

DIGITAL DIRECTIONS

PIXEL BORDER WARS:



Original image

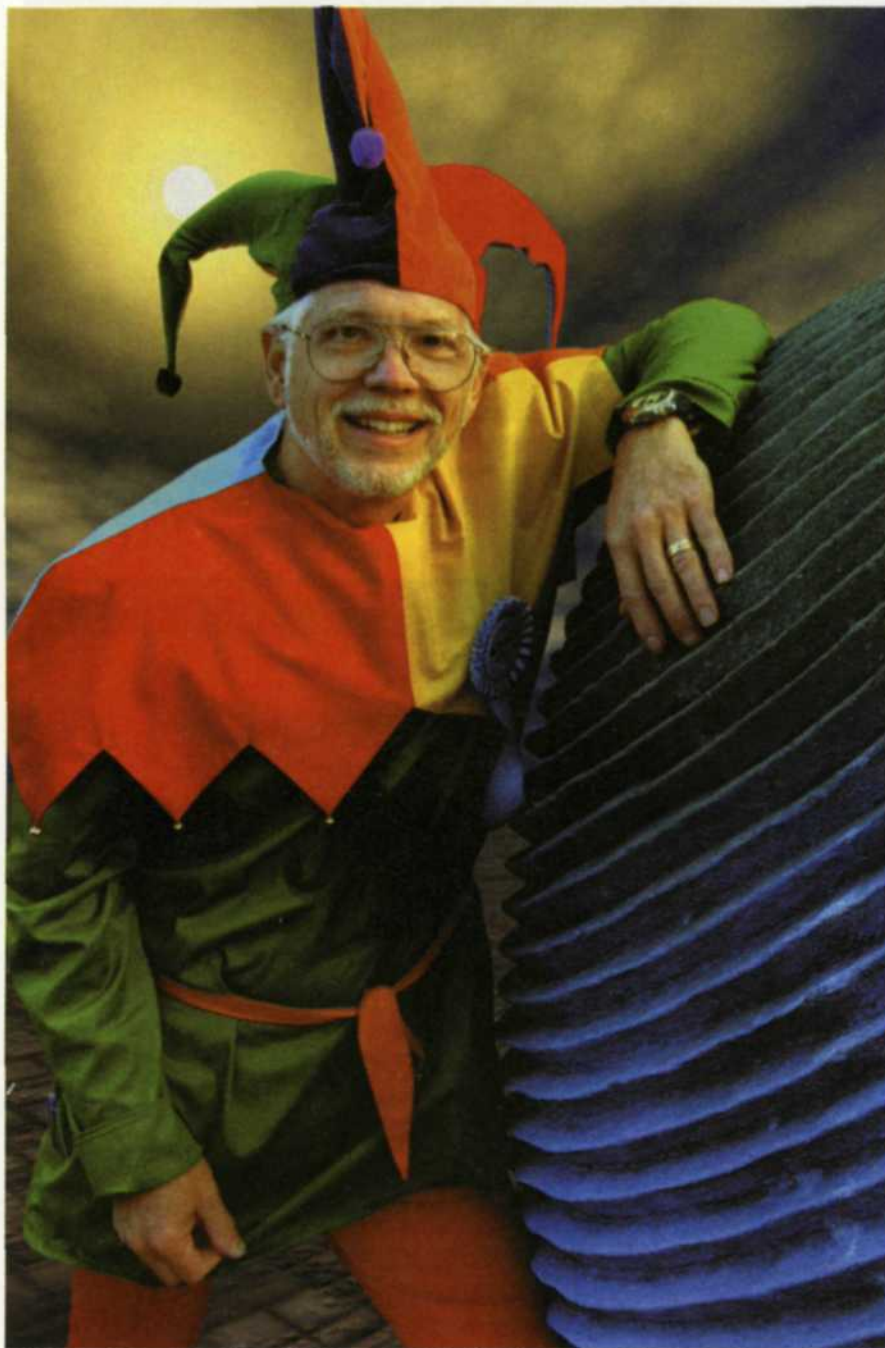


Blended image using feathering of 1 pixel

By now, you have probably seen images with that telltale ragged edge where the editor tried unsuccessfully to paste an image and blend it with another. Although the editor spent considerable time attempting to blend the pasted images, the results still looked like pasted images. The key to achieving high quality digital editing is to make the image look like it needed no editing, but that is no easy task. It takes diligent editing practice and refining of skills with several editing tools.

