

Latest software has new tricks

With digital photography, taking the picture is only part of the process. Any avid photographer knows that the fun continues in the "digital darkroom." There, the image you envisioned, can truly become reality. The darkroom not only requires a computer but software to turn your snapshot into a masterpiece.

Adobe is the second largest manufacturer of software with an emphasis on graphics. Photoshop, Adobe's flagship program, is so synonymous with photo editing that the word Photoshop has entered our lexicon as a verb much to the chagrin of Adobe's lawyers, who are trying to maintain a copyright on the term.

Adobe does not stay on top of the graphics world by resting on its laurels and continually updates its programs. This past fall was no exception when Adobe rolled out new versions of photo and video editing programs. I was privileged to be a beta tester for a number of these programs this past year and want to give you a rundown on the latest versions.

First let me clear up some of the confusion of version designations Adobe has given its products. Several years ago all the Adobe programs were treated individually and updates were on different schedules. Keeping up with the upgrades and all the different versions, became a bit confusing.

Adobe brought a number of its applications under one moniker and called it Creative Suite or CS for short. This is similar to how Microsoft bundles a number of programs together and calls it Office. Programs are offered individually, but when bought as a group, there is a significant savings if you have need for the other programs. So Photoshop, which is now in its eleventh version, is called CS4. One of the benefits of this strategy is the CS programs are released all at one time instead of piecemeal throughout the year. The CS programs have been on an 18-month product cycle.

Adobe offers consumer versions for both its photo and video editing programs. They are identified with the name Elements that infer it is not the full program it is named after. But don't let that deter you from using them. I use both on a regular basis and they can perform many of the same tasks that the full-blown version does and only cost a fraction of the price. These programs have been on a more aggressive life cycle with annual updates.

So here is a quick rundown of the latest Adobe offerings in case you're exchanging a gift you already had.

Photoshop Elements 7 — This consumer version of Photoshop just keeps maturing, while adding more features. Often this program is the testing ground of new features for its big brother. One new feature that is appealing is the special effects brush, which applies an effect while you paint. For example, one of those effects is keeping one object in color while turning the rest of the picture to black and white. You simply drag your mouse over the area you want to keep color and the rest of the image changes to black and white. This frequently used effect couldn't be simpler.

Premiere Elements 7 — Video editing can be more involved than photo editing. Just getting the data from camera to computer can be a job in itself. So perhaps you haven't had much interest in video editing. But with more still photo cameras being able to record video, transferring the files is as simple as transferring photos, so you may find yourself wanting to dabble in video. If that is the case you may want to consider buying Premiere Elements as is often sold as a bundle with Photoshop Elements. This program comes with a wealth of useful tools and with just a few clicks you can create a slide show with music from your prints and put it to a



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DVD or post on the web.

There may be a little confusion in the Elements versions too. Photoshop Elements arrived on the market several years ahead of Premiere Elements, so with Photoshop being several versions ahead in numbering, Adobe had non-matching version numbers when sold as a package. That has been resolved with the current release. Both versions are called 7.

The most recent version of Adobe Lightroom was rolled out several months ago. If you are not familiar with it, Lightroom was designed for photographers who shoot volume and especially those who shoot in the RAW format. The program is set up to primarily make global changes to images. So say you regularly need to remove a person or object, or lighten/darken specific areas of an image, then you will probably want to opt for Photoshop. Lightroom is priced in between Elements and Photoshop. But with Lightroom a photographer has a full set of tools to sort, edit and print or post images to the web.

Adobe Bridge is emerging as an important part of the CS package. It is not sold separately from Adobe products, but comes with the CS package. Initially Bridge started out as a program to just visually organize your image files, but it has turned into a full featured application of its own. Many of the output features of Photoshop like slideshows, printing layout and Web site design have been moved into Bridge. Personally I find myself using this part of CS more and more, saving Photoshop for specialized corrections. I refer to Bridge as Lightroom light.

Photoshop CS4 is truly the 800-pound gorilla in photo editing world and comes in two versions; standard, and Extended. Unless you work in 3D applications or want to edit a video clip, you probably will not see an advantage in purchasing the Extended version. It would be difficult to explain what is new in CS4 without running on for a few pages, but suffice it to say there are many new advancements in the program with an emphasis on making the interface more workflow friendly. If you are new to the program you may not appreciate the differences but they will be welcome to a frequent user. One new feature which is truly amazing is called content aware scaling. It allows you to change the aspect ratio of the picture while the program detects and keeps major objects from being distorted.

In addition to the learning curve, the price of Photoshop often deters a new buyer. But once you have paid for the program, upgrades are a fraction of the full price. If you are not sure if any of these programs are for you, you can download a fully functional 30-day trial version at www.adobe.com.

Here's a tip to get around the full purchase price of Photoshop. If you purchase a Wacom tablet, a device that simulates the motion of a pen on paper and is used instead of the mouse, you will receive a version of Photoshop Elements. If you go to the Wacom Web site and look up the privileges program, www.wacom.com/privileges, you will find that you can purchase Photoshop as a download for half of its regular price.

Of course, not all editing software comes from Adobe and not all editing software has a price tag. There are many competitors to the Adobe products and one called Gimp is even free. If you are familiar with open source programs like Open Office which compete with

Microsoft Office, Gimp is on par and will be the topic for an article next year. Speaking of which, I hope you had a Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year!

Keep those article ideas coming. You can reach me at pmi@palmermultimedia.com

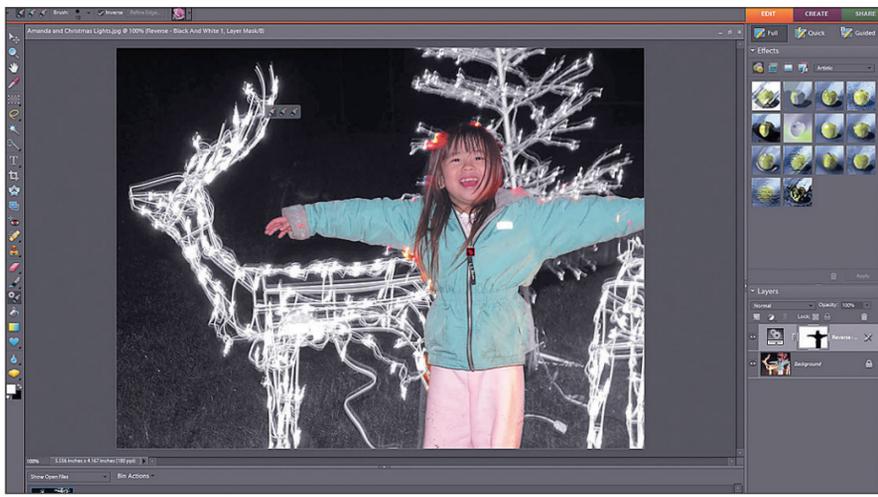


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One of the new features in Photoshop Elements 7 is the Smart Brush Tool, which creates special effects. One effect keeps one part of the image in color while the rest of the image is converted to black and white. You simply drag your mouse over the subject create the effect.

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