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In This Issue

Editor's &
Secretary's Notes

Contact Details

Corel PaintShop
Pro XI

Abby PDF
Transformer Pro 2

Norton Internet
Security 2007

Roxio Easy Media
Creator 9

CanonScan 8600F

Microsoft Flight
Simulator X

ROM is issued
six-times
a year to
members of the
Guildford PC
User Group
All Contributions
to the Editor
Tony Hawes
(details on page 2)

ROM

Newsletter of the Guildford PC User Group

Editor's Bit

Chairman's Christmas Message

I remarked to my brother-in-law, recently retired from a lifetime in the motor trade, that in five years and 70,000 miles my car had needed only one non-service small replacement part. His response was that the makers ought to be getting it right after a hundred years of practice. I thought of Microsoft, and the occasional hassles we have (ask John Childs): maybe we are sometimes unfair in our criticism — they have only been going for 20 years.

Will "Vista" abolish hassle? If not, our User Group will continue to have a strong supporting role for PC users locally.

Happy Christmas to you and yours.

Tony Wood

Guildford PCUG Chairman'



The Chairman, Editor and members of the committee wish you all the compliments of the Festive Season.

Secretary's Meetings Notes

Monday 9th October 2006 - DRAGON NATURALLY SPEAKING 9

On Monday evening, 9 October, we were treated to an outstanding demonstration of the new Dragon Naturally Speaking 9 software by Dr Paul Kuzmin. Paul is a partner in a local GP practice and has used Naturally Speaking from Version 5 to prepare patients clinical notes for a number of years thus saving much time and considerable expense. He wrote an article for ROM Aug/Sept 2002 on Version 6 and has reported on the latest Version 9 in the Oct/Nov

2006 ROM.

He started his talk with a brief history of voice recognition from the earliest IBM Voice recognition program to this latest version of Naturally Speaking. It is available in three levels. Standard at £80, Preferred at £150 and Professional at £645 (all prices including VAT). The software Paul was demonstrating was the Professional level with the medical enhancement. The facilities offered at the various levels were outlined. It operates with most popular applications, including word processors, email etc and has basic navigation and control functions for a limited number of applications, although for full computer control one must look to the professional level. Although the claims are that

(Continued on page 2)

ROM is now only available as a full-colour .pdf download from the Group web page at:
www.guildfordpcusergroup.co.uk

**NEXT MEETING — Monday
11th December 2006 at 7.45 p.m.**

Christmas Quiz

With the start of the festive season it's time again for our annual Christmas Quiz with some very attractive and valuable prizes to be won. Top prize has a street value of over £150!

Companies donating prizes this year include Microsoft, Logitech and others. Entry to the quiz will be £2.00 (one entry per person). **To allow for latecomers the Quiz will start at 8.35pm.**

At 8.00pm before the quiz Tony Hawes will demonstrate the capabilities of the release version of Microsoft Flight Simulator X.

Please bring a friend — and being Christmas, in place of chocolate biscuits we'll have free warm mince pies.

Don't like mince pies? Chocolate biscuits, coffee & tea are free.

**Meetings are held on the 2nd Monday
of each month at 7.45pm at the
Stoughton Youth Club and Community
Centre (opposite "The Royal" — Pub)
Worplesdon Road (A322), Guildford.**

Forthcoming Meetings

Monday 8th January 2007 at 7.45 pm

MP3 Evening. Can you detect the difference between a 64kbps and 192kbps audio file? A chance to see if you can. Plus what else can you do with an MP3 player — you may be surprised!

Monday 12th February at 7.45 pm

Digital photography for the photographic enthusiast — John Childs will speak and demonstrate.

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(this site contains many of the reviews that have appeared in ROM)

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(Continued from page 1)

Version 9 "works straight out of the box" without training this was shown to be an exaggeration when our editor had a go, but Paul confirmed that Version 9 was amazingly accurate; about 30% more than the prior release and his demonstration confirmed this. He also demonstrated the voice playback function which can be in the originators voice if you wish. He finally recorded some notes on a hand held recorder and then fed them into the computer to be "recognised". The evening ended with some interesting questions.

