

PRODUCT reviews

- **Corefx Three Level**
- **NEC VT676 Projector**
- **FireStore FS-4**

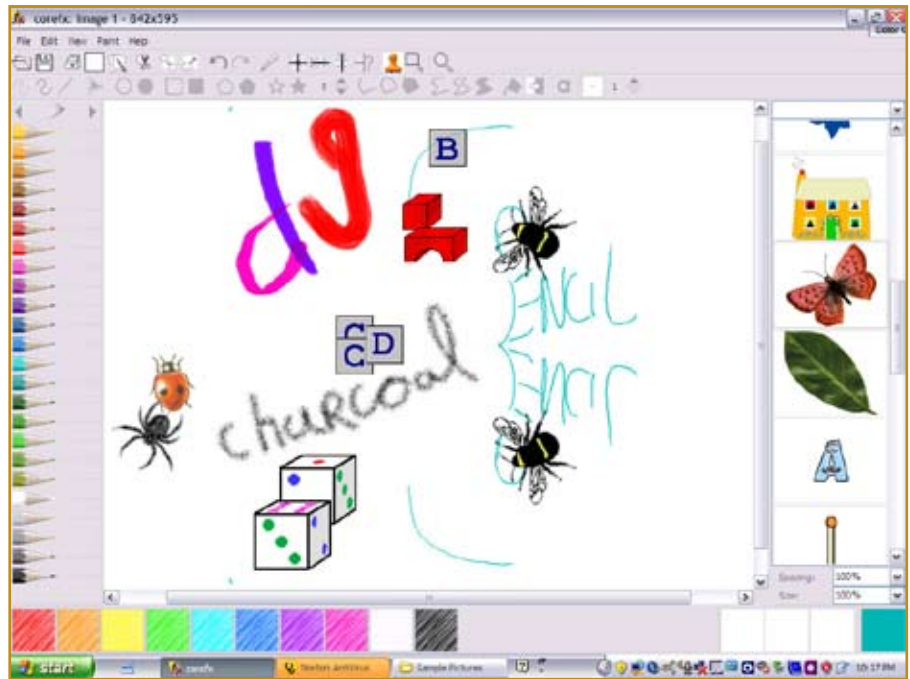
Corefx Three Level

By J.V. Bolkan

Core Learning's Corefx Three Level deserves to be the first name brand you think of when you consider digital imaging software for your elementary or middle school classroom, but instead, you probably think of products from Adobe.

Unlike Photoshop, Corefx is designed as a full-featured general artistic tool for students. It is a drawing/painting, photo-editing, and animation creation package with surprising depth. Large feature sets are almost synonymous with fat user manuals and steep learning curves. Core Learning sidesteps this with a combination of well-designed intuitive controls and a three-step interface. As users gain expertise, they can switch from the simplest, introductory interface to the intermediate, and finally to the most complex, full-featured preset. In addition to the three preset complexity levels, most elements of the Corefx interface are individually customizable, so teachers can create as many levels of difficulty as they need.

Beyond the controls themselves, one of the aspects that makes Corefx so easy to jump into is its adherence to expectations. When you choose to draw in crayon on rough paper, the results on screen closely mimic what you'd see on paper with a real wax Crayola. Likewise, watercolors bleed, charcoal smears, and pencils draw realistically. Depending on the digital



Corefx's tools perform like their real-world counterparts.

medium you're using, colors blend and can even smudge, very like their real-world counterparts. If you have a drawing tablet or tablet PC, Corefx can recognize pressure-sensitive stylus input, further enhancing the intuitive nature of the tools.

Digital photographs, from a camera, the Web, a scanner, or most other sources are easily incorporated into projects. Many somewhat complex tasks are even automated. For younger students especially, the stamps tool is fun and a way of accessing either Corefx's large collection of clip art or previously created original art.

With a wide array of image creation and manipulation tools, Corefx Three Level may almost overwhelm you with possibilities. Fortunately,

Core Learning provides a hefty Reference Guide and an Activity Guide. The activity guide was developed for teachers of elementary students, but is easily adaptable for middle school projects.

With a base price of only \$59.95, (activity and reference guides available separately, \$14.95 and \$19.95 respectively), Corefx belongs in any classroom where creativity and artistic expression are valued. The program has extremely modest hardware requirements. Any version of Windows 98 and above running on a 400 MHz or faster PC should be up to the task.

Core Learning

Corefx Three Level - \$59.95
<http://www.core-learning.com>
1.800.800.270.4643

NEC VT676 Projector

By J.V. Bolkan

NEC's VT676 isn't going to be confused with the latest crop of budget projectors. Some schools may not look any further than the VT676's relatively hefty price, but that could be a mistake. Even though projectors can be found at half, or even a third of the price, if those models aren't used because they are too dim, limited, or difficult to use, then they are no value. Even long after the price tag is discarded, few will confuse the VT676 for a low-end device. From blunt force features such as a powerful 190W bulb focusing 2,500 ANSI lumens to the refined touches such as its quick on and off capabilities, the VT676 obviously isn't cutting corners just to fit in a budget.

Built around high-quality LCD technology, the projector has a native 1024 × 768 resolution that is nearly optimal for projecting computer content. Maximum resolution is 1600 × 1200, and although sharpness always suffers when you stray from a projector's native settings,



Sleek and elegantly functional, the VT676 is a mid-level projector suited to any classroom.

