A Snapshot of Photo Editing Options

By J.V. Bolkan

The Competitors and My Methods
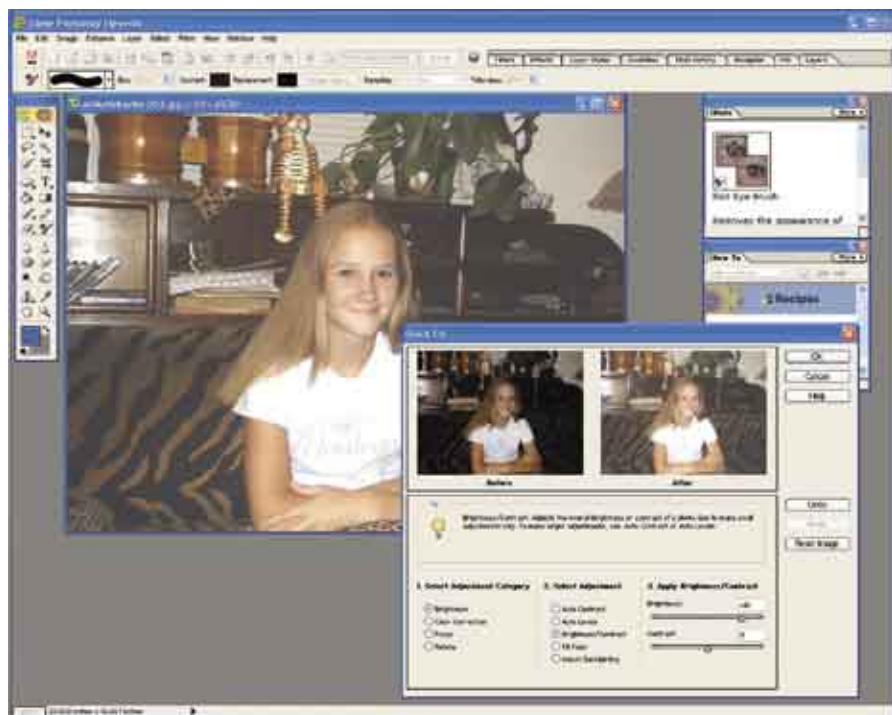
I've taken a look at a handful of the competitors in the affordable (less than $150) image editing category and held them to the standard of Photoshop CS ($649):

- Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0 ($99)
- Ulead's PhotoImpact XL ($89.95)
- Jasc's Paint Shop Pro 8 ($87)
- ArcSoft PhotoImpression 5 ($49.99)

I was unable to obtain a copy of Microsoft's Digital Image Pro 9 ($99.95) in time to include it, but hope to do a review in an upcoming issue.

The first thing you'll notice when shopping for imaging software is the bewildering array of versions, many with very similar names, and even multiple packages from the same vendor. For instance, Jasc offers its Paint Shop Pro 8 for about $90 and Paint Shop Power Suite—Photo Edition for nearly $130. The suite offers a number of imaging utilities, such as an image database, project templates, and photo e-mail. Typically, these add-ons are also available separately, so you're likely to see three boxes on the shelves: the image editor, the editor bundled with utili-ties, and the utility kit. Making it more confusing, the names are often less than forthcoming. We looked at the programs here in regard to their editing capabilities.

I weighted my evaluations strongly toward ease of use and features that are practical for the classroom. My test photos include an image from a two-megapixel digital camera and a large (25 MB) scanned image from a traditional photo. I looked to correct common image flaws such as poor exposure, red-eye, and scratches. I also created composites by pasting image elements into my test images.

Plenty of digital imaging professionals will tell you that Adobe's Photoshop CS is the best photo editing application money can buy. Professional digital photographers love its raw power, industrial reliability, and high-end feature set. Years ago, when Adobe and Aldus became a single company, Photoshop not only became the de facto standard, for certain professions it became the only option. Even today, with the enormous popularity of digital cameras, few competitors even bother making competitive claims against Photoshop. However, despite its overwhelming market dominance, Photoshop probably isn't the wisest choice for your classrooms.

Somewhat ironically, Photoshop's near total control of the high-end photo editing market has opened the door for a whole host of much more versatile, friendly, and affordable competitors. In some ways, Photoshop is the 18-wheel tractor trailer of digital photography. That will get you plenty of attention, especially if the goal is having trained professionals do some heavy hauling. However, if you just want to get around town, have some fun, or teach a child to drive, you'd be better off with one of the low-cost sedans, sports cars, or SUVs of the photo editing world.

