

Microsoft Digital Image Suite 10

Reviewer's note: Last spring, I took a look at four low-cost image-editing programs ("A Snapshot of Photo Editing Options," May 2004, pp. 54–57). At the time, Microsoft's Digital Image Suite (DIS) was in the midst of an upgrade cycle and wasn't included. With the release of version 10 in August, I was able to put the program through its paces. Although the original group of image applications were reviewed as low-cost alternatives to Adobe's professional-level Photoshop CS, and thus primarily evaluated on editing features, I decided to review DIS as a suite. Any group review can only hope to be a snapshot of the choices at a particular time, and it is not fair, nor practical, to attempt to "add" a product to a group review.

By J. V. Bolkan

Microsoft's Digital Image Suite (DIS) 10 is a fine collection of imaging applications that should compliment any digital camera, scanner, or other imaging hardware likely to be found in the classroom. The suite consists of three primary applications; an image editor, an image organizer/database, and a picture story generator. At \$129 (list) for the suite (\$89 for the editor only), DIS is priced competitively with its main rival, Adobe's Photoshop Elements and Album 2.0 bundle. For an unspecified time, Microsoft is offering a \$30 rebate on the suite and an additional \$30 rebate if customers submit a receipt for any digital camera purchased with or after the purchase of the software.

Image Editing

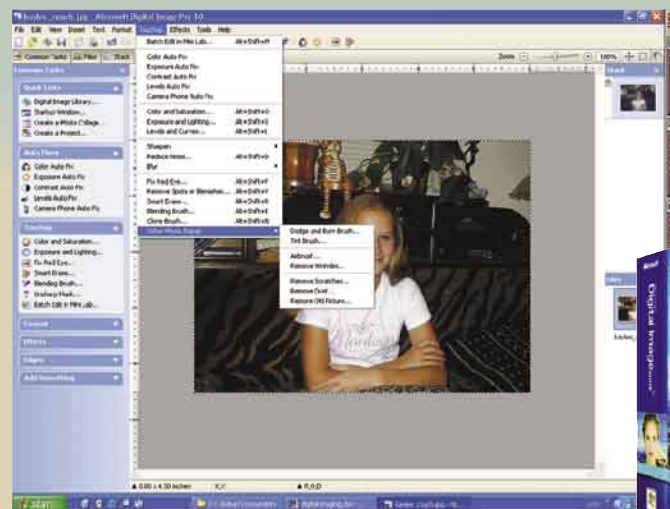
The core of any imaging suite is the editing application. Digital Image Pro 10, the editor in DIS, is fully capable, well balanced between friendliness and power, but slightly annoying at times. DIS is simple enough to be appropriate for younger students, yet has enough sophistication and depth of features to satisfy the imaging needs of even advanced high school students.

Microsoft has done an outstanding job of creating an interface that is usable and intuitive, yet doesn't borrow its conventions from the ubiquitous Adobe Photoshop. Although it may take veteran image editors a few moments to adjust to the different menus, icons, and methods, the design has its own logic. As seen in the screen shots of the interface, DIS follows standard Windows conventions for toolbar and menu placement, just not Adobe's.

As expected in a consumer-level image application, DIS has a collection of automated editing features including exposure and color optimization, red-eye reduction, and a camera-phone

