

Corel Graphics

In December's issue I reviewed the Corel Office Suite, and my conclusion was that though the programs it contains are excellent in their own right, they are not compellingly different from their Microsoft equivalents. It is a different story with most of the Corel graphics programs – which are, after all, what Corel is famous for.

There are currently seven mainstream graphics applications produced by Corel: two vector-based graphics programs, CorelDRAW and Corel Designer; two photo-collection management programs, Corel Photo Album and Corel SnapFire; and no fewer than three bitmapped graphics editors, PhotoPaint, Corel Painter and Paint Shop Pro (rebranded in September 2006 as Paint Shop Pro Photo). I will describe each of these in turn and review the applications provided in the review CD.

Vector Graphics – CorelDRAW and Corel Designer

Corel Designer is a technical graphics package aimed at (and priced for) specialist designers. It was purchased from the Micrografx company and extensively made over to resemble Corel Draw in its 'look and feel'. It was not included in the review package.

[Graphic about here: caption 'Working on a cartoon in CorelDRAW']

CorelDRAW is the Corel's flagship program. Currently in Version 13, it allows the user to construct complex images out of relatively simple shapes. The basic drawing objects include lines, rectangles, ovals, polygons, and stars. There are several sets of Perfect Shapes (known to Microsoft Office users as 'Custom Shapes') with special features – e.g. a 'smiley face' with a mouth that can be curved up or down. All shapes are made up of straight and curved line segments which can be manipulated independently of the rest of the shape. Straight segments can be converted to curves and vice versa. A toolbox at the left gives access to a set of drawing and object manipulation tools, while for each tool selected a new toolbar along the top gives the options that are available while using it. All toolbar buttons have useful tips.

Shapes can be moved, resized and reshaped numerically using the toolbar or manually by dragging the mouse. With manual resizing the default option is to keep the shape in the same proportions, though this can be overridden by using the Alt key. A nice feature is the ability to duplicate shapes which remain linked, so that changing any one of them affects all the others.

A palette at the right shows a set of standard colours, and others can be created using any of four colour definition methods. In addition to solid colours, shapes can be filled with patterns, textures or gradients (confusingly called 'fountains'). Many predefined textures are available. An Interactive Fill Tool allows patterns, textures and gradients to be manipulated 'on the fly' within the objects themselves, so the designer can see the results immediately.

There are two kinds of text: paragraph text, which can be formatted and made to wrap around objects, and artistic text, which can be manipulated in size and shape and made to follow paths. Text characters can also be converted to curves and manipulated like other objects.

Any two objects can be blended to produce a sequence of intermediate objects. The same button opens out into a set of interactive tools which allow objects to be

manipulated in various ways; this for me was one of the most engaging aspects of the program.

CorelDRAW crashed once during my trial but otherwise behaved itself. It was great fun to use and the help system is comprehensive and well-designed. I would recommend it to anyone who wants a powerful vector graphics program they can use effectively straight away, and go on learning for weeks or months. The full version is about \$770, so buy the Academic version (\$145) if you can; otherwise get hold of a cheap copy of an older Corel or Micrografx program that you can then upgrade from for \$268. For comparison, the full price of Adobe Illustrator is about \$860, and the Academic version is \$147.

Photo management – Snapfire and Corel Photo Album

Corel Snapfire is a free photo-management program available as a download from the Web (<http://tinyurl.com/zf6c8>). It is intended to compete with Google's free Picasa, and presumably to steer new users towards Corel's commercial programs. It contains the usual options for adding new image files from disk or directly from a camera, viewing thumbnail images at various sizes, and collecting images to print or email, including an email slide show option that requires the email recipient to also have Snapfire installed. The simple editing options include an automatic 'quick fix', red eye removal, cropping and ninety-degree rotation, as well as a panel of sliders including brightness, contrast and saturation, but not, alas, hue. Pictures can be given captions, but this is of little use as the captions can't be used for searching. There is a reference in the Advanced Search dialog box to verbal 'tags' but these don't seem to have made it into the picture information or the user interface.

If you don't already have a photo management program – which is unlikely, since they're usually bundled with digital cameras – then Snapfire may be worth a try; but nothing about it distinguished it for me from Picasa and other programs in this genre.

Corel Photo Album is a slightly more powerful program designed to compete with similar offerings from Microsoft and Adobe. It is priced at about \$84, somewhat less than Adobe Photoshop Elements or the new Microsoft Digital Image Suite. It is web-savvy, downloading and installing its own updates, which means that Corel can add new features to existing installations as the market grows and changes.

