

REVIEW – Adobe Photoshop Elements 4.0 (Macintosh)

<http://www.adobe.com/products/photoshopelmac/index.html>

\$80 retail (\$20 rebate if upgrading)

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It's probably best if I fess up.

After using Photoshop Elements as my primary image-editing application the past several years, I broke down and bought Photoshop CS2 (<http://www.adobe.com/products/photoshop>) last year. I was swayed by a special upgrade offer from Adobe, where the price for Photoshop CS2 was reduced from \$649 to a mere \$299 (okay, my wallet still felt the pain even at that steep discount). But for me, it turned out to be money perhaps better spent at a later date.

[There is also a very good “academic” discount available for Photoshop CS2 – \$285 – but one normally needs to invest in some pricey training to qualify for it.]

As with most hobbyist (non-professional) users of Photoshop Elements, I had not yet fully taxed the capabilities of the program. I just let a good deal influence my thinking. In hindsight, I should have realized that Photoshop has many capabilities that I was not ready to tackle (mostly due to a lack of time commitment on my part) or features for which I have no real need (e.g., CMYK output for publishing purposes).

In addition, I was already familiar with how to extend Photoshop Elements (PSE) capabilities through tools available from Richard Lynch's *Hidden Power of Photoshop Elements* books (tools come with the book on CD, or can be purchased separately for \$15). These tools – plus some other add-on utilities he markets – can provide access to additional capabilities already in the software, just not enabled in the PSE interface. An example is the ability to run Automated Actions (that others may have built using Photoshop CS2).

For further information, refer to these sites: Amazon's description, *The Hidden Power of Photoshop Elements 4* [\$19] – http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/078214456X/ref=ase_newwriting/103-5231607-0458217?s=books&v=glance&n=283155&tagActionCode=newwriting and Richard's own web sites for the book (<http://aps8.com/hppe4.html>), his tools (<http://www.hiddenelements.com/downloads.html>), free frames/action tools from others (<http://hiddenelements.com/downloads.html>) and optional booster tools for curves and masking (<http://aps8.com/boostermac.html>).

That is not meant to belittle Photoshop CS2 in any way – it's an incredible program, with almost unimaginable power behind its deep layers of menus and features. It merely highlights an important fact to keep in mind when buying software: *know your needs*.

For this author, the driving need was for more powerful image editing than the rudimentary capabilities available in Apple's iPhoto '06. For years, Photoshop Elements had been meeting that need, and – while competent with many of its features – I still had new and useful techniques to master, and features (“effects”) with which to play.

I also have yet to fully commit to iPhoto as a portfolio manager, preferring to keep my images in the OS X file system in my own file hierarchy. That may be overlooking an excellent capability of iPhoto – one that does not prevent you in any from using PSE as the photo editor – and one that I can revisit. (Though

my choices have been broadened by PSE 4.0, which now with new portfolio management capabilities borrowed from CS2, in the form of the *Bridge* program.)

So I hang my head with a small amount of shame. Did I really need the massive power of CS2, especially if I was not ready to spend the extensive time necessary to learn all of the incremental capabilities?

Who Is A Photoshop Elements Buyer?

For many in our Mac user group, Apple's iPhoto '06 (<http://www.apple.com/ilife/iphoto>) is quite adequate for their needs. It combines excellent portfolio management in a familiar interface (using concepts very similar to iTunes), and provides an ever-increasing amount of "basic editing" features. For those wanting to do image editing without learning more complex concepts, it also does an outstanding ability to simplify the user interface – it has a shorter learning curve than products like Photoshop Elements.

However, my needs went beyond iPhoto's capabilities, and I chose (some years back) to purchase Photoshop Elements. (Other editing choices exist as well, such as open source *GIMP* tools [<http://www.gimp.org>] or *Graphic Converter* [<http://www.lemkesoft.de/en/graphcon.htm>].) I've upgraded with each new PSE release, though it is debatable each upgrade has been compelling while the expense has been high – Adobe gives very little discount (a \$20 savings) to owners of prior versions. Many people might be perfectly satisfied to use an older version of PSE today – such as PSE 2.0 – which seem to be plentiful due to free bundles included in other products (buy a scanner and get PSE 2; buy a tablet and get PSE 2, etc.).