Feathering Tool is the Ultimate Weapon!

Jack and Sue Drafahl



Blended image using feathering of 1 pixel

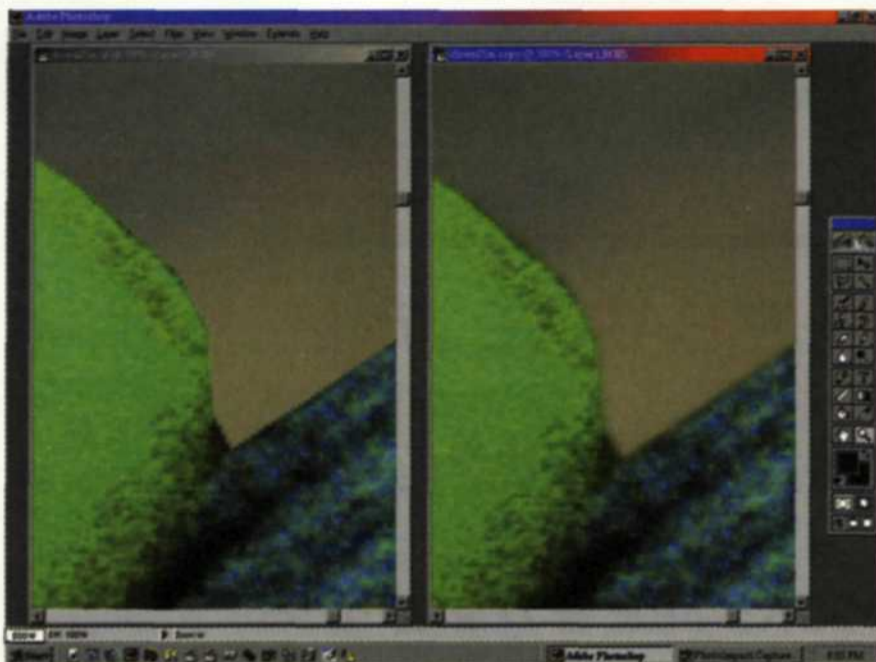
THE BATTLE LINE
between two images
looks like a miniature
border war of pixels
and the peacemaker
is the feathering tool.

THE BATTLE LINE between two images looks like a miniature border war of pixels and the peacemaker is the feathering tool. Feathering is a process applied to one image so that when blended with another image, the touching edges achieve a blurring blend. You can vary the degree of feathering by assigning different values to the feathering function. Although the feathered area does lose its image resolution, if kept to a minimum, it will be lost within the finished image.

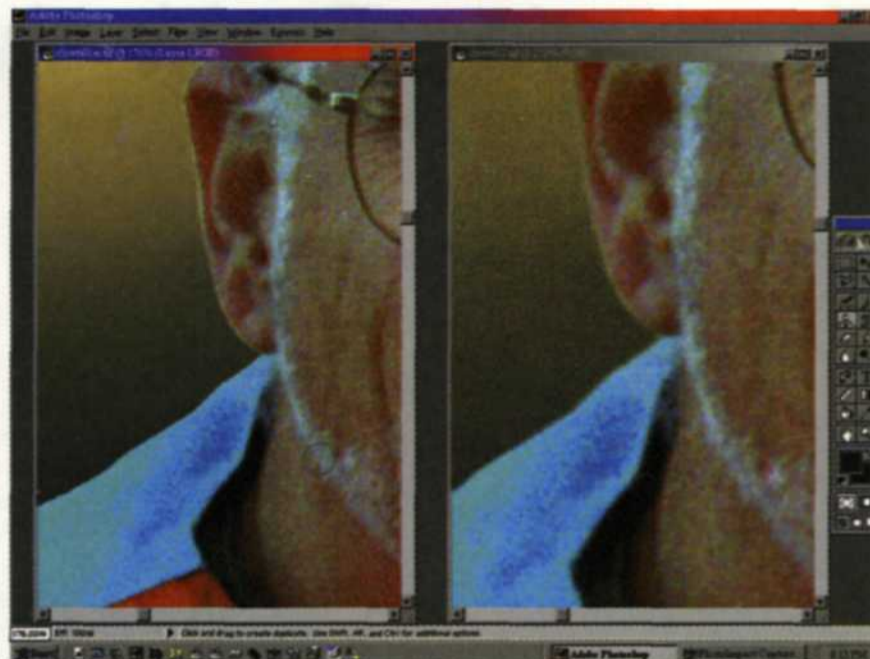
When you look through most software editing manuals, or even the help pull-downs, little mention is made of this tool. This is because in the newer image editing software versions, the feather tool has become an integrated part of the brush and selection tools. If you want to know if a specific tool has a feather function, select the tool and then double click on it in the tool box. The problem is that many people who first get into editing don't realize that there are optional tool settings to uti-