Of course, Adobe hasn't ignored the popular market. The company has a consumer-oriented software, Photoshop Elements. But even the familiar name combined with significant amounts of its sibling's core code hasn't prevented a host of worthy competitors, some of which I review here.

Adobe's Photoshop Elements has plenty of power and features, but also has one of the steeper learning curves.

Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0

Adobe's biggest challenge seems to be avoiding making a better Photoshop than Photoshop at a much more attractive price. Essentially, Elements is much of what the name implies, many of the key elements from the company's flagship application with a bevy of automated and wizard-based features mixed in.

If you've spent any time in Photoshop, Elements will seem very familiar—you may even think it is an upgrade to the workhorse. Virtually all the tools and menus from the expensive program are there, along with all the automated and semi-automated additions. Naturally, a few high-end pieces of Photoshop are missing, but the omissions are few. This makes Elements the most daunting editor in the group, especially to first-time image editors.

Power and control are the strengths of the program. A large default Hints window eats plenty of interface space,

but really provides little more than a distraction when you move the cursor over the incredible array of tools in the tool menu. Adobe's tutorials,

called Recipes, are pretty nifty, but the program doesn't include enough of them. Fortunately, you can download more, but a program of this sort should come with every bit of help possible.

For just about any photo-editing task short of commercial printing preparation, Elements 2.0 is more than up to the task. The drag-and-drop filters and effects in particular are fantastic and have incredible control options. The sheer volume of options and dense interface make this a better choice for older students. For only a fraction of Photoshop's price, high-school and advanced middle-school students can explore their creativity almost endlessly.

Arcsoft PhotoImpression

Arcsoft's PhotoImpression has easily the most welcoming and nonthreatening interface. Younger students are likely to feel comfortable with the minimalist menu and large icons and buttons. Although PhotoImpression
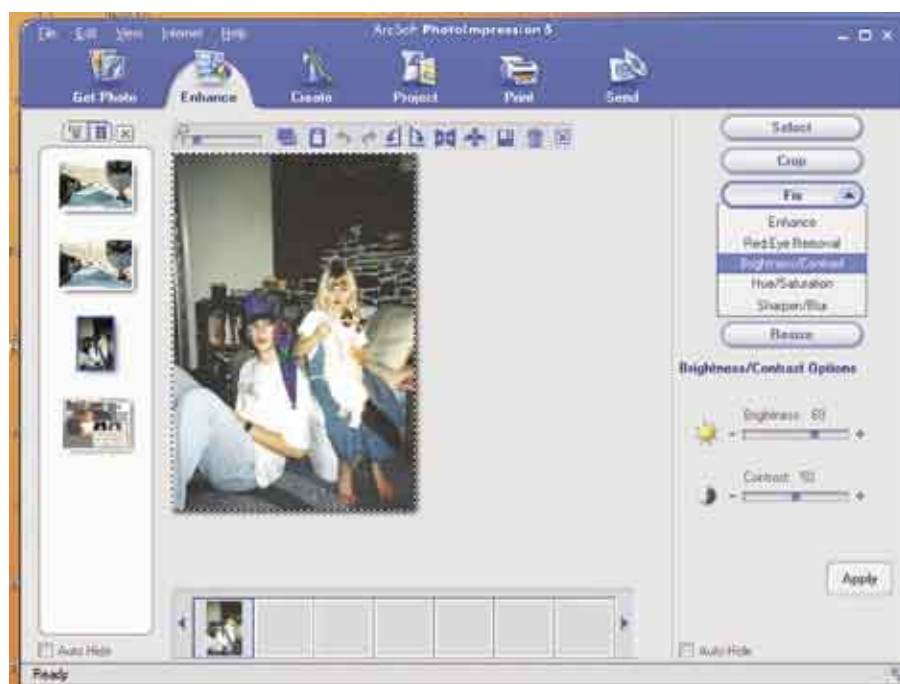
ArcSoft's PhotoImpression offers extreme ease-of-use and effective wizard-based corrections, but doesn't offer the power of the others.
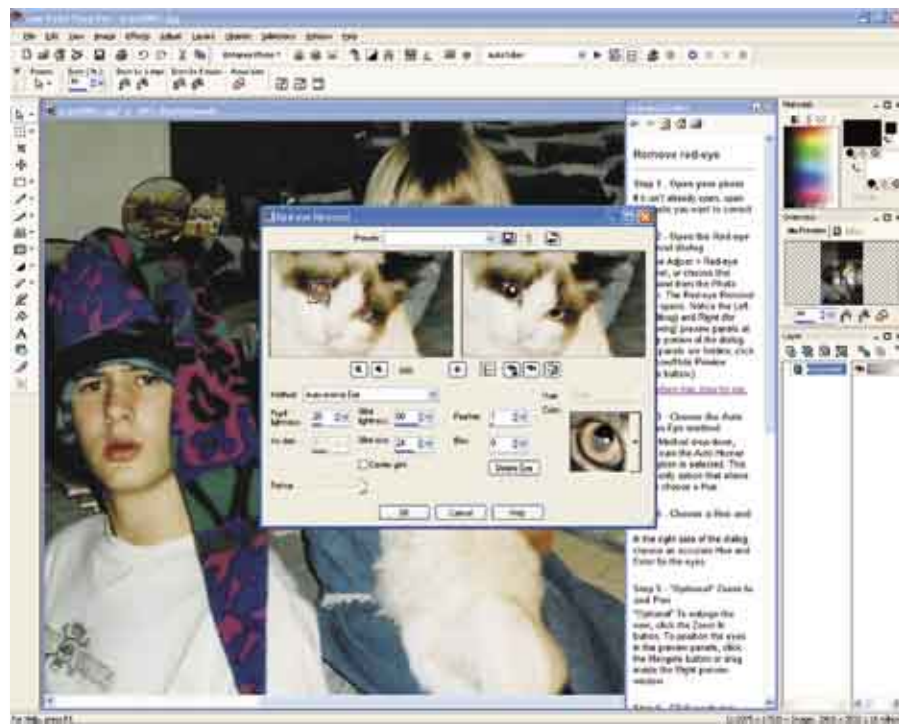
Jasc's Paint Shop Pro is the most powerful editor in this roundup, yet manages to maintain a good level of usability and some great wizard-based tools, such as the red-eye removal example shown above.