Monday 13th November 2006 - CANON 8600F SCANNER

Tony Hawes demonstrated the CanonScan 8600F scanner from Canon. Priced at around £137, it comes with plenty of software and attachments to enable you to scan photos, slides, negatives and documents. Features include 4800 x 9600dpi, 48-bit colour depth, FAU (Film Adapter Unit) - 12 x 35mm film strip and 4 x 35mm slides, FARE (Film Automatic Retouching and Enhancement) Level 3 dust/scratch removal for film, Super-fast scan engine, and comprehensive software package including SilverFast SE, Adobe Photoshop Elements 4, and OmniPage 4 SE (OCR), USB 2.0 Hi-Speed, 7 EZ buttons and Fast Multi-photo mode. Tony scanned some 1950's black and white photo prints and with the help of the new version of Paint Shop Pro turned them from faded images into great looking photos. Transparencies and negatives (of various sizes) were no problem for the scanner,

The newest calculator Sire:
16-bit, with hi-tech see-through monitor
— including mouse. My price only 5 goats.



and documents were easily scanned directly to PDFs using the supplied software and the dedicated buttons on the lid of the scanner.

Laurence then took the stage to show how you can tweak a picture using PSP XI, before Tony finished the evening by scanning both 35mm colour negative film strips and 120-size black and white negatives and processing them into very acceptable positive images ready for printing. The scanner proved to be versatile and priced at around £137, is very good value for money.

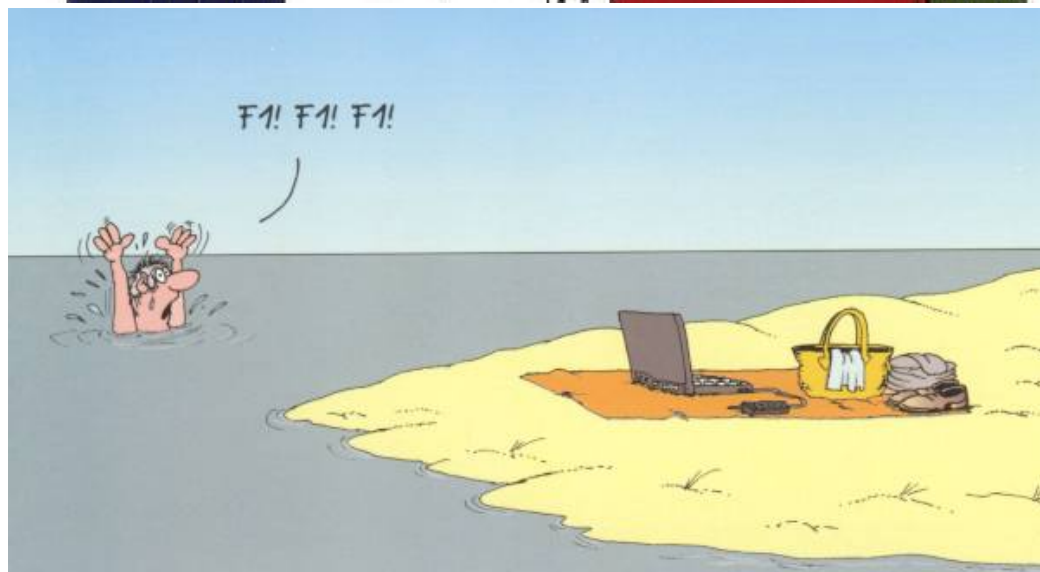
Editors Bit

As a grandparent to two active toddlers I've observed as they grow up that they seem to have their own set of property laws. Here's the rules I've noted:

1. If I like it, it's mine.
2. If it's in my hand, it's mine.
3. If I can take it from you, it's mine.
4. If I had it a little while ago, it's mine.
5. If it's mine, it must never appear to be yours in any way.
6. If I'm doing or building something, all of the pieces are mine.
7. If it looks like mine, it's mine.
8. If I saw it first, it's mine.
9. If you are playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.
10. If it's broken, it's yours.

I'm not saying anything more — the Chairman and Secretary have had said their bit — I'll let the cartoons say it all for me, but I do wish you all a Very Happy Christmas!

5 goats? Sire it's not worth it.
Wait till next month and it'll come with Vista



OK ... This one may need a bit of thought! — Clue keyboard shortcut.

