

# Getting over the hump with Adobe After Effects

**While After Effects is the most complex of Adobe's apps, developing a good working knowledge of the program is not beyond the average user of Illustrator or Photoshop.**

**BY KIRBY FERGUSON**

Many of us have done it: downloaded a demo of Adobe After Effects, eager to make the plunge into motion graphics. But we soon find ourselves unable to accomplish even the most basic of tasks in the program: set some type, draw a line, a circle, a square, anything. After a few more exasperating minutes, After Effects is closed and probably never opened again.

On first encounter, After Effects is frustrating to use not only because of its apparent complexity, but also because of its misleading familiarity. The program bears a superficial resemblance to other Adobe applications, but the way it functions is

completely unique. And even if you're familiar with Premiere, After Effects' video editing cousin, you're still no further ahead because Premiere has no more in common with After Effects than, say, Photoshop does.

While After Effects is indeed the most complex of Adobe's apps, developing a good working knowledge of the program is not beyond the average user of Illustrator or Photoshop (you may have forgotten: neither of which were particularly easy to learn). And you're at a major advantage already because you know how to build graphics. Yes, good motion graphics skills



FIGURE 1. The Adobe After Effects WORKSPACE isn't quite like any other. In the upper left corner is the Project window. All imported footage (audio, video, stills), as well as the compositions you create, appear here. To the right of the Project window is the Composition window, where animations are constructed and previewed. In the Toolbox, note that the Pen and Marquee tools don't behave like they traditionally do – both are using for masking and won't create or select images. At the bottom of the screen is the Timeline. The position and length of footage within an animation's running time are represented by the coloured bars to the right of the layer name. Ghosted areas of the bar are trimmed segments of footage. Two toggle switches at the right of the layer name – Collapse Transformations (the star-shaped icon) and Quality (the diagonal line) – are used to preview at final render quality. There are three tabs in the Timeline and Composition windows, indicating three compositions are currently open. (A very unusual interface feature: there's actually a tiny, horizontal scroll bar at the top of the composition window.)

are well within the reach of most print and Web designers, all it takes is patience, determination, and documentation—which is where I come in.

So download the After Effects demo again (go to [www.adobe.com/aftereffects](http://www.adobe.com/aftereffects)) and I'll walk you through some basic tasks. We'll approach this from the perspective of a print designer (ideally with some Web design experience too). For the sake of simplicity, I will grossly simplify all tasks and ignore enormous facets of the program, but such are the compromises of four-page tutorials. I won't be touching After Effects' more daunting features, such as Motion Math, Expressions and 3D, which are three areas that baffle even some experienced AE users.

The final animation you create at the end of this tutorial will be a random mess, but the point here is to learn how After Effects functions without worrying about final results. Did you expect to make beautiful music the first time you picked up a guitar? No, you were thrilled when you strummed your first clean chord. So let's start making a racket.

## STARTING YOUR PROJECT

Let's cover some minimal basics then go straight to getting our hands dirty.

The files you create with After Effects are called projects. In essence, the project file tells After Effects how you'd like to combine your source files—the footage you import: audio, video, or stills. The individual animations you create with After Effects are called compositions (or comps, for short). You will not find any comps on your hard drive, only the project file. Like pages within a Quark document, compositions can't be opened individually, they're all embedded within your project file. One project could contain dozens of compositions. You'll see the project window in the upper-left corner of your screen. All the files you import and the compositions you create will appear here.

See Figure 1 for an overview of the After Effects workspace.

To begin, let's create a new comp (this will simultaneously start a new project). Hit command-N (control-N on Windows). Select "Medium, 320 x 240" to create a low-resolution file we can preview quickly and with minimal memory demands. Call the composition whatever you like and click OK. You now have a blank composition.

## ANIMATING AN ADOBE ILLUSTRATOR FILE

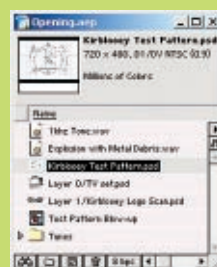
Let's import an Illustrator file (either an EPS or native Illustrator) and apply a basic transformation.

