by painting, while the new Magic Selection Brush lets you roughly scribble over the object and then attempts to work out what you're trying to select. It's another example of Adobe trying to make life as simple as possible, but unless the object is clearly

distinguished from its background the system fails more often than it succeeds.

For maximum control over your images, you need to shift from Quick Fix to Standard Edit mode. Here, you'll find a breadth of power borrowed directly from Photoshop, ranging from non-destructive adjustment layers and advanced retouching through to artistic filters and vector handling. It's the photographic capabilities that are most important to Elements' users and, as such, it's disappointing that CS2's Lens

Correction filter for camera-based distortion and aberration hasn't made the transition.

However, there's a range of new power to compensate in the form of an excellent new correction command for producing realistic skin tone; an enhanced Crop tool that lets you swap between presets and orientations on-the-fly; and a new Straighten tool for correcting photos taken at an angle. Most impressive is the Magic Extractor for pulling out objects from their background ready for colour correcting or compositing. The Extractor dialog is based on the same technology as the Magic Selection Brush, but offers greater control and is much more successful as a result.

Once you've enhanced your photos and created your compositions in Elements' Editor window, it's back to the Organizer window to create more advanced projects to share. Here, the biggest change is to the Slide Show Editor, which now lets you add text, objects, audio, narration, transitions and advanced zoom and pan effects to your presentations before outputting them to WMV, VCD/DVD, or direct to TV (assuming you have one hooked up to a Windows Media Center system). Other improvements include better email-based workflow and the ability to import Outlook and vCard contacts. You can also now drag-and-drop photos to a dedicated Order Prints window to

arrange professional output from Kodak, and the ability to upload collections and to invite family and friends to view them is more integrated and generally smoother.

Ultimately, Photoshop Elements 4 demands more from its users than alternatives such as Corel Photo Album (see p85), but it gives a lot more in return. By focusing on what users want to do with their photos and working out how best to help them do it, Adobe has come up with the best partner yet for your digital camera.

TOM ARAH

PC PRO RATINGS

EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP (SP 2).