

# PRODUCT reviews

- Comic Life Deluxe
- IRISPen Express

Comix and a high-tech gadget—get your geek on

## Comic Life Deluxe v 1.2.5

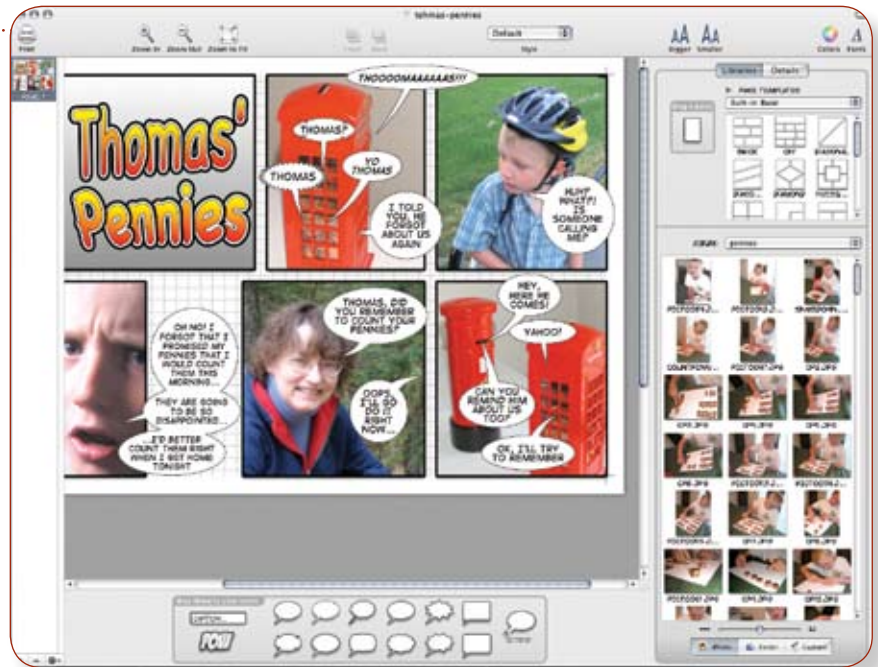
By Tim Pelton and  
Leslee Francis Pelton

Comic Life supports the transformation of ideas and images into marvelously satisfying comic creations.

The download and installation process is simple and well mannered. Given a basic familiarity with iPhoto and the Mac OS 10 platform, Comic Life is an incredibly intuitive, logical, and productive application—even the sound effects are meaningful and helpful. A short 5–10 minute demonstration is sufficient to get a classroom full of students or teachers up to speed and working on their own projects.

Comic Life has the flexibility and feature set to support the efficient creation of any type of comic—whether it be a single-pane editorial cartoon for the Web, a three-pane comic for a newsletter, a full-page Sunday funny, or even a graphic novel. But the most liberating feature of this program is that it uses photographs (and other captured or created images) as the primary visual source material, eliminating drawing ability as an impediment to the creation of aesthetically satisfying comics.

The layout of a new comic is entirely flexible. Starting with a blank page, users may either generate their own layout a pane at a time, or begin with one of the hundreds of included templates. As illustrated above, the program provides access to images through a libraries tab, with direct access to the iPhoto library, browsing



access to other resource files through the Finder, or even an ad-hoc image capture process that supports an attached iSight camera. Once an image is generated or located, it is simply dragged to the intended frame and rotated or resized and clipped as necessary to achieve the desired effect. Switching to the details tab provides tools to filter the images (everything from sepia with an exaggerated old-fashioned dot print pattern to acrylic paint) and customize the panes (size, edges, shapes, shadows, weights, etc.) until the desired presentation is achieved. The text components are equally easy to generate. Simply drag a caption, a talk bubble, a thought bubble, or a sound effect text component (e.g., POW!) onto the document, type (or paste) the text that is needed, and then switch to the details tab to modify the font and style until the appearance is satisfactory.

