

Paint Shop Pro 8, by Jasc Software

Reviewed by Dick Riesz

\$76 street price, from Internet. Also available in retail stores

This program is a “complete photo and graphics editor”. This means that it will take input files of digital pictures or graphics and permit elaborate changes to be made (editing). This is an elaborate upgrade of earlier versions – your reviewer has used Paint Shop Pro 6 for several years very successfully – so this review is a recitation of the experience of changing gears!

System requirements:

- Pretty standard for today’s desktop computers.
- Windows 98/NT4SP6a/2000/ME/XP
- Pentium or comparable processor
- 128 MB RAM
- 200 MB free hard disk space
- 16-bit display adapter at 600 x 800 resolution
- Microsoft Internet Explorer 5.0 or later

Installation proceeded smoothly from the supplied disc. Location of files was made customer-selectable, and a suitable Uninstall file was available. Absolutely no problem installing.

Learning to use the program.

Well, here is where a full book is needed to even recite the features which the program offers. You start with a photograph (this is the usual image you’re interested in modifying).

WAIT! You START by having to set up your PSP8 window with the options you want to use. Here is where the complexity and versatility of the program hit you full on. Even in the (very complete) hardcopy manual there are FOURTEEN different areas of the screen, only one of which is your picture!

There are EIGHT toolbars to choose from.

There are EIGHT palettes to choose from.

And for each of these choices there are multiple options available for EACH of the choices. I could not manage the arithmetic to find out how many possible combinations there are! But cheer up, there are probably only a few of these options that you will ordinarily use, and these are conveniently available.

O.K. NOW you start by opening a picture. Most commonly you will want to improve the brightness and/or the contrast of the picture. Under the TEN options for “ADJUST” one is Brightness/Contrast and here you find a handy option “Automatic contrast adjustment” which works pretty well. BUT there are TEN other adjustment options available. One of these, Brightness/Contrast, was familiar from earlier experience and worked very well, though the buttons had been made more user-friendly and hence I had to adjust MY attitude.

And also my much-used Sharpness/Unsharp Mask was present – thank goodness for a familiar face! But there are some strangers too – take “Clarify”. Using this did indeed make some of my flower pictures look a lot better – but in what way I was unable to figure out! And of course that word – clarify – was not in the index!

So my conclusion is that the good old fixes work very well indeed – but there are a vast host of options which only a real image-processing “pro” will be able to appreciate and use. Some will be welcome – Batch Processing will serve well when there are many images needing the same treatment – how many times I wished for that with the older version.

And, thank goodness, there is an Edit>Undo button which is many operations deep, so I could get out of the soup if I found I was in it!

Documentation:

Clearly, from the above, this is a key issue and Jasc has done it well. The hardcopy manual is elaborately illustrated and easier to understand than most. There is a “Product Tour” included as an on-screen guide through many features. And there is a Learning Center window that guides through many of the important new features. This includes many fast-moving movies that take you through the processes you may be interested in (like red-eye removal) so at least you see a bit of what you are up against.

Well, that’s too harsh – actually if you concentrate on exactly what you are interested in then you can learn a lot in a short time – and of course the movies are loops so you get as many shots as you need!

I found that the learning curve was very shallow – it took a long time to get into the uses I was really interested in using – but the documentation was generally transparent and really useful.

Never had to use the available on-line Help, so can’t comment on it. I found all the help I needed right on my desk.

Conclusion:

My conclusion is that this is NOT a program for the amateur unless he/she sticks only to very basic operations (after all, even an amateur can drive an Indycar on local streets – with care) but a pro can open up and drive the “500” at top speed! The results to be expected then are spectacular and gratifying – some day I may achieve that level!

A really good program that stands up with the best competition – but one that needs to be handled with care to get truly professional results.