Corel Paint ShopPro Photo XI

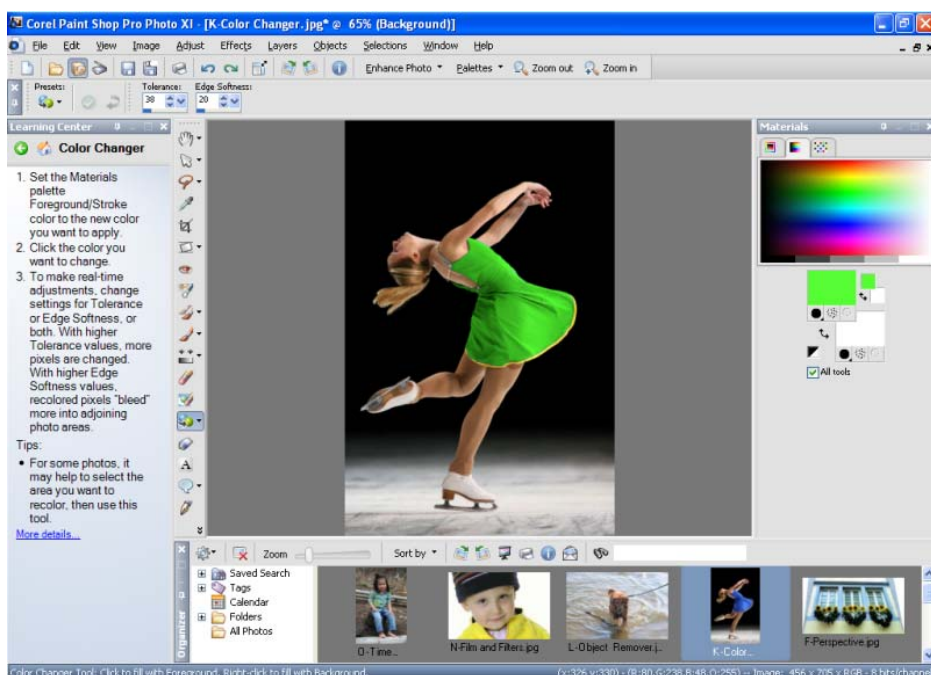
by Laurence Fenn



Corel have released a new version of Paint Shop Pro, now known as Corel Paint Shop Pro Photo XI. The name of the program gets longer with each release and also so does the amount of space it takes up on your hard drive. Along with the program comes a 30-day preview of Corel Snapfire Plus, which offers image editing, photo-management and creative photo-project tools. After the trial period, the standard features are still available, but I'll come to this program later in the review.

There are a number of new features in the main program, and improvements based on user input. If you have many photos on your hard drive, it's difficult to keep track of them, so the new Organiser management centre takes the guesswork out of finding images. You can search by filename, date, type or folder location. You can assign keywords and ratings to the pictures, which are shown in a thumbnail view and you can edit the EXIF-data (that's the data about the photo added by your digital camera). You can also add frames from video files to make it easier to organise them. Corel are trying to incorporate features seen in other programs, as I usually use PowerDVD or a video editor to extract frames from video files, and ACDSee to manage my images. If you do have many images on your system, you probably already organise them into folders. If you want to add keywords to them using Corel's organiser, then it's going to take you a long time if you have many pictures.

The Crop Tool has changed in response to user feedback (apparently) to give users the exact dimensions they want in a snap. Instead of entering the dimensions, which you can still do, when an area is selected with the crop tool a floating toolbar appears below the area, allowing the user to choose a predefined crop size or rotate the area. As



Colour Changer Menu

great as it may be, I found the toolbar got in the way, and would have preferred it to be with the rest of the crop tool controls. Some of the dialogs for tweaking your images have been enhanced, including the levels and curves dialogs. Histograms are now included, and the preview rendering is improved. Rather strange with most of the dialogs is that the preview in image option has been moved to the top of the dialog as a tick box instead of a button underneath the preview image. With some effects it's difficult to see how it will change the image in a small preview, so seeing the effect (no pun intended) applied to the image itself can help you adjust the controls to get the required result

The Colour Changer

The Colour Changing tool lets you change the colour of an object in the image, like the colour of a person's shirt, for example. You need to make a selection to avoid the effect leaking onto other parts of the picture, but you can choose the edge softness of the selection. You then just pick a colour and click on the object in the image to change its colour, taking into effect the right brightness and shadow elements. Before this tool, you needed to select an area (or with me create a layer) and colourise it, possibly tweaking the saturation and contrast levels to the desired effect. It can work wonders on an image, but really depends on the contrast and levels of the image you are working on, so it can be a bit of a hit or miss.