lize. If you set up these tools properly, then additional use of the feather tool itself may not be necessary.

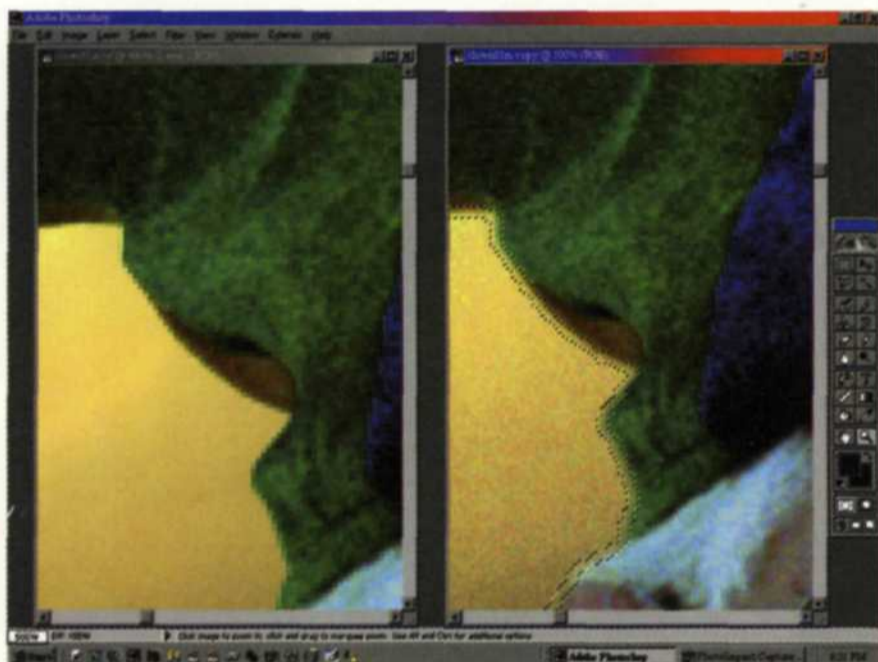
Each editing program on the market offers different tool boxes featuring feathering, and to cover them all would take too much space. Since Adobe Photoshop is one of the most popular editing packages, we will use it as our example. If you pick the lasso or select tools from the floating toolbox, a small box appears that allows you to set the feather values and another function



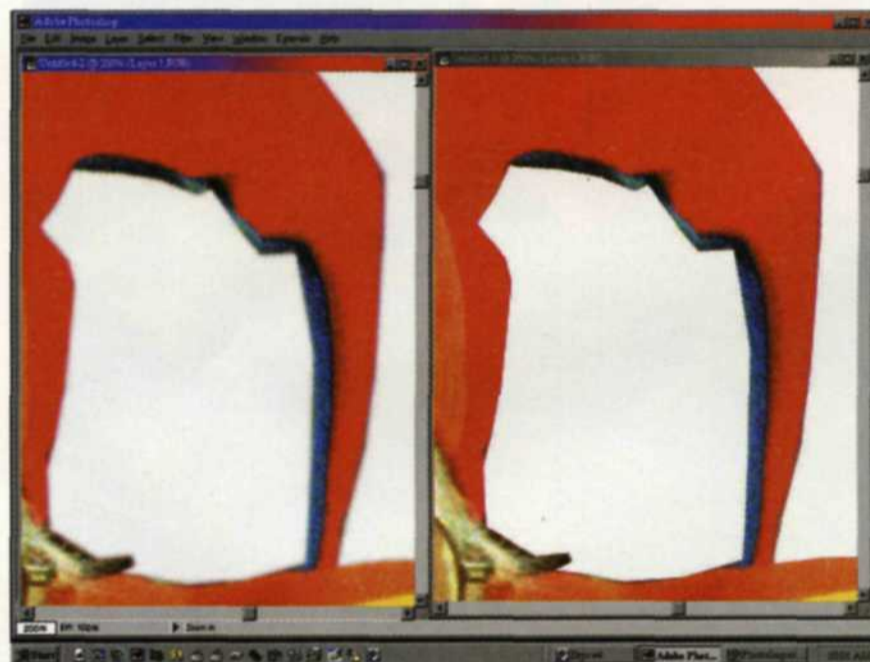
Left screen with no feather, Right has a feather of 1 pixel



