

## **Microsoft Plus Digital Media Edition**

Review by Don Lewis

### **Product information**

Microsoft produces this product. It is advertised as the ultimate photo, music and movie enhancement pack for Windows XP. The retail price is \$19.95. It is available from Amazon.com and other vendors as low as \$16.99

### **Requirements**

Operating system: Microsoft Windows® XP Home Edition or Microsoft Windows XP Professional.

Processor: 233 megahertz (MHz) processor, such as an Intel Pentium or Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) processor. Recommendation: 300 MHz processor or faster, such as a Pentium III or equivalent processor.

RAM 64 megabytes (MB) of RAM. 64 MB of RAM may limit performance in some features. Recommendation: 128 MB of RAM or higher.

Free hard disk space: 205 MB of free hard disk space. Actual requirements will vary based on your system configuration and the Plus! Digital Media Edition components you choose to install.

Video adapter and monitor: Super VGA (800 X 600) or higher-resolution video adapter and monitor.

Other hardware: CD-ROM drive or DVD drive, keyboard, and Microsoft Mouse or compatible pointing device.

Internet access: 14.4 kilobits per second (Kbps) or higher

There is a long list of other requirements for operating the various features. Most any computer running Windows XP will satisfy the requirements.

### **Installation**

MS Plus must be activated before it will function. The CD is inserted and setup runs automatically. There is no option to change the location of the installation. Once installed, you go online and enter the product key. Microsoft records a hardware ID for your computer that is associated with the product key. This is to prevent the software from being installed on any other computer. MS Plus can be uninstalled with the Windows Add/Remove programs function in the Control Panel.

### **Features**

#### **Photo Story**

Photo Story provides the ability to create a narrated video story from digital pictures. The story is created in Windows Media Video format (WMV) for Media Player version 7.1 or higher or any player supporting this format. A wizard leads you through the steps of importing your pictures, recording narration, adding title pages and adding music. There are many options for controlling how the video plays. It is very easy to create a video slideshow in specified order with audio annotation, title pages and custom panning and zooming effects. Photo Story supports background music from MP3, WMA or WAV files. When you add narration, it sets the display time automatically for the duration of the narration for that slide. You may also set the display time for slides with no narration.

Microsoft's Slideshow Wizard in Power Toys for Windows XP is a good alternative for creating an HTML slideshow. However, adding sound and annotation requires editing the HTML.

#### Party Mode

Party Mode is a full-screen skin for Windows Media Player that enables you to use your PC for a jukebox. This is very simple to operate. You can set up the playlist by any criteria including all of your music. There are many visualization choices and a marquee that can be changed as it plays. There is a feature to run a "party" and limit guests from access to computer files. It works well for listening to music on your PC. Switching between applications is not as easy while it is running. This makes it inconvenient to play the music while you work on other applications. It would only be practical for a real party if your PC was located in the party area or you connected it to your stereo.

#### Analog Recorder

The recorder allows you to transfer music from your analog audio device, such as a record, cassette, eight-track, or reel-to-reel player, to your digital music library. Analog Recorder steps you through the process of converting your music to digital format and then copies the digital files to your computer.

Your stereo is connected from the lineout terminal to the line-in plug of your computer. The only hardware needed is a cable with RCA jacks on the stereo side and a 1/8-inch mini connector on the PC side. There are options to record from any of the inputs that your sound card supports such as microphone, telephone or stereo mix. The program provides several mechanisms to help improve the quality of your music. It adjusts the recording level for you, to prevent distortion and other effects that might degrade the sound quality. It provides filters that reduce the popping and hissing sounds within the tracks. You can also choose the amount of audio compression you want to apply to the tracks, based on whether you prefer better music quality or smaller audio files. It also provides the ability to split the recording into individual tracks, play the tracks, split a single track into multiple tracks, combine multiple tracks into single tracks, delete tracks and name the tracks by providing tags. The Analog Recorder records in Windows Media File (WMA) format only.

A wizard leads you through the recording process. It starts by setting the record level. This feature is a big help, since getting the volume right is a difficult trial and error process without some tool to help. The track detection is based on the silence between tracks. It worked well in my tests, but there is no way to adjust it. If it fails to recognize a track split or splits before the end of the track, there is a manual process to split or combine tracks. The makers of Cool Edit provide the cleanup filters. It worked well in my tests. I recorded tracks from a 40-year-old LP with many scratches. The easy to use process removed most of the noise. There is no provision in Audio Recorder for adjusting sensitivity, discrimination, thresholds or other controls, if you want to tweak the clean up process. The cleanup and track splitting processes are available only during recording. Once the files have been converted and saved, there is no way to edit them at all.