In short, PhotoImpression might be a good choice for elementary classrooms, but is a bit too limited and unconventional to be a strong choice for use with older students.

Jasc Paint Shop Pro

At one time, Paint Shop Pro was arguably the closest competitor to Photoshop. The current incarnation hasn't lost the power or the depth of a full-blown commercial-level product. Not surprisingly, the program is nearly as daunting at first glance as Adobe's Elements—the feature set is extremely deep.

Although Paint Shop Pro has industrial-level menus with relatively arcane capabilities such as the ability to convert into CYMK for commercial printing, it smooths the learning curve with some excellent automated features. It did the best of all the programs at attempting to perform a "one click" fix of our seriously underexposed digital camera image. Paint Shop Pro also features a wonderful implementation of the multiple undo—unlike PhotoImpact and

was the weakest in offering automatic fixes, basic editing commands and wizard-based corrections are very easy to find and perform. With manual tweaking, results were very good.

Although students may get started quickly, two drawbacks to the approach are evident. First, Arcsoft's unconventional interface offers little transferable experience. In other words, once students outgrow this imaging application, the transition to another isn't made much smoother. Outgrowing the program is quite likely, as the second drawback to a streamlined interface is a lack of control. For instance, the program makes it very easy to rotate an image 90 degrees, flip it, or mirror it, but it doesn't offer incremental rotation. Compositing is almost impossible with this lack of rotational control, and the layers functionality is rudimentary.

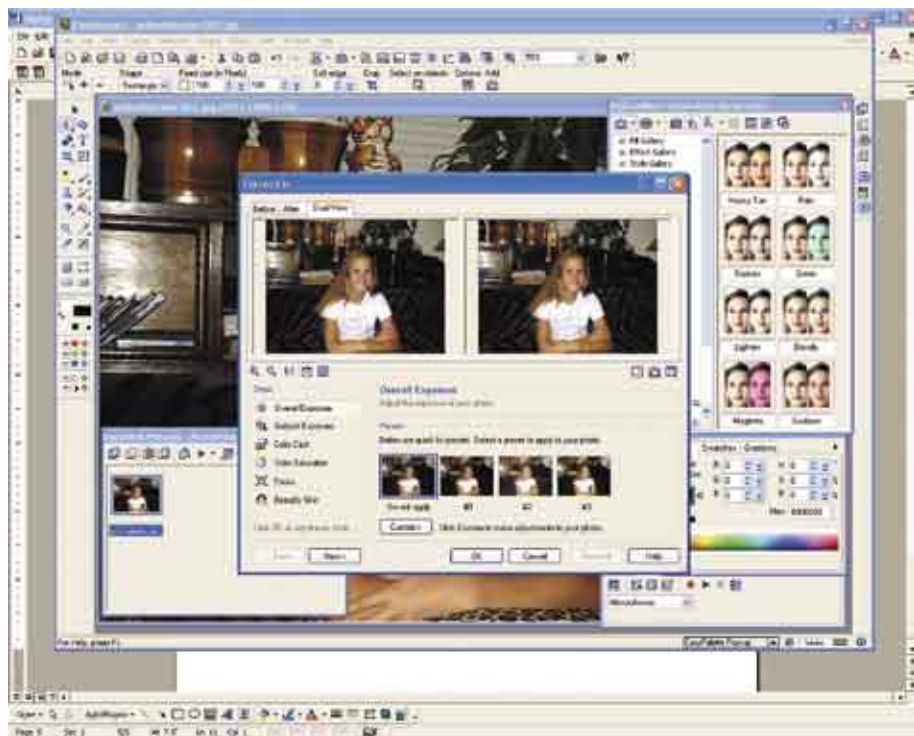Despite the lack of fine control, the program does very well at correcting exposure and color problems, in a broad way. An overall underexposed photo can be lightened, but you can't adjust midtones, lighten shadows, or boost highlights. Likewise, you can adjust hue and saturation, but you can't adjust individual color levels.