Like Snapfire and other similar applications, Photo Album shows the images as thumbnails. The user can add new images from files or a camera, and instruct the program to automatically search specified folders for new images. Images can be allocated to user-defined categories and subcategories, and given titles, keywords and descriptions, which can then be searched. Images can be grouped by category, file location, or date sequence. Groups of images can be emailed, printed, backed up or displayed as slide shows. These shows which can also be used to review images, but apparently not saved.

Unfortunately Corel Photo Album has fallen into the current trend of trying to make the user interface look exciting and new rather than familiar and easy to use. This usually goes with a shortage of content, and Corel Photo Album is no exception. The editing features are disappointing, adding very little to those in the free Snapfire program. I found it hard to believe how little it could do compared to, say, Adobe Photoshop Elements, and looked for some hidden secret features, but in vain. With very few advantages over the free Snapfire, and none at all over the full-featured editor in Adobe Photoshop Elements, I can't recommend this one.

Bitmap editors – PhotoPaint, Corel Painter and Paint Shop Pro

PhotoPaint is a midrange bitmapped graphics editor, and comes as part of the Corel Graphics Suite – i.e. bundled with Corel Draw. It is clearly modelled on Adobe Photoshop and offers many of the same buttons and tools. One difference is the use of masking rather than selection for working with portions of an image, and the addition of an Image Sprayer which can quickly make attractive sequences of predefined images like leaves or footprints. There are also more predefined brush tools than in Photoshop, which has opted instead for a single tool that can be extensively customized. Interactive tools like those in Corel Draw make a reappearance here and are equally useful. PhotoPaint can be used to make cels for an animated GIF file, something which Photoshop delegates to its companion program ImageReady. Photoshop's image-manipulating Filters are matched by PhotoPaint's Effects, with image treatments ranging from slight sharpening to complete re-creation. Like Photoshop, PhotoPaint can open and save files in a wide variety of formats, and it allows the user to create and manipulate vector-based shapes as well as bitmaps.

After a brief acquaintance I would rate PhotoPaint alongside Photoshop for anyone but the most exacting professional user. The only areas I found where it fell short were in the number of predefined shapes available and in the size of the buttons and other controls, which were too small to find easily on a standard screen.

Corel Painter is the most original of these programs: it allows the user to simulate a variety of painting 'tools' – brushes, sponges, charcoal, etc – and to apply these to textured and patterned surfaces the way one would do on canvas. Each tool can be configured in many ways to produce a vast range of effects. On top of this basic structure there is a set of editing tools similar to those in PhotoPaint, but less extensive. Painter was fun to play with, though rather slow to respond to some commands. I suspect that it would take a lot of exploration before one was able to use it productively. The full version retails for \$625, but there is an academic version available for \$154. It would make a wonderful present for an artistically gifted friend or relative.

[Graphic about here: caption 'Modifying an image in Corel Painter']

Finally, **Paint Shop Pro**. This is an old friend which I used extensively before moving across to Photoshop a few years ago. It was purchased by Corel from the German company Jasc, though whether this was to mean to improve Corel's range or simply to dispose of a rival is not clear. Before this Paint Shop Pro had been 'shadowing' Photoshop over many versions, adding in new features when its rival did, while selling for substantially less. The price differential, at least, is still there; Paint Shop Pro is available for \$159 while Photoshop retails for over a thousand dollars. Like PhotoPaint, Paint Shop Pro downloads its own upgrades.

Paint Shop Pro has a lot in common with PhotoPaint, including an Image Sprayer, though here this is called the Picture Tube Tool. The buttons were a little larger and more user-friendly than in PhotoPaint, and as one would expect from the name there is a little more emphasis on creative painting tools, though Corel have included the standard photo-fix tools as well. There is a scripting language available so that sequences of operations can be recorded and applied to many images in succession. Paint Shop Pro is compatible with Photoshop plug-ins, so extra resources and materials are available through the web. Effects are in here too, and the Effect

Browser makes it a little easier to see the result of one's choices before making a final decision. Paint Shop Pro doesn't appear to have anything like the Photoshop 'Liquify' (sic) filter yet, though.

Conclusion

These are nearly all excellent programs – Corel Photo Album is the only disappointment. In choosing between them I would opt for Paint Shop Pro as the most powerful bitmapped image editor and Corel Draw for vector graphics. None of them were quite good enough to make me abandon three years' experience on Adobe products, but they came close, especially Corel Painter for the fun of it.

So, Mr. Corel, here's what I'd do: integrate Snapfire, Corel Paint, PhotoPaint and Paint Shop Pro into one top-notch creative bitmapped graphics application that could stand beside Corel Draw and give Adobe Photoshop a run for its money. But *please* call it something that doesn't use the words 'Paint', 'Photo' or 'Album'. This reviewer is heartily sick of them.