

Review: Adobe Photoshop CS2

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Adobe Photoshop CS2 is the latest release of Photoshop. The CS2 part can be slightly confusing, as the large software companies have realised that there's extra money to be made by bundling their software titles together, hence 'Adobe Creative Suite', 'Macromedia Studio', 'Microsoft Office' etc. As soon as the program starts though, you realise this is actually version 9.

My own background is in building database driven websites. For years, I'd managed to leave the graphical side of things to graphic designers, but there's only so much pestering for GIFs they'll take before advising you (politely) to do them yourself. As such, I got myself a copy of Photoshop 6 and haven't upgraded until now.

Oops!

The reason I chose Photoshop back then, was that it was considered by professionals to be the best tool on the market. As far as I know, that's still the case. Big competitors are Paint Shop Pro and Fireworks, but as I've only had time to learn one program, I can't really compare them. Following the merger with Macromedia, there is a lot of speculation about the future of Fireworks. The official line is that Fireworks still has a place, but there are inevitable murmurs about the business logic of developing two competing products.

Message

Detail

Extended Info

Tag Context

The learning curve for Photoshop is notoriously high, especially for someone like myself without formal graphics training. I've read a few books on the subject, but the more I've picked up, the more I realise there is still to learn. Mostly I use Photoshop for creating GIFs (sometimes animated), touching up JPG photos, and sometimes (if I'm feeling brave), putting a collage together. When I'm bored, I also have a perverse delight in super-imposing the heads of family and friends on sumo wrestlers. For some reason, they don't seem to think it's as funny as I do...

I used Photoshop while building the sites www.melrosepdf.com and www.gwb.org.uk, so much of this review is based on a real-world experience of the product in action.

The installation of Photoshop was fairly painless, as you would expect from most modern software. One minor quibble is that the system requirements only listed Intel processor chips. Considering AMD chips have been around for ages, it seems strange to confuse a large section of the potential audience. For the record, I tested with both a 1.6GHz Centrino Laptop with a gig of ram on Windows XP pro, and an AMD Athlon XP 2400+ Desktop with half a gig of ram on Windows 2000 pro. I can quite happily say that neither system faced any serious performance issues, despite running several applications concurrently with Photoshop. It should be noted however, that most of the images I was dealing with were destined for the web, and so fairly small. If you are into serious photograph retouching for a medium such as print, then the higher resolution could slow things down on an old machine.

On to the new features of Photoshop CS2, the first of which is Adobe Bridge. This replaces the file browser in CS1, but as I'm coming from Photoshop v6, it's completely new to me. As anyone who owns a computer knows, you soon build up a huge collection of images, and finding the one you want can be a nightmare. The Bridge lets you easily navigate your images, preview them, rate them, rotate them, and just about anything else you need. The ability to resize the thumbnails in real-time, just by dragging a slider was very impressive. It's probably the feature I've used most since upgrading, and is permanently open when I'm working in Photoshop.

A feature built into the Bridge, is the ability to browse stock art catalogues when you're online. It's very easy and fast to use, and contains a lot of very good photos on whatever subject you require. Unfortunately, prices seemed to be upwards of £60 per photo, which rules them out of most projects. Despite being a useful feature, I've had to source cheaper images from CDs and stock art websites.

One of the biggest features of Photoshop CS2 is Camera Raw. This is the ability to get the raw data recorded by the digital camera's CCD sensor, before it's turned into a popular file format such as TIFF or JPEG. The idea is that the raw file will hold extra data, and thus give a higher quality starting point for manipulating the image. Not all cameras support the raw format though, including my own, so I'll just have to take Adobe's word on it. Relating it to my own work, most web images are fairly low resolution anyway, so I don't know if it would make much difference.

In addition to Camera Raw, I didn't use the new features of 32-bit HDR, Noise Reduction or Smart Sharpen either. This actually demonstrates how huge an application Photoshop is - that you can use it for years and never touch on many features. It all depends on what you use Photoshop for, and very few people will have used it in-depth for all its capabilities.