A Depth of Field effect allows you to blur the background of an image, but even with the variety of the selection types, it's really just a selection tool that blurs. Skin Smooth-

ing has only an amount control but it can reduce the wrinkles in a person's skin. Along with the tanning, teeth whiten and spot remover you can really go to town enhancing a person's appearance.

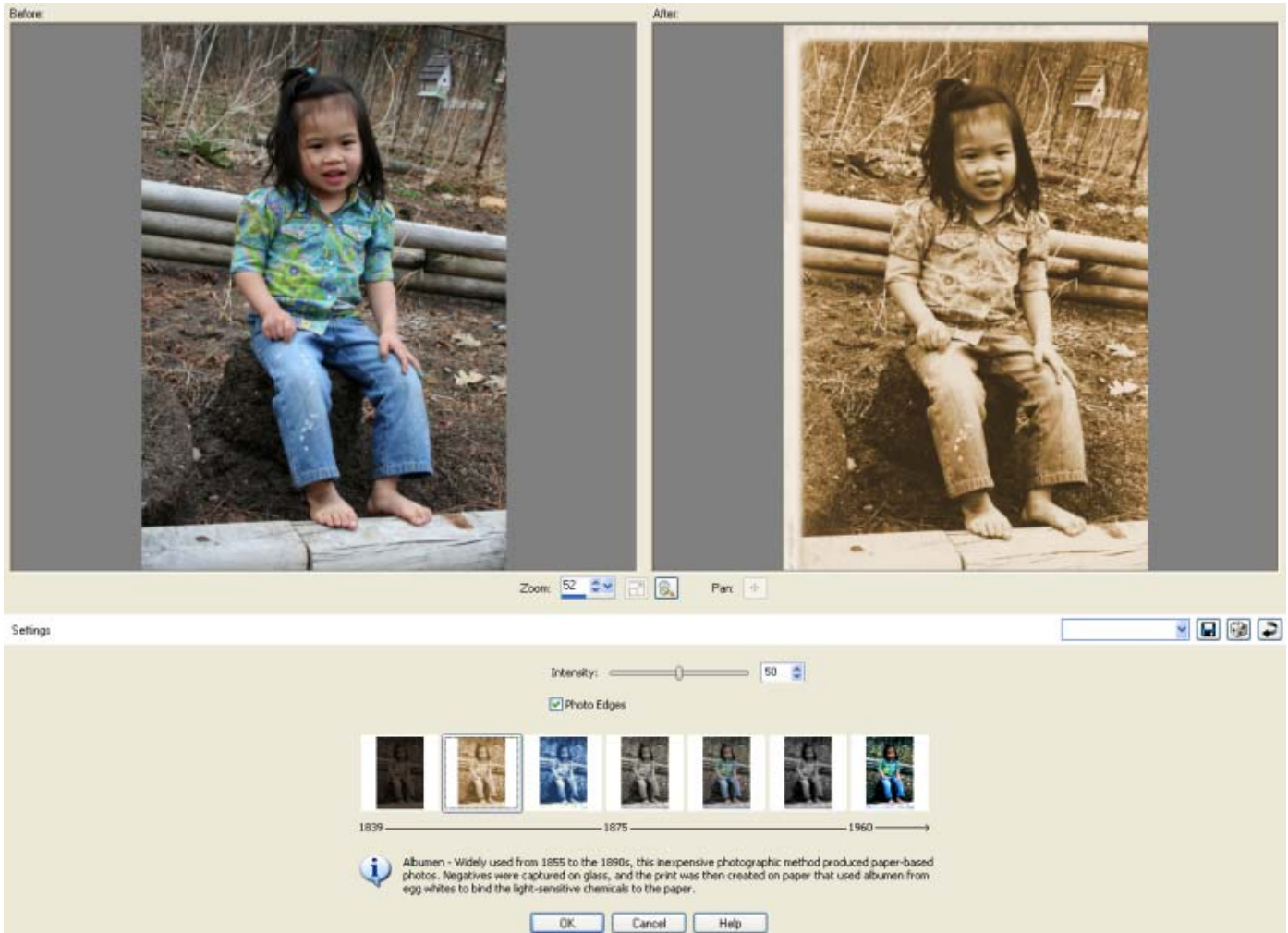
The Time Machine Effect

There are some new special effects that can be applied to an image. Time Machine lets you choose from seven different effects to age your picture, namely Daguerreotype (used in the 1830s), Cyanotype (used in 1840), Albumen (used from 1850), Platinum (used in 1870s), Box Camera (popular from 1900s), Early Colour and Cross Process. There are new Film and Filters, such as Vivid, Vivid Skin Tones, Muted Reds, Enhanced Reds, Vibrant Foliage, Warm Earth Tones, Glamour, Night Effect, Cooling, Warming, Orange, Champagne, Sunset and Custom.

Corel Snapfire

Corel Snapfire is a separate program that seems to duplicate many of the features in Paint Shop Pro. The Photo Doctor analyses the image and recommends when a Quick Fix should be applied, as well as Red Eye, Crop or rotate. You can also choose to open the image in Paint Shop Pro where you can do all of these fixes as well. Photos projects allow you to produce calendars, collages, greeting cards and print layouts, the latter of which you can do in the main program. Photo Downloader automatically downloads photos from card readers or cameras, and can be set to work with no user intervention. It can also detect Photo CDs, but for all this to work seamlessly, the program must be loaded when the computer starts up. As I haven't bought a digital camera for a while I can't tell whether this