### Audio Converter

Audio Converter can optimize WAV audio files by converting them to Windows Media Audio (WMA) files or MP3 files. You can choose the bit rate for the converted files, deciding whether you want the files to have less compression and better sound quality or a smaller file size. The converter will convert from MP3 to WMA, but it does not convert from WMA to MP3 or WAV unless a codec engine (compression/decompression) is installed. No codec is provided and there are no instructions on how to get one. I consider the lack of the ability to convert to MP3 a major deficiency, so I searched for a solution. I finally found information on the Plus! Newsgroup. It suggests installing a third party plug-in to Media Player 9. The Media Player will play MP3 files, but does not support ripping to MP3 without the codec. There are two options for plug-ins. Download MP3 Power encoder for Windows XP from the following address.

[http://www.gocyberlink.com/english/products/powerdvd/winxp\\_plugin.asp](http://www.gocyberlink.com/english/products/powerdvd/winxp_plugin.asp). Or download InterVideo MP3 Xpack from this address.

[http://www.intervideo.com/products/custom/ms/windowsxp/media\\_pack.jsp](http://www.intervideo.com/products/custom/ms/windowsxp/media_pack.jsp). The cost for either plug-in is \$9.95.

### Dance

Plus! Dancer displays a two-dimensional, animated dancer or pair of dancers on your Windows desktop. You can start or stop the dancers at any time. You can set the dancers to appear only when audio is detected or to appear all the time, even when no music is playing. You can select the dancer that you want from the dancers that are included with the feature. You can also download additional dancers from the Internet. This is interesting for a while, but not very useful.

### CD Label Maker

Using Plus! CD Label Maker, you can design and print custom labels for your compact discs (CDs), and inserts and booklets for your CD cases. Creating a label is simple. Content options are either a CD or playlist. Then choose a template for your label, insert or booklet and make any design changes and print.

### Sync & Go

Sync & Go for Pocket PC provides the ability to synchronize content between your desktop computer and portable device. It also provides the ability to select and organize content from the Internet and Media Library in Windows Media Player. I do not have a Pocket PC, so I have not tested this feature.

### Effects & Transitions

Plus! Effects & Transitions for Movie Maker 2 includes 25 new video effects and 25 new video transitions that you can use to enhance the movies you create and edit using Windows Movie Maker. Plus! Effects & Transitions are installed automatically with Plus! Digital Media Edition. They are available when you start Windows Movie Maker. Effects & Transitions only works with Windows Movie Maker version 2 or later. My Movie Maker 2 has many effects and transitions. I am unable to tell which came with this product, but all seem to work fine.

### Alarm Clock

Plus! Alarm Clock provides the ability to schedule alarms that play music or audio content in Windows Media Player. You can set the alarm to wake or alert you at any time and date with music, a special sound, or a notification on the desktop. It also provides the ability to turn the sound off. I tested this feature and found that if you restart your computer, you must restart the Alarm Clock.

### Skins

Plus! Digital Media Edition includes eight new skins for Windows Media Player. Again, I have many skins for the Media Player. I cannot tell which came with this product.

### Documentation

There is no documentation other than Help and a brief tour that describes the features.

### Product Support

Support option information for this product is available at the Microsoft Product Support web site. Support options include submitting questions to be answered by email, FAQs and Highlights and Microsoft News groups. There is a phone number for unlimited incident support. The phone number is not toll free.

### Conclusion

Plus! Digital Media Edition is an inexpensive enhancement to the multimedia features of Windows XP. There are no real “must have” features, but the features do add to the usability. I was mainly interested in the Audio Recording feature. I like its ability to set the record level automatically and its wizard makes recording a simple process. The limitation on supported music file types is disappointing. Microsoft claims that the WMA format is as good or better than MP3 and creates smaller files for the same bit rate. I don’t doubt this is true. I can tell no difference in WMA and MP3 sound, but MP3 is much more likely to be supported and compatible with other products and players on your PC as well as CD and DVD players. I feel that it is necessary to obtain a plug-in to support MP3 at least. The added cost is nominal, but it does increase the cost of the product by fifty percent. This still does not provide support for WAV files. The product’s file editing and sound enhancing ability worked well, but is very limited. It would be much better to be able to work with existing files, not just while recording new files. For instance, if you want to trim excess silence from the ends of the files, you have to do this with the split track function during the record process. If you end the process without doing that, there is no way to go back and do it later. Audio Recording has another annoying feature. It dials up and calls home when launched. I don’t know the purpose of this. It seems to function the same whether allowed to connect or not.

I liked the Photo Story feature. It is easy to create slideshow movie with photos, audio narration and background music. I would like to see the ability to create movies in the MPG format, not just WMV.

Given the nominal price of the product, it is a worthwhile addition to Windows XP.