The next new feature is the ability to select multiple layers at once. To be honest I haven't used this one yet, but I'd imagine there will be a use for it at some point. 'Smart Objects' on the other hand are a feature that will be used extensively. The basic advantage here is being able to work away without committing changes. We've all been in the situation where you spend hours working on something only to notice a spelling mistake, or for the client to request a small change. Before, you might have had to redo almost everything, but with smart objects, you just edit the original image, and the later effects remain in place. Another 'Smart' thing is 'Smart Guides'. Again very simple, it's just lines that appear when moving layers, to help line them up. Combined with the ability to snap to these guides, it saves time when doing pixel-perfect alignment - no more having to take notes of coordinates!

The following group of tools can probably all come under the category of 'Retouching'. It's probably the biggest use of Photoshop, so it's just as well there are loads of great tools. First up is the 'Red Eye' tool. It's never been that difficult to

remove red eye from photographs using Photoshop, but now you can do it in just one click! Simply selecting the tool and clicking on the eye removes it - no fuss, no finding the correct size of brush etc. It does exactly what you require, so I can't really say anything else about it. Next up is image warping which is long overdue. This is the ability to distort an image by choosing a shape such as 'Arc' or 'Fish-eye'. More useful is when you choose 'custom' and Photoshop presents the image in a grid. You can then pull the grid sections around and define curves to mould it into whatever shape you want. This effectively allows you to make an image feel more '3-D' as you can shape it to match in with background objects. It's great for collages and is limited only by your imagination.

Related to warping, is the new vanishing point feature. It's a bit complicated to describe, but allows you to define planes on an image, which then allows you to clone or paint etc in the perspective of the image. It's very impressive when you see a demo of it in action. I did struggle to find an image where I could actually use it on though. It's very powerful, but I don't know if I'll have cause to use it very often. It seems to lend itself to angular images such as buildings, and only then when you are trying to do some sort of collage...

Of more practical use is the new Lens Correction filter. I often take photos using a wide-angle or telephoto lens. These can cause distortion in the final image, especially the wide-angle lens which tends to bloat the image in the centre. It took a bit of trial and error before I got used to it, but it's now very easy to correct this distortion using the Lens Correction filter. There are also handy sliders for correcting the perspective, and a clever line drawing tool to sort photos where the camera wasn't properly horizontal.

Another new addition is the spot healing tool. This belongs in the same family as the Healing tool, Patch tool (Both new since Photoshop 6) and the cloning tool. All these tools use data from other parts of the image to paint with. In the case of the spot healing tool, it takes information from the side of the brush. As such, it's great for removing facial spots, cracks, stray hairs and anything else relatively small, that detracts from the image. In my own case, my camera has recently developed a 'dead pixel' in the middle of the CCD. It leaves a very noticeable black spot on each photo, but a single click by the spot healing brush is usually sufficient to remove it.

Another long overdue feature in Photoshop CS2, is WYSIWYG fonts. It's very simple, it renders a sample of the font when you pick it in the text tool. Before I used to have MS Word open just to choose fonts, as it was the only way to quickly preview and make a choice.

One small disappointment was with ImageReady. In recent years there has been a growing move towards web-standards, using semantic html markup, instead of the hideous nested table layouts that get churned out. I had hoped that using ImageReady to do navigation and roll-over states etc, would produce a nice bit of web-standard html with an accompanying style-sheet, but sadly not.

At the moment, no other software seems to either. I did go to a demonstration of Fireworks 8, which claims to give the option of CSS for sliced navigation. Actual inspection of the code however, proved that all they had done was wrapped a pair of <div> tags around the old table! I have been told that Project 7 provide Dreamweaver extensions that can do this type of thing properly, but I haven't tried them myself yet.

The final feature I'd like to mention is scripting. I know it's been a product feature before CS2 and may even have been in Photoshop 6, but I've only just found it. So far I've only used it to batch the creation of thumbnail images, but this has already saved me hours creating web-galleries.

In summary, my upgrade from Photoshop 6 to Photoshop CS2 was well worth it. In many ways, the smaller features (such as WYSIWYG font) are just as useful as the headline grabbing ones such as Adobe Bridge.