As pointed out earlier, PSE (\$80 retail from Adobe, or \$60 after \$20 rebate for those upgrading) is an inexpensive alternative to Photoshop CS2 (\$649). For me – in hindsight – I could have easily kept using PSE for another year or two, and used the monetary difference to purchase more RAM for my Mac, update my tablet or perhaps buy some worthwhile PSE technique training or books. Or I might have used some of the money to join the extremely worthwhile *National Association of Photoshop Professionals* (NAPP - <http://www.photoshopper.com>) which provides a superb bi-monthly magazine, great tutorials and online access to a wealth of image editing knowledge and special offers. That could have been a better investment. However, as one MacinTech member has pointed out to me – if you were used to using a wet darkroom in the past, perhaps only the depth of capabilities within PS CS2 will satisfy you (making the \$570 retail difference worthwhile).

What's New or Changed in PSE 4?

New features in PSE 4.0 are:

- *Magic Selection Brush* – a new selection tool that works wonderfully to quickly select an object – no need to be precise. Simply scribble or place dots and let PSE select the item for you (perhaps using the touch up tools to do minor add/subtract tuning to the selection). This tool can definitely shorten your workflow process.
- *Magic Extractor* – Building on the above tool, allows you to identify an object to easily extract from the photo by scribbling (or placing dots) on the object and then scribbling (or placing dots) on the background. While the capability to select objects has always been in PSE, this is a useful time saver, for example, when cutting a person or object from one photo, and pasting into another. It also allows novice users to perform extraction without having to hone their skill with selection tools and learn how to soften (feather) selection edges. [Some have said that this tool is even easier to use than the Photoshop CS2 *Extract* tool.]

- *Skin Tone Adjustment* – Allows an area of skin to be identified, and then have the image tonal qualities automatically adjust. (Manual adjustment can also be used to vary the effect.) As with the above tool, this simplifies a process, providing a shorter work cycle for those wanting to improve skin tones/color balance. (Improvements to skin tone can sacrifice other tones in the picture, but this feature works pretty well for a single menu item.)

As shown during June's Multimedia SIG meeting, this feature is perhaps best done using masking techniques, so that the degree of the effect can be easily varied once the selection and mask are easily in place. This is a great way to realize more natural skin tones.

- *Auto Red Eye Removal* – Previous versions of PSE solved red-eye using a special red-eye brush tool. Now this capability has been enhanced into a one-step action, and can even be applied to multiple images (files) at a time (batch processing). For some, this could be a real time saver.
- *Straighten Tool* – An improvement to an existing feature, where you now draw a horizontal or vertical line in the image, and then have the straighten tool align to that line. I like this far better than the old Straighten tool, which often made automatic alignment choices that I did not like.
- *Defringe*– for removal of a selection's colored halo effect that can occur when extracting or using layers. (Used in the Magic Extractor tool.)
- *WYSIWYG Font Menu* – An overdue enhancement that let's you see font choices in their actual font ("what you see is what you get").
- *Online Printing Options* – An alternative to ordering Kodak prints, card, photo books or calendars through Apple iPhoto (Kodak), or other online print services.
- *Adobe Bridge* – A replacement for PSE's old *File Browser*, and a rich subset of the *Bridge* program supplied with Adobe Creative Suite products. Provides tools to help find and manage your images, regardless where they're located on your Mac. Images can be found by metadata, search using smart filters and saved searches. A PDF slide show feature is also provided.

Bridge provides an alternative to doing portfolio management in iPhoto, using many of the same management concepts (e.g., keywords) to help sort or filter a large collection of images. Without altering your image or requiring you to store it in a proprietary manner (as with iPhoto '06), *Bridge* accomplishes many of the same portfolio management goals. While it is not quite as intuitive to learn as iPhoto '06, it is reasonably easy to learn, powerful and an alternative that allows you to choose where and how your photos are stored.