PhotoImpact XL editing features offer a nice balance between complexity and ease of use.

Selected Feature Comparison of Image Editing Software

Product	Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0	ArcSoft PhotoImpression 5	Jasc's Paint Shop Pro 8	Ulead's PhotoImpact XL
Suggested Retail Price	$99	$49.99	$87	$89.95
Suite Available/ Suite Included	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
Compatibility	Mac/Win	Mac/Win	Win	Win
Ease of Use	Good	Excellent	Good	Very Good
Feature Set	Excellent	Fair	Excellent	Very Good
Control	Very Good	Poor	Very Good	Good
Advanced Features	Very Good	Poor	Excellent	Good
Auto Photo Enhance Feature/Quality	Yes/Fair	Yes/Poor	Yes/Fair	Yes/Fair
Red-Eye Removal	Good	Fair	Very Good	Good
Special Effects	Very Good	Fair	Very Good	Excellent
Effect Preview	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Help System/ Tutorials	Good	Poor	Good	Very Good
Grade Level	9–12	3–5	9–12	6–12

Elements, it can undo a command from the middle of a series. For instance, if you've made seven changes and decide that the fourth change was a mistake, Paint Shop Pro allows you to undo just that action. The others require you to discard all the actions that follow the mistake.

Correcting the red-eye problems in our large scanned image was a mixed bag. Zeroing in on the subject's eyes in the cramped work and preview panes was difficult and far from intuitive using the clunky navigation controls. However, once correctly oriented on the problem area, Paint Shop Pro's red-eye fixes were the best of the bunch, easily. Unlike the other programs, it actually attempts, with great success, to replicate a human eye rather than simply replacing the red with black or another color. There is even an animal eye option that let me

fix the cat's eyes quickly without making it look like a monster.

Paint Shop Pro is a very powerful program that could easily handle even school yearbook chores. Younger students can easily get lost in the deep menus and even advanced students may find some options too complex, but overall it strikes a good balance between power and usability.

Ulead PhotoImpact XL

PhotoImpact may be the best of this group at balancing power with ease of use, with the edge going toward friendliness. Although it lacks the incredible depth of Elements and Paint Shop Pro, it is still a very capable editor.

Automated and wizard-based tools are plentiful, powerful, and easy. Corrections in some of the wizards, the ExpressFix wizard, for example, are

a bit heavy-handed, but quick and simple. More nuanced corrections are available in the Post-processing wizard, with only a modest increase in complexity. PhotoImpact has a number of options for fixing damaged images, offers full support for layers, and like both Elements and Paint Shop Pro, includes multiple undo capability. Once users become accustomed to the wizards, the menus offer extreme control. This multi-tiered approach makes PhotoImpact a solid choice for a wide range of students, serving as scaffolding that will lead them into better understanding of digital imaging concepts.

PhotoImpact XL offers the deepest array of image creation tools. These tools take up space in the menus and add somewhat to the complexity of the program without delivering much value to image editing. However, they are undeniably fun and help spur creative exploring. PhotoImpact's menu and tool conventions are standard enough that switching to another program shouldn't be difficult. For middle school students, this may be the ideal choice.

Conclusion

The affordable image editing software category is very competitive and full of incredible values. The products we looked at deliver nearly the power of Photoshop in packages that are much easier and convenient to use at a fraction of the cost. If you've been waiting until you can afford Photoshop CS to bring digital photography into your classroom, you're probably waiting for no reason.

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