The potential for this application to support education through student engagement and success is incredible. Comic Life can be used by students to create comic adventures, generate effective representations of mathematical or scientific concepts, or summarize their understanding of historical or cultural events. Once the design is finalized and the images and ideas are captured, the final product comes together very quickly and can easily be printed or shared on the Web. The resulting well-refined learning artifacts are both agreeable and affirming to the producers and often interesting and engaging to those who are given the opportunity to read them. With Comic Life comes a real potential for children, teenagers, and adults to be so satisfied with their efforts that they are eager to share with both their peers and their families—the fridge doors of the world may never be clear again.

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### **Plasq Comic Life Deluxe Version 1.2.5**

\$29.95; Educational pricing: \$19.95 (single), \$499.95 (unlimited district license)

Mac OS X 10.3+

<http://plasq.com>

*A version of Comic Life is now bundled with all Intel iMacs and MacBook Pros. A full-featured 30-day demo is also available.*

## IRISPen Express

**By J.V. Bolkan**

**T**he IRISPen Express pen scanner is an uber-sexy gadget about the size of a large felt-tip marker or highlighter pen. Handheld scanning devices aren't really new, they've been around for more than 20 years. They've gone from geek-cool low-resolution devices the size of a desk phone with dodgy imaging software to sleek geek-cool pen-sized high-resolution gadgets with sophisticated optical character recognition (OCR) applications.

Geek-cool is only the initial unifying concept. Unfortunately, utility—or more specifically, lack of utility is—also still a large part of the mini-scanner story. As a geek myself, I really wanted to like the IRISPen. Easily installed, the high-speed USB scanner works with either Windows XP or Macintosh OS X systems and has a fast-loading, low-footprint software installation. I was ready to scan my first line of text in a matter of minutes. My first disappointment came almost immediately.

As a left-handed person, I'm used to the occasional problem using equipment designed for less fortunate people, so I was happy to discover a software switch for left-handed use. Alas, the OCR software does automatically flip the text (it would be upside down for a lefty), but I still had to scan text right-to-left for the software to work.

Even when I switched to right-handed use, useability isn't great. The problem isn't the pen, its scanning capabilities, or even the amazingly good OCR. It is the concept. Scanning copy from a magazine or book line by line is tedious. Although the OCR is good at overcoming slight errors in hand movements, you must still move your hand slowly and at pretty close to parallel to the text. Line breaks and punctuation are classic problems for OCR routines and although I.R.I.S.'s software is the best I've seen, it isn't terribly good at distinguishing commas, periods, and other small punctuation marks, especially in smaller typefaces.

Despite my frustrations, scanning with the IRISPen is somewhat quicker than manually typing a longer print passage, even accounting for corrections and scanning errors. I found it more onerous, and I'm not a great typist. Younger students with poor typing skills will probably find that it isn't much easier to hand scan.

The software can recognize as many as 55 languages (although translation between languages isn't available in the Express version). Other versions of the software can also read and decipher bar codes as well as perform text-to-speech.

The hardware device itself is well designed. Even though extremely light, it has a solid feel, akin to a high-quality pen. Powered through the USB port of the computer, it has no need for batteries or chargers. The pen is pressure activated—placing the pen



on the page automatically powers it up. It also has a programmable rocker button for automating tasks such as inserting line breaks. The rubber roller guide helps you scan fairly straight lines. The pen's scanner is half an inch wide, so it can handle most text copy, but large display type such as headlines cannot be scanned.

With a list price of \$149, the IRISPen Express is just inexpensive enough to be very attractive, but expensive enough that you'll wish it was more useful. For most educators, spending about the same amount on the company's Readiris Pro 11 software and using it with an inexpensive flatbed scanner is a much more practical, if not a geek-satisfying solution.



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### **I.R.I.S. IRISPen Express**

\$149 (\$122 online)

Windows XP and newer or Macintosh OS X and newer (both included)

<http://www.irislink.com>