Bridge is a separate portfolio management program that comes with PSE 4, with integrated menu calls.

Changed features in PSE 4.0 are:

- *Quick Fix* – Possibly the most significant change to PSE in versions 3 and 4, this improved shortcut user-interface allows a new user to begin getting results from PSE in the first 30 minutes of use. It provides a powerful subset of capabilities in an eminently friendly user interface (similar in appearance to iPhoto '06's "*Adjustments*" feature) with good beginner choices for:
 - Automatic Fixes – Smart Fix, Red-Eye, Contrast, Levels, Color and Sharpen
 - Slider controls for Lighten Shadows, Darken Highlights, Mid-tone Contrast, Hues, Saturation, Temperature, Tint and amount of Sharpening
 - Quick access to Cropping tools and Magic Selection Brush (discussed above)

This is an excellent tool for the novice user, who wants to get immediate productivity whether moving from iPhoto to PSE, or being totally new to image editing. Every control has much-improved hints and instructions available in Help files, and the interface allows one to easily play with changes before committing to a modification.

That being said, the power of PSE can best be realized using the standard (not *Quick Fix*) editing interface, where more capabilities can be easily leverage (such as using layers, masks, and so much more).

- *Crop* – New flexibility to change image boundaries while cropping.
- *Text Paragraphs* – Automatic text wrapping as you move the boundaries of a text paragraph.
- *Color Management* – Improved flexibility in handling embedded color management (e.g., get the printing you're expecting). And another of many areas where Help files have become more understandable to hobbyists and novice users.
- *Advanced Camera RAW* – Work with lighting and exposure in RAW files, and then export to DNG (the universal digital negative format).
- *Noise Filter: Remove JPEG Compression Artifacts* – Good for use with poorly taken photos (such as those with a low-res camera phone – poor lighting or taken with high ISO).
- *Slide Show* – Rate and label your images when in a full-screen slide show.
- *Photo Captions* – Apply captions across multiple files.

While not touted as an enhancement, it is worth knowing that Help and bundled tutorials continue to see wonderful improvement. Information is easily found, and more often than not, is stated in understandable terms for novice users. In addition, Adobe provides access to free online tutorials that are worthwhile, and many web sites exist offering great ideas on how to improve your workflow and techniques. Amazon and other online book sites can also provide an excellent window into the number of PSE books that exist to help accelerate learning curves and develop advanced editing techniques.

As with the full Photoshop program, the community around PSE continues to grow and be very supportive of users' needs. Adobe – of course – is very supportive of this personal growth, as that only helps grow the potential audience for its Creative Suite of software.

The retail box we received also contained a coupon for two complimentary (free) online tutorials. This is another reminder that there is an immense amount of power available in this program, and that Adobe knows that education will (1) speed your learning curve and (2) make you feel better about the value received with your purchase.

One last hidden aspect: the space the program requires has grown by more than 50%, to almost 90 MB. Plug-ins and presets can add another 60 MB, and if you transfer over the Goodies folder, be prepared to give up another 142 MB of space. (Good thing hard disk space – unlike gasoline – is cheap these days.)

Summary

Is PSE 4 a worthwhile alternative to iPhoto '06?

A definite YES.

PSE 4 provides excellent image editing capabilities and can be easily integrated into iPhoto's portfolio management capabilities. Simply open iPhoto's preferences – General panel – and choose Edit Photo >> In Application... to make PSE 4 the image editor that iPhoto will use.

PSE 4's biggest strength is its depth of powerful features – this is a comprehensive program that most amateur/hobbyist photographers will not outgrow. Its biggest weakness is a more complex user interface than iPhoto, one that requires an investment of time to release the full values of the product. While the Quick Fix interface and improved Help can provide immediate productivity with PSE, you really need to practice with the software, learning the editing features and how they can be used. While a novice user can get immediate results, there is a learning curve to truly effective use of layers, masks and many of the highly worthwhile tools that come with PSE. It simply takes time to learn these tools and associated techniques for making the work go smoothly and quickly. (Though the Multimedia SIG is here to help members benefit from the knowledge and experiences – both good and bad – of others.)