Choose File>Import>File or, better yet, hit Command-I (or double click an empty area of the project window). Drag this file from the project window to the timeline. (Dragging footage into the timeline will centre it within the composition window; dragging it directly into the composition window will place its centre wherever you let go of the mouse.) The file appears in the composition window and becomes a layer in the timeline window, de-

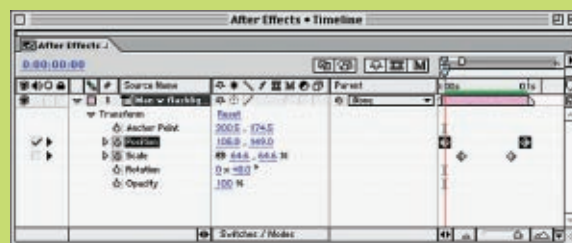
faulting to a length of ten seconds. The bar to the right of the file name represents the file's length and position within the running time of the animation. If you wanted to reposition where this file appears within your animation, just drag this colored bar to move the footage earlier or later in timeline. To trim footage, grab one of the grey handles from either end of the bar.

Now let's animate the size of this graphic. In the timeline, click the arrow beside the layer and then click the arrow beside "Transform". The five properties that appear are the various kinds of transformations you can apply. (A 3D layer has many more, but we won't get into that). Click the stopwatch beside the word "Scale" to set your first keyframe, then grab the playhead and move it to about the one-second mark. Click the stopwatch icon beside "Scale" again to set the second keyframe. Now, click one of the Scale values and enter "300%".

Congrats, you've just created an animation that scales your artwork from 100% to 300%. That's how tweening works in After Effects, and the other transformations work the same way. It's pretty



The **PROJECT WINDOW** is home to all your After Effects footage. The file second from the bottom is a composition file; the rest of the files were imported.



After Effects' **TIMELINE** is where you'll spend much of your animation time. LiveMotion sports a similar, streamlined version of the AE timeline.



For **CRISP PREVIEWS** of vector artwork, be sure to check the "Collapse Transformations/Continuously Rasterize" option in the timeline.

# AFTER EFFECTS FAQ

## What is Adobe After Effects?

After Effects is an application which allows you to create motion graphics and visual effects for broadcast and the Web. The program is used regularly and frequently in television and film production.

## What's the difference between the standard version and the Production Bundle?

Unless you're a professional in the motion graphics industry, don't concern yourself with the extra features in the Production Bundle—the standard version is all you need. But visit [www.adobe.com/aftereffects](http://www.adobe.com/aftereffects) if you just gotta know what you're missing.

## Why is After Effects worth learning?

Remember the first time you saw Photoshop and your mind reeled at the thought of all the things you could do? After Effects is every bit as exciting. It's fun, it's addictive, it's staggeringly complex.

## Can my computer handle After Effects?

If you purchased your computer within the last year, it probably can. If you're running a G4 or Pentium 4, you certainly have the processor power. A G3 will probably try your patience, but my Pentium 3 handles the program at a respectable clip. For real work, you need around 256 megs of RAM dedicated to the application. The more complex your project, the more horsepower you'll need. Like Photoshop, After Effects will devour as much power as you can throw at it and still want more. However, you can probably make your way through this tutorial with 128 MB.

## Does After Effects run better on Mac or Windows?

When it comes to performance, After Effects seems to run substantially faster on a PC. In July/2002 Chris White, pre-eminent tech-head at [www.DigitalVideoEditing.com](http://www.DigitalVideoEditing.com), published extensive tests which showed the Mac (running OS 9 and X) being consistently and badly trounced by an array of different PCs. In real world use, I've found Apple's take on the 'megahertz myth' to be a myth of its own. Of course, the Mac has compelling user experience advantages, but if raw performance is what you're after, Wintel appears to boast superior speed for the moment.

## I can't afford After Effects. What else can I buy?

Unfortunately, nothing. For Windows, After Effects (priced at US\$649) has no significant direct competition. If you're only interested in adding basic animation to your video projects, your DV editor can probably handle that. The timeline in Macromedia Flash MX has dramatically improved, but Adobe's under-appreciated LiveMotion is also a fine means of getting acquainted with After Effects' timeline, although it only allows you to create Web animations. And there are some who argue that After Effects itself is as good or better than either for producing SWF files.

## Do I need a digital camcorder or DV footage?

Absolutely not—no DV footage is needed to produce spectacular animations.

easy and pretty powerful—you can accomplish quite a lot with these simple skills.

