

PRODUCT reviews

- Corel Ulead VideoStudio 11 Plus
- SmartDraw 2008

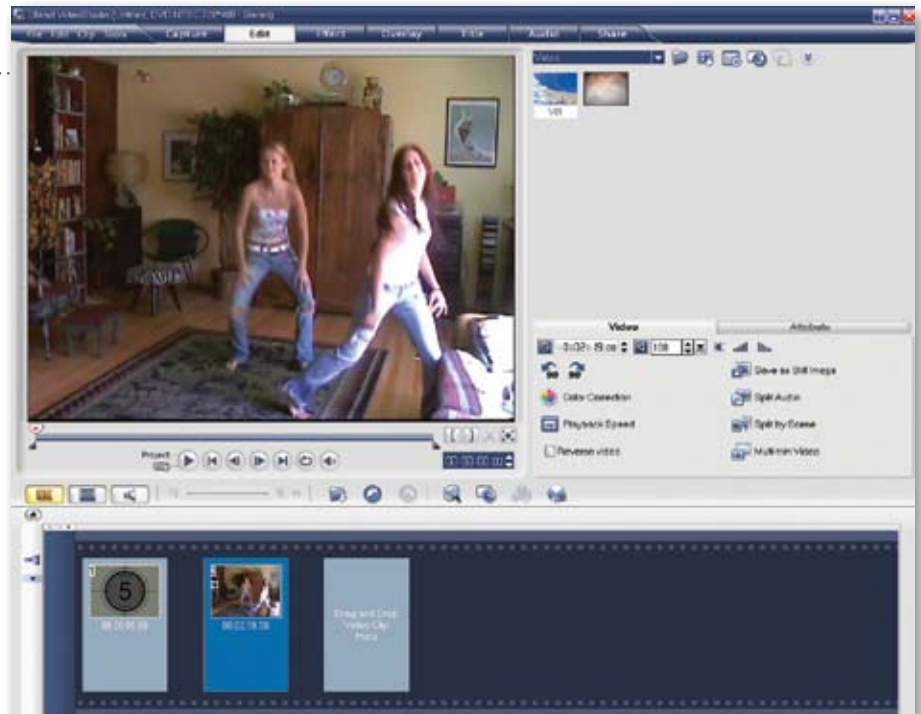
VideoStudio 11 Plus

By J.V. Bolkan

VideoStudio 11 Plus makes it pretty easy, relatively inexpensive, and even semifun to edit video. Easy is expected from an application in its 11th major version, especially when that application costs less than \$100 and is targeted at the consumer market. Semifun is actually a compliment to VideoStudio. Shooting video can be fun and sharing a well-crafted production can be extremely rewarding. However, slogging through the video editing process has been hour-gobbling drudgery.

VideoStudio 11 Plus does have a number of automatic features such as correction for poor color or brightness, hand shake, and noise reduction. However, it is the advent of mediocre-bandwidth video and the constant increase in computing power that really deliver the biggest results. The combination of low-resolution, small-format personal video playback devices, such as the iPod, and low-bandwidth video online distribution channels (YouTube, etc.) have made mid-1990s computer video quality acceptable, even hip. Editing YouTube- and iPod friendly video files is trivial for today's dual-core PCs; even older single core, 2 GHz machines with pokey hard drives can slice and dice that level of video content.

Corel, which recently acquired Ulead, focuses heavily on the higher-end, flashier aspects of digital video in their advertising and retail packaging graphics. Although HD video editing and full DVD menu creation tools



VideoStudio 11 Plus offers a flexible timeline or clip-based editing space with a mature and easy-to-use feature set that is incredibly deep.

are pretty cool, well implemented, and frankly astounding for the price, these aren't exactly practical features for the classroom, at least not yet. Fortunately, almost ignored in the feature list are a host of practical tools for dealing with video that isn't going to overwhelm your hardware or your class schedule. In addition to supporting expensive and still rare HD video camcorders, VideoStudio 11 can accept most handheld device video formats, including those common on digital still cameras and cell phones. It is even more versatile in outputting your finished creations to these devices as well as iPod, PSP, Zune, and services such as YouTube.

I did much of my testing on a functional, yet aging 2.0 GHz Athlon-based PC running Windows XP. The program runs on Windows XP or Vista. Even huge, full-length

DVD-quality clips loaded and the application was fully functional. It just wasn't practical. If your school has a HD camcorder available and the fastest multi-core CPU system with terabyte-level storage, you can produce amazing video with VideoStudio 11 Plus that would do even the most expensive HD plasma big screen proud. Of course, you'd need the students to start editing in kindergarten if you wanted to show the results to parents at high school graduation ceremonies.

Back to reality, and the old Athlon. With modest clip lengths (a couple minutes each) at standard digital camcorder (DV) resolutions, even fancy effects such as applying a fisheye filter to an entire segment, were relatively quick, fun, and effective. Everything is just snappier working with iPod-level video files, which are only 25–33% the size of DV. Quality is surprisingly

good for most of this video. When watching high-motion clips on a HD monitor, I couldn't tell the difference between DV and iPod levels.