That being said, I am a big fan of PSE 4 (and its prior releases 2.0 and 3.0) in that you can fix photos – composition cropping, red-eye, sharpness, lighting, contrast, etc. in a reasonable amount of editing time. You can also be creative – changing sunsets, overlaying people into new images, creating vignettes and many other special effects.

If you do not have a capable image editing program or feel like you would like to do more image enhancement than can be done in iPhoto '06, PSE 4 is a really great choice at \$80.

I would also encourage those short the \$80 for a PSE 4 purchase, to consider obtaining previously-owned pre-4.0 versions from their network of friends in the MacinTech User Group, or from legitimate copies contained in software bundles included with scanners, tablets, etc. (see below comments on whether PSE 2 is good enough for you).

If I already own PSE 2 or PSE 3, is it worth upgrading to PSE 4?

Questionable for some, but probably.

When it comes to upgrades, far too many people make a knee jerk reaction and feel that they will be left behind if they do not upgrade. This is far from the truth with Adobe's PSE product, as PSE 2 and PSE 3 were both very capable releases.

It's also important to keep in mind that Adobe does not give upgraders much significant credit for prior expenditures – the net price for an upgrade to PSE 4 is a pricey \$60 (making you repeat 75% of your initial investment – ouch!). One of our members disagreed with me on this incremental value, pointing out that a year or more of value had already been extracted from the original purchase, and that the upgrade should instead be looked at as simply an incremental investment that might speed one's workflow. (Thinking back to how I buy music CDs, he may have a point there.)

Upgrades however, are a very personal assessment, tied closely to one's valuation of new capabilities. Consider your word processing program for a moment (mine is Microsoft Word). At least 90% of the features I touch have been in the product for years and years. Many of the new features mean far less to me. Microsoft is highly motivated to provide new releases (they're very lucrative and inexpensive to sell to an installed base), but how much do I think I need all the new workgroup collaboration features that are currently being added?

Times exist when you simply need to make an upgrade due to macro changes to the Mac environment – the move to UNIX (OS X) and perhaps the move to a new Intel-based machine. But there is no compelling event like that pushing a former owner of PSE to the new 4.0 version. [Note: PSE 4.0 is not yet implemented in Universal Binary, so for Intel-based Macs it will utilize the Rosetta emulator.]

An owner of PSE simply needs to look at PSE 4 in three ways:

- Am I getting new functions – effects that have not previously been available to me – that I could use (perhaps some things that have previously only been in Photoshop CS2)?
- Is the user interface or existing capability changing in some way that can save me significant workflow time (e.g., faster Selection tools)?
- Are there worthwhile gains to help with portfolio management (e.g., with *Bridge*)?

For this user, the answer is yes, But if you already own PSE 2.0 or 3.0, then carefully consider the features described in this review, do some additional online reading of other published reviews, try the software at a local CompUSA, Apple or other store...and then decide what's best for yourself.

PSE 4.0 Products Details

Operating Requirements

- G3, G4 or G5
- Mac OS 10.3 or 10.4
- 750 MB or disk space
- 56 MB of RAM (more is desirable)
- Color monitor with 16-bit color or greater
- 1024x768 monitor resolution or greater
- CD-ROM drive (unless downloading the software from Adobe)

This software was tested on a 1.25 MHz PowerBook G4 Alum, with 1 GB of memory, running OS10.4.7. (Unlike iPhoto '06, PSE 4.0 is not yet available in Universal Binary.)

Contained in the Retail box:

- 112 page PSE 4.0 manual
- Registration card (offering 2 complementary online training sessions if registering today)
- Promotional inserts
- PSE 4.0 CD

Adobe PSE product info - <http://www.adobe.com/products/photoshopelmac/overview.html>

Adobe's online forum for PSE - <http://www.adobeforums.com/cgi-bin/webx/.eeb4f8b/>

New Adobe online PSE tutorials - <http://www.adobe.com/products/tips/photoshopelmac.html>

*This review was contributed by Doug Brown, Multimedia SIG, MacinTech User Group, July 31, 2006.
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