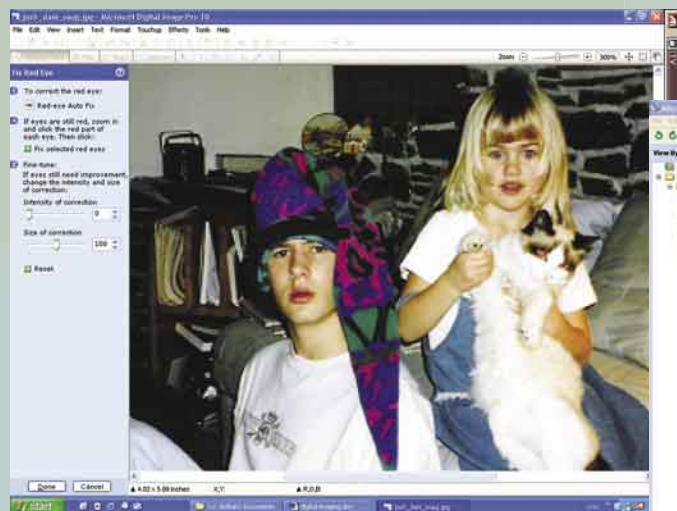
image enhancer. I found the automatic settings a bit on the conservative side. My most severely underexposed images were automatically "fixed" only about 75% of the way I'd have chosen. Likewise, the red-eye reduction automatically fixed the minor problems in one subject's eyes, but only partially lessened the more serious redness in the other subjects. Fortunately, manual controls are very effective and extremely easy to access. It would be nice to be able to adjust the defaults in the automatic routines, but that is nitpicking in this category of software.

DIS does include advanced features, such as the ability to work with multiple images, layers, and selections. Once you're delving deeper into the feature set, you'll notice both the good and the not-so-good results of Microsoft's interface choices. I was impressed with how easy it was to overlay an image onto another. Not only does the program give you full rotation and positioning, you can also easily size the overlay on the fly. Conversely, I was deeply unimpressed by its inability to display more than one



Microsoft product users may find the menus easy to use, but veteran Adobe product users may have trouble finding common options at first.





▲ Automatic adjustment tools are easy to use, but may not always fix severe problems on the first try.

▼ The gem of this suite, Photo Story allows you to easily set up slideshows.



image window at a time, and quite irritated by the task pane that forces you to click on the Done button before you can return to work.

In short, DIS makes a good effort at redefining the standard of image editing interface design, but doesn't quite have the polish that it requires to equal Adobe's Photoshop Elements or Jasc's Paint Shop.

Digital Image Library

It doesn't take long for a lone digital photographer to produce an overwhelming portfolio of images. Multiple students sharing a computer for their images makes a strong image organization tool a necessity. Microsoft's Image Library will do the job, but falls just a bit short of the power and flexibility offered in the best organizers.

It isn't hard to get started cataloging your image collection, in fact, it is totally automatic the first time you open Library. The program searches your My Pictures directory and imports all the images it finds there. Even on a large drive, with 1,000s of images in a huge variety of formats, Library found and imported images quickly from the directories I specified. It handles removable media, such as CD-ROMs, digital camera media, and others very well. It even has the

ability to tag new files so you can do incremental backups of just the images you've added since the last backup.

The weakness of Library is in the custom keywords section. You can add keywords to your photos, such as 2nd Period English, or Mary_Brown, and so on. You can assign rankings (a five-star system), and you can sort by a myriad of methods such as date created, filename, and so on. Unfortunately, you can't edit the way Library organizes keywords—they will always appear in an alphabetical list. This is pretty clumsy once you've assigned a couple hundred keywords. Although Library is functional, it, like the image editor, falls a bit short of Adobe's alternative.

Photo Story

For some people, Microsoft's Photo Story will more than make up for the shortfalls of the two other modules. Essentially a nifty method of creating a stand-alone slide show with both voice and musical annotation, Photo Story may have more classroom uses than the rest of the package.

Enabling you to set pan and zoom effects for individual images as they progress through the slide show, Photo Story can help you produce a Ken Burns-style video in a matter of

minutes. Completed stories can be shared among computers that don't have the program. The files can also be easily burned to VCD for playback on a television, or the program can compress the movie enough to make e-mailing a project quite practical.

It isn't a professional application. There are a limited selection of pan and zoom styles that aren't always a good fit for oddly sized images. However, the overall results are pretty good and creating a picture story is not only easy, it was quite fun from the very first step.

Overall Recommendation

There isn't a flaw in the suite serious enough to keep it out of the classroom, but there also aren't quite enough compelling reasons to recommend it over its competition, especially if image editing and organization are your prime goals. I really liked the Photo Story module, and if you've been curious about using such a tool in the classroom, Digital Imaging Suite 10 might make perfect sense.



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