Hit the "Home" key to return to the start of the timeline and press the space bar to preview the animation. There is one major problem: your smooth, resolution-independent file gets chunky when it scales up. Why? The image was only rasterized once when it was imported.

To have it continuously rasterized, you need to check the "Collapse Transformations/Continuously Rasterize" box in the timeline—it's the star-shaped icon to the right of the file name. For best quality previews, also click the "Quality" checkbox just to the right of "Collapse Transformations". Remember that these options will slow down your previews, so only use them when you want the highest quality. Hit "Home" and then the space-bar to

see the difference this makes (these options only affect the preview, not your rendered file).

After Effects can also recognize layers in Illustrator and Photoshop files. For instance, you can place different body parts of a figure on each layer and animate them separately. But for most of us, layering in Photoshop and Illustrator is an organizational function: as long as your image looks pretty, your layers can be a mess. In After Effects, you'll want your layers to function as moveable sections of an image, so you'll probably want to relayer and save a copy of your images before importing them.

## IMPORTING A PHOTOSHOP FILE

Now let's import a Photoshop file and apply another transformation. Hit command-I and select a Photoshop file with a transparent background from your hard drive. Notice that After Effects recognizes Photoshop's transparency and uses it as an alpha mask.

Let's animate the opacity of this image, but let's do it quickly. Rather than twirling down arrows (which is slow and messy), select the layer name and hit "T". This displays the "Opacity" property alone. (And why is the shortcut "T"? Well, because "O" was taken. Just think "T" as in "transparency".) Below are the other keyboard shortcuts for transformations:

P - Position            S - Scale  
R - Rotation            A - Anchor Point

Hit "Home" to go to the start of the timeline. Click the stopwatch beside "Opacity" and decrease its value to 0%. Go to the 1 second mark and increase the value to 100%. Because you already set your first keyframe, After Effects automatically creates a second keyframe when you adjust the opacity value. Hit "Home" and then the spacebar to preview the animation. The image should fade in over the span of one second.

Now let's make this image move across the screen. Select the layer and hit "P" to display the Position property. Let's start this animation at the one-second mark, after the image has faded in. Go to the one second mark either by dragging the playhead or clicking the time display in the upper-left of the timeline window and entering "1:00". Move the image to the left of the composition window. Click the stopwatch to set your first keyframe. Now go to the two-second mark in the timeline. Move the image to the right of the composition window. Notice how a dotted line appears, showing you the motion path of the object.

Hit the "Home" key to return to the start of the animation and then the spacebar to preview the animation. The object fades in, then moves from left to right. However, we don't like the sudden starts and stops at beginning and end of the object's motion—it looks too artificial. Select the Position keyframes by clicking and dragging a marquee around them both, then go to Animation>Keyframe Assistant>Easy Ease (or hit F9). This makes the start and end of the objects' movements more gradual.

Close this composition. You should now have two compositions in your Project window. Let's create a third composition.

## CREATING SOLIDS AND SETTING TYPE

Let's set a little type—so, where's the text tool? Alas, things aren't quite that simple in After Effects. There *is* no text tool (and no line tool and no circle tool and no polygon tool!). In order to create anything in After Effects (as opposed to importing it), you must start with what After Effects calls a "solid". Solids are blocks of solid color which are typically masked or treated with an effect, and they only exist in the timeline, not in the Project window. In order to create text, we need to create a solid first, then apply an effect to it. Yes, I know this seems utterly bizarre, but you'll get used to it.

Control-click (right-click in Windows) in the timeline and go to New>Solid. A new layer appears in the timeline. Select it and go to Effect>Text>Basic Text. In the dialogue box, enter and format some text. The Effects window pops up when you're done to display the text formatting properties. Notice the stopwatches next to each of the text formatting options? That indicates that all these elements can be animated. There are a lot of possibilities here—but let's not open this particular can of worms just yet.

Let's try applying another quick effect, something more conventional. With the Type solid layer selected, go to Effect>Perspective>Drop Shadow. Adjust the drop shadow properties in the Effect window to your liking. Hit F3 to show or hide all the effects that have been applied to a layer.

## NEST, PLEASE

And for my final trick, we'll throw together all your hard work to illustrate one of After Effects' most essential features: nesting.

