

IMAGING SOFTWARE

Faster creativity can be fun — but not a replacement for Photoshop

Live Picture 2.6.1

BY JOHN KORCHOK

OUR FRIEND *PHOTOSHOP* HAS BEEN KING OF THE HILL FOR A long, long time. It is a versatile work of software engineering, offering excellent color correction tools with very good illustration features.

It is the standard, it is flexible — but it ain't perfect. The emperor isn't naked, but he has a few holes in his clothes that Adobe would rather pretend are not there. The worst ones are its inherent slowness of operations on large images and its limited ability to undo operations.

We've seen the standard workarounds for the first problem: throw masses of hardware at it. The fastest machine you can afford, the maximum RAM you can cram in, accelerators of all types, RAID disk systems — and it still isn't fast

Even after the shape distortion has been applied to the headlight shape, the base image can be altered and even swapped out without losing any of the modifications done to it.



enough. The second problem gets “solved” by saving early and saving often. Then we wonder why 9 gig disks aren't big enough.

To be honest, Adobe can't really solve these problems without throwing out its file format and almost all its code and starting from scratch. What sane company wants to do that with its flagship application?

The competition, on the other hand, is quite ready to begin from first principles and design a totally new approach. That competition is called Live Picture Corporation, and it has some software you really should consider seriously as an addition to your bulging toolbox.

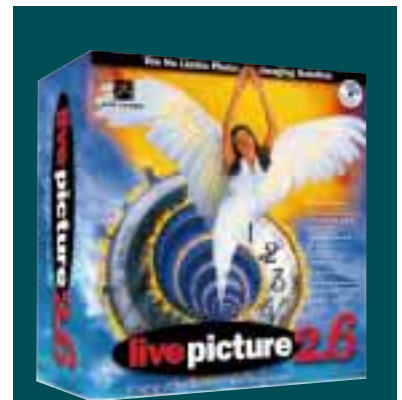
BENEFITS OF AN OBJECT-ORIENTED APPROACH

Live Picture is now chaired by John Sculley, formerly of Apple. The company has licensing agreements with Kodak, and has worked with Kodak, Hewlett-Packard and Microsoft to develop the FlashPix multi-resolution format for consumer digital pictures.

Of late Live Picture has developed Web image servers and a competing format to QuickTime VR that needs no plug-in with Java-enabled browsers. You can see examples at <http://builder.hw.net/news/1997/showhomes/futurefinal> or <http://www.mediadome.com/Webisodes/Titanic/Explore/mainmenu2.html>.

The key to *Live Picture's* alternative is its file format. Developed in France in the early 90's by Bruno Delean, it takes an object-oriented approach to the image rather than treating it as a mass of individual pixels. This has several advantages.

First, modifications to the original can be an algorithm applied to a field, rather than to millions of individual bits. This avoids the mind-numbing slowness of calculations which are repeated as many times as there are pixels in the selection. Second, because modifying layers are algorithms rather than bitmaps, they can be tiny. Third, the image can be enlarged or reduced without the software having to recalculate nine pixels out of an area that had four. (Many are the high quality images that have been turned to garbage simply by trying to resize them once too often.)



Live Picture 2.6

Platform
Power Macintosh only

Minimum system requirements
System 7.5, 24 Mb RAM

List price \$899
Upgrade \$199

In order to gain these advantages, your images must first be converted to *Live Picture's* IVUE format. There is no resolution-enhancing magic here; your initial scan quality will determine the final quality of your image. Where IVUE comes in is in the prevention of degradation during manipulation of the image.

IVUE images are linked into FITS format files for compositing. It's analogous to placing an EPS in an *Illustrator* file, and just like the linked EPS, you can modify or substitute the IVUEs that are placed in a FITS, and *Live Picture* will simply recalculate all your image modifications and apply them to the new images in seconds. In *Photoshop*, you start with something that looks like dirt and (hopefully) tweak it until it's a gem. In *Live Picture*, your dirt is still there at the bottom, but by the time you see it through the top layer, it glows.

It takes two to three minutes to convert a 45 Mb TIFF, EPS, DCS, *Photoshop*, FlashPix, Scitex CT or Photo CD file to IVUE. The size of an IVUE is roughly comparable to an equivalent uncompressed TIFF. The FITS files in which they are placed remain small: even with a dozen layers in place they are only a couple of megs. As you add effects and modifications, *Live Picture* is changing the screen appearance without rewriting the actual file. This means real-time speed, even for 5,000 pixel airbrushing on 100 meg images.

Then, when you have reached a state of visual bliss, you consume it by rendering out your final image to TIFF, EPS, DCS, PICT, IVUE or FlashPix formats. For a 25 Mb final format, this took eight minutes on a PowerTower 180 MHz with 40 megs of RAM allocated to *Live Picture*. It is only at this final stage that resolution is set and all effects are calculated for each pixel. Believe me, I'd rather look at one bar for eight minutes than 49 bars for 45 seconds each.

The beauty of this is that in six months, if I need a larger version for a poster or I feel like rebalancing the colors, I



This is an image with problems. Dark flat shadows with a blue cast, poor detail, and the original scan was 220 Mb. This is correctable in *Photoshop*, but you'd better know what you're doing.



Twelve layers of color correction in *Live Picture* produced this result. Any of these layers can be adjusted later, or a different shot can be swapped to have the same color correction applied. This was corrected by the photographer who shot it, and *Live Picture* gave him the "redoability" he needed to play with it and gradually improve it until he made it sing.

