

Pxl SmartScale

Review by Jim Mansfield

Product Information

Pxl SmartScale is produced by Extensis, Inc. The US address is 1800 SW First Avenue, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97201. Phone 800-796-9798.

The Manufacturers "Street Price" is \$199.95 and can be purchased directly through Extensis. On the Internet, the product was recently priced at \$189.95 at B&H Photo. The lowest recent price through cNET Shopper was \$172.08. Special "Student and Educator" rates of \$99.95 were available.

Summary of Product

Extensis calls its product an "...easy, intuitive way to resample images up to 1600% with no discernable loss of quality. All brightness and color data is preserved during the scaling process allowing users to create high quality scaled images." It "...makes scaling and cropping fast and easy." This means you can crop and enlarge (scale) digital images taken from digital cameras or scanners and can also do some editing of the image. This product is functional ONLY if you already have installed Adobe Photoshop 6.0 or higher (\$288.88 through Amazon) or Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0 (about \$50.00 at Amazon). It cannot be used with any other "Photoshop" software or other brands of image editing (including Adobe Photo Deluxe). Experience and practice with the Photoshop programs (which I don't have much of) would certainly help in utilizing this software.

Requirements

In addition to having installed and become familiar with Photoshop 6.0 and higher or Photoshop Elements 2.0 you need 128 MB Ram, 256 suggested.

For Mac users you need: OS 9.2.2 or Mac OSX 10.2.5 and higher; Power PC G3, G4 or G4 dual processor; Quick Time 5.0.2 or higher (Mac OS 9 only).

For PC users you need: MS Windows 98, 2000 or XP; Pentium III, 4 or faster.

Installation

Installation was not a problem. After inserting the CD, the Install Wizard completed the process effortlessly. pxl SmartScale is installed as a menu item on the top of the Photoshop tool bar. You are then asked if you want to register the product or demo it for 30 days. After opting for the demo, it frequently asks you to register it. There is no uninstalling option with the program. You can uninstall it with the Windows Add/Remove feature. (Although at 2.46 MB, it takes up very little space).

Program Features

The program is designed to enlarge an image file or part of an image file so that the new image retains the color and the maximum resolution. It does this by "resampling" and

creating new pixels, not merely enlarging the original pixels. These changes can be done without changing the original image. This function is very useful to photographers, graphic designers and printing specialists who may want, for example, to enlarge a photo or image from 4 x 6 inches to poster size. In addition, the software will be especially useful to images taken at lower resolution like 1-2 megapixels. They tend to decline rapidly in quality when enlarged.

Clicking the “Extensis” box on the Photoshop toolbar starts the program. You can then import an image from a file or utilize the image already open in Photoshop. By following the instructions in the user’s manual, you can crop, enlarge, sharpen or soften and then save the changed image. You instantly see the results of your changes and can modify as you go if the changes are not what you want. I wouldn’t call it an “intuitive” process (I never do), but it wasn’t too bad to make the changes by referring to the manual. You can crop the image within the program. You don’t have to exit SmartScale to do your cropping. There is also a feature to save your settings if you are doing several images the same way. Supposedly, you save time “scaling” the images over doing that in Photoshop.

Utilizing an “Image Size Palette”, you change dimensions or percentages of enlargement of an image by simply clicking and sliding a pointer. You can instantly see the results of your changes. After cropping and changing size, you can change the detail of the image by selecting “Overall Sharpness”, “Edge Contrast”, “Edge Control”, or “Extreme Edges”. Of these, the first two were the most useful in photos. The last two are for use primarily with graphic designs. When done modifying the image, it may be saved to Photoshop or to a file. This saving process took up to several minutes. Apparently it depends on how much modifying you have done, the size of the original image and how much memory you have allocated. On a couple of occasions when saving a file, my computer “froze” up and I had to exit the program. There is information in the “Troubleshooting” section on how to change memory allocation though I did not try it.

The resulting images did appear to retain their sharpness although the higher the magnification, the more “blotchy” they seemed to become (that is not a technical term). The software seemed to smooth the edges, not to show the rectangular edges seen when normally enlarging an image.

Documentation

Supplied with the CD was a 34 page “Users Guide”. The Guide confused me a little at first by the chapter called “Getting Started”. It seemed to be lacking in detail, which you found in the next chapter. The first chapter was only a preview; you really couldn’t “get started” using it as I tried to do. There is a chapter on “troubleshooting” but it is relatively short and limited. The “Users Guide” is repeated through the “Help” button on the screen and adds no more information than that in the Guide (You need Adobe Acrobat Reader 5.0 or higher to read it. Acrobat Reader is available through a free download from Adobe). There is no search function or FAQ available in “Help”.

One problem noticed in the manual, I kept looking for a way to “undo” the messes I’d made and didn’t find the “revert” button until page 21.

Product Support

I didn’t use Product Support but there is a Technical Support web site and phone number available. The web site is: <http://www.extensis.com/support/>. The phone number is: (503) 274-7030. There is an 800 number and email address also listed, probably for sales only.

Conclusion

If you have the need to crop, alter, and enlarge images on a professional or high volume scale, this product could prove valuable. For most people working with digital images for a hobby, this isn’t necessary. The cost (about \$200), seems excessively high when considering the much more functional Photoshop 6.0 can be bought for about \$290. I can’t directly compare SmartScale’s functionality to other software or to what can be done in Photoshop. However, a couple of reviews of SmartScale found through Google seem to agree that, for the price, the same things can be done as well or almost as well as SmartScale without shelling out \$200. (<http://www.luminous-landscape.com/reviews/software/smartscale.shtml> and <http://graphicssoft.about.com/cs/resolution/gr/smartscale.htm>).