I did find the drop off with VT676 minimal.

Although showing computer-generated content may be the bulk of what a classroom projector is currently used for, multimedia, particularly high-definition video, promises to become more common. The VT676 supports a dizzying array of video formats from HDTV 1080i, 720p, and 576p to enhanced and standard television signals. Although conventional

wisdom claims DLP projectors excel at video, the VT676 challenges that. This is probably because of the fast 135 MHz pixel clock. Even in extreme viewing conditions, I found the video and even high-speed computer animation sequences very smooth.

In other areas, the VT676 is merely adequate. The 2,000-hour bulb life is good, but not special. The projector is quieter than most, but not remarkably so. The two-year warranty is average. And, my personal pet peeve—the audio is average for a multimedia projector, which means your watch might have better sound capabilities. A 1.0 watt mono speaker would be silly, if it weren't standard in the industry. For multimedia devices billed as portable, I am baffled at the poor built-in audio.

With outstanding image capabilities, solid, well-designed construction, and the flexibility to handle both the common chores of the present and standards of the future, even at the \$2,495 suggested list price, the NEC VT676 is a value projector, just not a low-end one.

NEC VT676

<http://www.necvisualsystems.com>
1.800.NEC.INFO

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Volunteer Curriculum Specialists play a key role in helping L&L editors shape curriculum-based content for the magazine. Duties include reviewing manuscripts, referring potential authors, and writing short articles for the Learning Connections section.

FireStore FS-4

By J.V. Bolkan

The Focus Enhancements

FireStore FS-4 gives educators using digital video something any teacher can use—time. Shooting video can be a creative and rewarding educational experience. Likewise, using nonlinear video editing software enables students to express themselves in a highly engaging media. Unfortunately, bridging the gap from digital camera to desktop editing software is often too time consuming, not to mention tedious, to be practical in the classroom.

The FS-4 is a direct-to-edit (DTE) portable hard drive device. What this means is that you can connect the paperback-book-sized device to your digital video camera with an IEEE 1394 (Firewire) cable and record directly to the FS-4. When you're finished shooting, you connect the FS-4 to your computer and begin editing. Quite simply, this provides a full 1:1 time savings when compared to shooting on standard digital video tape, which requires footage to be transferred at real-time speeds—If you shoot 30 minutes of footage, it will take at least 30 minutes to copy that footage to your computer. As any professional video producer will attest, being able to choose from large amounts of raw footage greatly increases your chances of getting the right footage. Without the concern that every minute of filming means



The FS-4 interface is a bit daunting, but the solid easy-to-use buttons quickly become a videographer's friend. Firewire in and out make the FS-4 a bridge between PC and camera.



another mind-numbing minute waiting for the video to transfer to the computer, students are more likely to have the patience required for high-quality video.

Additionally, the FS-4 is compatible with a large variety of digital video formats. This can be another huge time saver, especially if your choice of nonlinear editing software requires that you convert your camera's output format. This common step can require double, triple, or more than real time, depending on the speed of your host PC. In other words, after you spend 30 minutes to transfer a 30-minute clip, it



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is common to spend an hour or even two hours converting that clip into a format you can edit. With the FS-4, you could be editing the footage immediately. Supported formats include RawDV, AVI Types 1 and 2, AVI Type 2 24p, Matrox AVI, Canopus AVI, QuickTime, and QuickTime 24p. Additional formats and even high-definition video capabilities are available in some models of the FS-4 or as upgrades.

Designed to be truly portable, the FS-4 includes a 90-minute rechargeable battery (extra battery packs in 90- or 180-minute capacities are available). In practice, I was able to squeeze out just over 80 minutes on a charge; recharging took a couple hours. A second battery pack or access to power while filming is required if you want to approach the three-hour storage capacity of the FS-4. More important, especially to schools, is the durability of the device. The 40 GB hard drive is shock resistant. Ad-

ditionally, it spins at a relatively modest 5400 rpm, sacrificing some potential speed for cooler, more dependable performance. Despite weighing only about 15 ounces, the device feels more solid than most consumer video cameras. The FireStore is designed to attach directly to most digital video cameras or be worn on a belt. I found the belt option the most practical when shooting handheld footage, and the camera attachment superior for tripod shooting. Either way, I found it much easier to use the FS-4's remote camera controls than the camera's own tiny buttons, but especially in handheld mode where pressing buttons on the camera itself can cause the image to shake.

Operating the device isn't quite as simple as it might be, the monochrome LCD screen menus aren't especially friendly and the controls can be a bit unintuitive. Fortunately, this isn't a casual use device and once you become comfortable with it, the

sparse interface does a good job of staying out of your way. The large, tactile controls are a huge improvement over the often frustrating control buttons of most consumer-level video cameras.

Primarily designed for the "event videography" market where time is a critical factor and production facilities are somewhat modest, the FS-4 also fits well into education. At \$799, the FS-4 isn't a toy, but it can be well worth the money for a schoolwide multimedia lab, or even shared among a few classrooms.

Focus Enhancements

<http://www.focusinfo.com>
1.800.338.3348



J.V. Bolkan is a senior editor for L&L with nearly 20 years' experience reviewing and writing about hardware and software.

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