Working with the smaller files means you could actually accomplish some pretty ambitious video editing projects within a standard class period. The only problem is that with the ability to painlessly play with the hundreds of filters and special effects, you and your students probably won't want to finish that quickly.

The high-end video features of the Plus version really aren't practical for most classroom projects. In fact, even a dedicated high school video media lab would find the basic version 11 more than sufficiently powerful, and it costs \$30 less. I saw my first version of Ulead video editing software well over a decade ago. Although Corel's logo is now on the package, the software still impresses with its value, flexibility, and ease of use. I can easily recommend VideoStudio 11 to anyone looking to start video editing. For educators with version 10, or those debating whether to get the Plus version, I'd have to say the upgrade isn't bad, just really not needed. If Corel maintains the Ulead tradition of frequent upgrades, version 12 should be soon enough.

Ulead VideoStudio 11 Plus

Corel Corp.
\$99 (\$69 for Version 11)
<http://www.corel.com>



Corel's Ulead VideoStudio 11 Plus features a deep feature list, including DVD authoring and tools for handheld video devices such as the iPod.

SmartDraw 2008

By J.V. Bolkan

SmartDraw.com, creators of SmartDraw 2008, bill it as “the world’s most popular business graphics software.” Obviously not shy, the company makes a case that the software fits in the classroom as easily as the corporate board room. It might be right.

I'm skeptical of any product that claims to be “educational software” yet doesn't actually produce a distinct version for that market. Despite my misgivings, SmartDraw certainly does have immense potential in the classroom, both as a tool for teachers and for students, particularly older middle school or high school learners.

Just to be clear, SmartDraw is not an “art” or even a very artistic application. The drawing aspect really isn't the core. Rather, the ability to render and organize graphics and text easily is the power of the program. An impressive library of predrawn icons and an equally impressive collection of templates are what the vast majority of SmartDraw users are going to appreciate and depend on. In other words, most users are going to assemble pre-existing pieces within a designed template—in most cases not “drawing” a single pixel themselves.

To understand why such an assembly program is well worth the purchase price, you need to see the long list of template types. From mind maps to calendars and bar charts to technical diagramming, uses for the program in education are immediately evident. It did bother me that the company chose to “add” education and classroom to a few categories and populate these folders with fairly basic templates and objects. It feels tacked on. The much more plentiful and densely populated folders for business uses include a rich vein of content for educators to mine.

The disconnect arises either because the developers underestimate the complexity and depth of today's typical high school curriculum or they overestimate the appeal of this software to younger students. However, as I said, this is more about what's in the package than how they've packaged the content.

The first time you run the application, you'll see the obvious business orientation. The look and feel is crisp, somewhat reminiscent of a corporate presentation slide or board report. Colors are muted and icons are minimalist. The interface also eschews the standard menu bar and tool palette configuration used in many paint and drawing programs. Instead, you're given graphical thumbnail views of templates organized by type (flow charts, electrical diagrams, calen-



The huge selection of well-crafted templates skews a bit heavily toward business, but many education-oriented examples are included.

dars) with a few user types (education) mixed in. A heavy-duty toolbar above the project workspace is context sensitive and self configuring. The tools you have available depend on the content you are working on. Despite the many tools and non-conformist design, it takes surprisingly little time to get the feel and an appreciation for the workings of the program. The look is a bit daunting, another reason it probably won't appeal to younger students, but it is an elegant solution.

The included artwork is pretty impressive, both in quantity and quality. Both vector and bitmapped graphics are supported. The program does require a whopping 3 GB of storage space for a full install. You do get the option of installing without the

full template and art libraries, but although only 300 MB is required for this option, the CD-ROM must be in the drive to access the libraries (the real strength of the program) and performance will also take a hit. The program is only available for Windows systems (2000, XP, and Vista). Aside from the disk space requirements, SmartDraw will run on any system capable of loading the appropriate Windows version.

Output from the program is quite versatile. You can print your projects, import directly into Microsoft Office programs such as Excel, PowerPoint, and Word and even create PDF files.

SmartDraw.com does make specific legal and medical versions of SmartDraw 2008. Although it hasn't seen fit to make a "real" education version,

the program can be too useful to be ignored or punished for bad marketing choices. Older versions of the software are available online as shareware. You can also download a trial version of the most recent version. SmartDraw 2008 is well worth the \$297 single user list price. Educational and volume discounts are available on the company's Web site.

SmartDraw 2008
[SmartDraw.com](http://www.smartdraw.com)
 \$297
<http://www.smartdraw.com>



J.V. Bolkan has become the acquiring editor for ISTE's book publishing department. He has been reviewing and writing about multimedia and technology for more than 20 years.

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