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PhotoImpact 4 by Jack and Sue Drafa

In the past, it seemed like software creators assumed that theirs was the only program you would install on your computer. Of course, that was the only reason that you bought a computer, right? If you tried to install other programs, there would be an instant incompatibility because their drivers would interfere with everything else. It was like their way of getting even if you even tried to install another program.

Thank goodness times have changed. Now, in order for software companies to survive, their number one goal is to interface with other programs on your system. One program that works hard for compatibility is PhotoImpact 4, made by Ulead Systems. When the program first hit the market, it was called ImagePals.

Our theory is that the name did not sound professional enough, so they changed it. We loved the program then and now it's even better. Most of the version changes reflect the advancements in the Windows environment.

When we first installed the program, we noticed quite a few special effects filters had been added. Many of these filters were ones we had previously downloaded off the Internet to be used with Photoshop. As we started to wander through the pull-down menus, we came upon preferences. There was a plug-in location menu, so we figured what the heck, and typed in the location of our Photoshop plug-in menu. We exited the preferences, re-started the program and lo and behold, all the Photoshop plug-ins were being loaded! When we pulled down the effects menu, we noticed a lot more than just the Photoshop effects were listed. Many were ones we had never even seen before.

Excited about all the power that just been handed us, we quickly loaded a picture to see if the plug-ins really worked. There was a lot more here than we first had imagined. Let the fun begin! One function we had not seen before was a pull-down called "All." Normally, a half dozen similar effects are grouped together in a pull-down menu. Although this was still there, in addition, all the effects were also located in one giant plug-in pull-down menu. As we started trying each effect on the sample image, we realized we would have to stop as some effects had hundreds of variations!

The PhotoImpact 4 image editor is a full-blown photo-editing program. It has many of the advanced features found in Adobe Photoshop, MicroGraphx Picture Publisher, and Corel Paint. Brightness, sharpness, tone maps, saturation, resolution—these are just a few of the standard editing tools we found. In addition, two automatic image-enhancement features have been added. With the "auto process" tool, you select a specific task and the program determines the best correction on its own. How the "auto focus" tool enables the program to figure out the best sharpness is still a mystery to us. The "post processing wizard" starts with a straighten menu, followed by a crop, focus, brightness, or color balance, removes red eye, and concludes with a magic frame. At any point you can stop off and use a specific tool or back up through the steps, if you accidentally skipped a step. There is a well equipped toolbox with brushes, zoom, selection, paint, and text tools to make this a very complete image-editing program.

You have all types of options for viewing the selected image—full screen, zoom in, zoom out, fit to window, and guidelines or rules for exact object alignment. Additional image control allows you to rotate your image after a scan, flip it, use the clipboard function, or another huge submenu full of selection controls. The stitch function allows you to reassemble partial scans of images to fit into one image. The trace function enables a very high resolution line trace of any contrasting lines in the image.

You can bring images into the program from various sources, and once edited, send them out to a variety of file formats or printing devices. PhotoImpact supports both digital cameras and scanners. The "smartsaver" menu lets you select either JPEG, GIF, or PNG image format for use on the Internet. The split screen shows you the before image with its file size, and the after image with its compressed size. No more guessing how it will look or how bit it'll be.

Since much of the image work today goes onto the Web, a whole pull-down menu is dedicated to making your own personalized web page. The web utility includes several animation functions, an HTML image assistant, backgrounds, buttons, frames and access to the Ulead Systems' home page [<http://www.ulead.com>] where you can get additional help.

The PhotoImpact Album is a companion program that maintains a visual database of all types of computer and image files. When you start the program, it will ask you for a new album name, thumbnail size, location of the album, and the fields you want to include in the database. It will then ask you if you want to collect files from your hard disk, floppies, CDs, Zips or SyQuests. When all the thumbnails are collected and displayed on the main screen, you can add information in the data fields.

This is a great way to catalog storage devices that don't remain in your computer. For example, we store all our images on CDs. When we write a CD, the writing program assigns a number to the CD using the date and a unique four-digit number. The number 990213-3456 translates to disk 3456 made on February 13, 1999. When we name an album, we use this number followed by any additional information we want up, to 256 characters.

When we want to find a specific image, we can search through all the albums using a batch manager program. The search can be for date, time, file name, subject, or just about any piece of information stored with that thumbnail image. When we want to print a specific image from a CD, we insert the CD into the computer, drag the thumbnail file image onto the printer and it is sent to be printed. You can also select specific thumbnails to be copied to a different location or convert images to a different file format.

The left side of the album page contains thumbnails of previously used albums so you can quickly return to a previous album by simply touching the thumbnail. On the right side is a special toolbox that lets you link other software programs directly into the PhotoImpact Album. We added the Adobe Photoshop icon to our toolbox, so that when we drag a thumbnail from the album page over to that icon, Photoshop opens the file. When finished editing, it is easy to switch back to Album and update the thumbnail. Other icons in this toolbox can include printers, e-mail programs, other editing programs, or input devices.

Ulead PhotoImpact 4 is a powerful editing tool for the professional and novice alike. It features state-of-the-art imaging tools that make short work of image enhancement. The Album feature with its thumbnails makes it easy to locate files and better organize your work. PhotoImpact 4 provides the necessary tools to simplify your digital world.

For more information contact Ulead Systems, Inc., 970 West 190th Street Suite 520, Torrance, CA 90502; (310) 523-9393; Fax (310) 523-9399; email: [info@ulead.com].

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