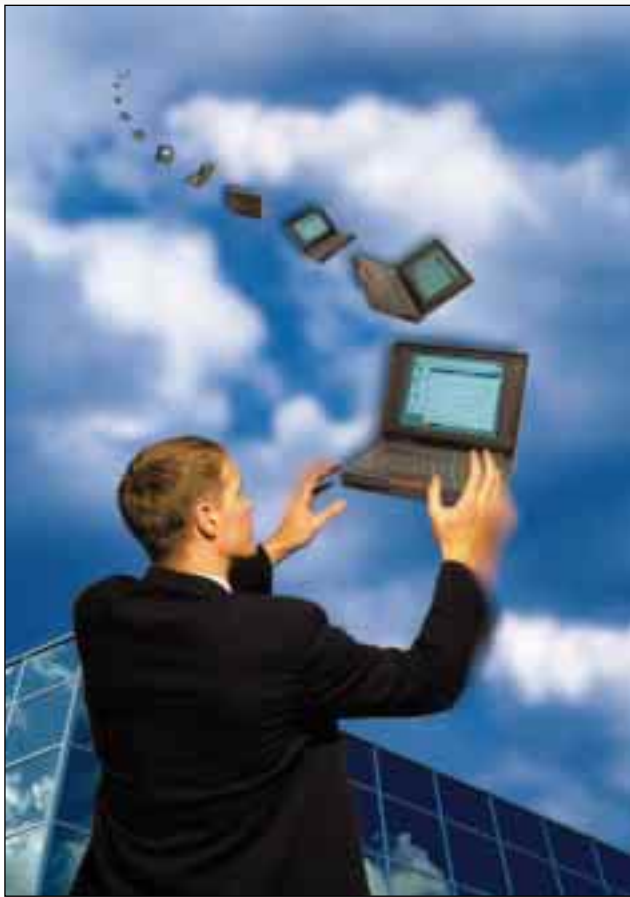
can go back and change it all again, shuffle all the layers, re-render and not lose one bit of detail.

SO WHAT'S THE CATCH?

If this software is so great, why isn't everyone using it? Well...it does have a problem or two.

The clipboard is only good for pasting paths to and from

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Live Picture is great for compositing images for illustration work. If your art director says, "That's nice, but can we have more clouds in the sky, fewer computers in line and have the guy wearing a Superman outfit?", you can just smile and reply, "No problem!"

Illustrator or *Photoshop*, since all images have to undergo conversion to get them in. You can only open one FITS file at a time. Previews of color corrections only show in a small window in the dialogue instead of on the real image.

Images that you drag around only display a bounding box until you let go of the mouse button. Even though you can rearrange all the layers whenever you feel like it, there's still only one level of undo. Thus if you delete an image and then perform another operation, that image is gone for good.

On top of all this, there is a learning curve: *Live Picture* can create several different types of modification layers, and your tools change their capabilities depending on which layer type is active.

It's a bit of a mind-bender trying to remember which layer type you need to create so that your brush tool will make a freehand distortion instead of a darkening effect. If you place an image in the wrong kind of layer, you can't change it to the right kind, you have to dump it and create another.

In short, *Live Picture* still belongs in that category of software created by the brilliant individual programmer. Where it shines, it is amazing, but it has gaps that seem puzzling to the user. *Photoshop* has long since joined the group of software made by a team: it is polished and efficient and fairly bug-free.

BUT IMPROVEMENTS AROUND

Some of you may remember talk about *Live*

Picture from its earlier incarnations as a product distributed by HSC, currently known as MetaCreations. It has grown considerably since that time.

Live Picture 2.6 now includes support for most *Photoshop* plug-ins as well as TWAIN scanners, Wacom erasing pens and ColorSync. Masks and stencils are now able to be copied between layers. In addition to the soft-edged masks of earlier times, hard-edged masks give sharper corners and cleaner type.

And you can now open IVUE and FlashPix files directly rather than having to place them in a FITS file first, and you can print directly from the program without having to first render out a file.

Live Picture now also comes with a TextureWorld module that creates and modifies textures and places

them on a layer. Textures can be created from images and can be used as masks. And it finally includes a good gradient tool. Known as PowerBlends, it enables linear or radial blends to be created with a variety of colors and opacities.

But I've saved the best for last.

The EdgeHighlighter is a wide-tipped intelligent tool which you draw roughly over an edge that you want to define. As long as the edge remains somewhere under the tip of this tool, it is able to understand what you are trying to cut out, and defines a path for you.

The tool works quite well, and only about 5 to 10% of the points need adjustment if you are a perfectionist. This is far faster to use than either *MagicMask* or *Mask Pro*, the *Photoshop* plug-ins I looked at last issue, though I would still prefer *Mask Pro* for masking hairy subjects.

Photoshop is known for its ability to balance color correction and illustrative capabilities. I don't feel that *Live Picture* has as much utility as a production tool, but as a creative instrument it is outstanding for retouching. Its ability to give real-time feedback on the largest images is untouched by *Photoshop*, and its compact layering scheme gives an artist the ability to create extremely complex imagery which is able to be revised easily.

My view is that *Live Picture* complements rather than replaces *Photoshop*, and it would be a powerful addition to the desktop of any illustrator, retoucher or photographer.

Live Picture 2.6, which also includes 600 Mb of royalty-free FlashPix images from PhotoSpin, is available for Power Macintosh only and retails for \$899 in Canada (although the price for version 2.5 has been dropped to \$299; the upgrade from 2.5 to 2.6 is \$199). Call Canadian distributor Daymen Photo Marketing at (905) 944-9401 for details, or visit www.daymen.com or www.livepicture.com. *