Left: A grainless background image and no feather between the images. Right: The screen had a grain pattern applied to the background before it was feathered and mixed with the image of the clown. The right has a feather of 1 pixel.



(left-hand portion of the jester's hat) Left: Image was selected and pasted onto a grainless background. Right: The noise filter was used to add a grain effect to the background, and the border select was then used to feather the pasted edge.



(right-hand portion of the jester's hat) Left: This portion of the jester image was selected and pasted onto a background that has no grain. The area between the paste and the background has a rough edge. Right: A feather effect was applied to the border area, and then a noise filter was used to add grain.

called anti-alias.

The anti-alias works much like the feather, but makes the edge pixel semi-transparent to better blend with the other image. It works well if your selection is very accurate, but it cannot hide some of the edges that faster selection creates. If we had all the time in the world, fine-tuning every selection and using the anti-alias would give us excellent image blending. But, as the saying goes, time is money, especially in a digital photo lab. So, the alternative is to use faster editing, and the feathering function to cover any

last-minute edge errors.

Getting back to the feather function, which level of feathering should you use? We have found the best way to figure it out is to experiment with a test image. Using an image size that is common in your lab, select a specific object in the scene and set the feathering level to one. Copy it to the clipboard and then open a new file with a white background. Paste the object onto the white background. Repeat the process for one file without feathering, and another set to two. Zoom in on the

edges of each image, look at the blending and record the best setting. Then repeat the tests with a smaller and larger image. The best feathering technique should be different for each image size.

If your selection is very complex and you're not sure which level of feathering to apply, you can set the feathering to zero, and save the selection as part of the file. You can then experiment with different levels of feathering by reloading the selection.

Using the feather function, found under the "Selection" menu, apply feath-

ering to the selected edge. If the feathering level is wrong, simply undo and set it to another level. This saves time because you can keep using the same non-feathered selection repeatedly until you achieve the desired results. Nothing is more frustrating than using a select tool with a specific feathering level only to find out that the level was wrong.

The rubber stamp is another tool that uses feathering. When you select the rubber stamp tool, make sure that the brush palette is on the screen. You can activate "Show Brushes" from the pull-down under Window. At the upper right of the box you will find a small arrow that leads you to brush options.

One of the sliders is called hardness and is actually the feather control. At zero it has the maximum feathering while 100 has none. The closer you get to zero the more blurred the cloning. If you are cloning a lot of small detail, don't be tempted to set it close to zero.

Experiment with the settings by moving the slider to different positions and saving out each as a new clone brush. When we use the clone tool on areas with fine detail, we like to set the hardness somewhere between 35-50.

Let's now assume you have an image that has already been edited, with the layers flattened and the original feathering still showing. Of course, there is not enough time to do the entire process again, but you still have two choices.

First, you can zoom in on the area, and use the clone tool with feathering to fix the problem area. Otherwise, you can re-select the area using the polygonal lasso. Go back to the select pull-down, find "Modify" and select the border function. Set the border to different widths, making changes using the undo until you find the desired width setting. Pick one of the many blur filters and apply it to the border. Again experiment with different blur strengths, using the undo if you don't like the effect. With experience, you will find the fastest and most effective combinations for correct-

ing these problems.

Unfortunately, there is no set of values anyone can provide for achieving the best image blending with feathering. A lot will depend on the quality of your editing, file size, and ultimate print size.

The best results are going to be derived

by experimenting with test images. Once you have a good set of feathering data, keep a record of it. It will save you a lot of time and money later.

Jack and Sue Drafafl are freelance writers and professional photographers based outside Portland, Ore.

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