Create one more composition. Now, simply drag all three of your previous compositions from the project library and into the timeline. Each one becomes a layer in the new composition. When you place a composition within another composition, that's nesting. A nested composition then behaves just like any other layer within a composition. You can't, however, edit the nested composition. In order to do that, you have to open the original comp.

And why nest? Simple: to keep your timeline from becoming impossibly convoluted.

Hit "Home" and then the space bar to feast your eyes on what you've created.

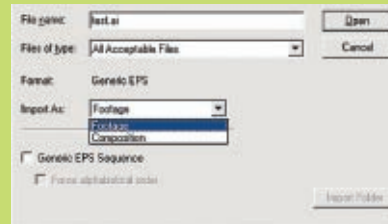
## FINISHING IT OFF

At last we're done, and now you'd like to see a preview that's representative of your final exported movie. Let's do a RAM preview. Either hit the play button on the right of the "Time Controls" palette or hit **o** on the number pad.

What a mess, eh? But, hey—you made it all by yourself. 🍷

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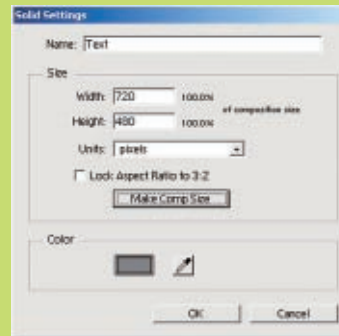
*Kirby Ferguson (e-mail me@kirbyferguson.com) recently completed work on his sketch comedy video, Goodie Bag. Currently carbon-based in Toronto, he can be found on the Web at www.kirbloey.com.*



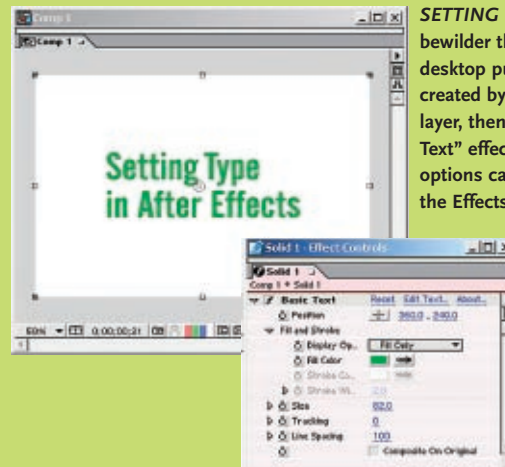
Select "IMPORT AS FOOTAGE" to have Illustrator or Photoshop layers import in individual After Effects layers.



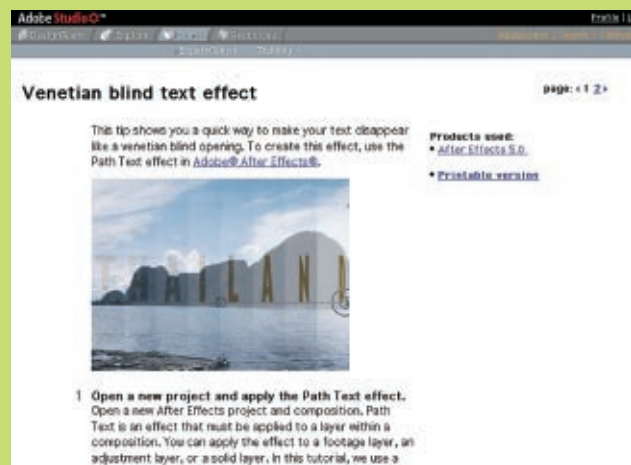
After Effects' TOOL PALETTE may look familiar, but if you draw an object with that pen tool or try to select something with that marquee tool, you'll get a surprise: both tools are used for masking and don't actually create anything.



If you're going to create anything directly in After Effects (rather than import it), you'll need to start with a SOLID. It's an unorthodox approach, bound to temporarily confuse the average user of Photoshop or Illustrator.



SETTING TYPE will also bewilder the seasoned desktop publisher. Type is created by first making a Solid layer, then applying the "Basic Text" effect. Type formatting options can be seen here in the Effects palette.



For free After Effects tips and tutorials, you can't you beat the EXPERT CENTER at Adobe.com (registration required).