(Continued on page 4)



The Time Machine effect. Make a modern-day colour photo look as though it is a faded-edged Albumen photo taken a hundred or so years ago

(Continued from page 3)

feature is available with the normal driver software, but it certainly is with my Kodak DX3900 digital camera, and Windows XP certain runs an auto play feature when I plug in a card into my card reader.

E-mailing

Quick Review lets you manage slide shows, adding captions, ratings, rotate images or apply a quick fix to a slide. Photo Trays lets users gather photos from various folders so you can then e-mail, print or upload the images. E-mailing pictures is enhanced so previews can be seen before sending the pictures, which can be sent as attachments or an embedded photo. A maximum photo size can be set for the images and the file size is given. In these days of broadband this is becoming less important, but not everyone has a fast internet connection speed.

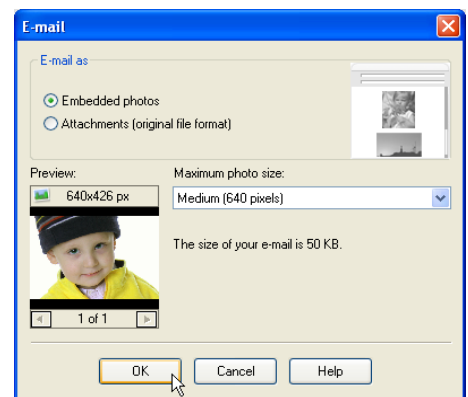
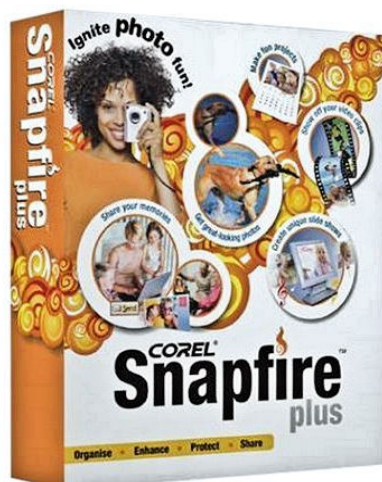
Conclusions

The differences between the previous version of Paint Shop Pro and this new one are not that much, so I wouldn't really upgrade. However, if you've never had a graphics program then this version will let you do everything that you want. If you don't have anything to organise your photos, then this program will help you and if

you want to grab frames from video files then you won't need another program to do that. If it could only edit icon files, then this would be the one program for all my graphic needs.

Finally — Extras

As mentioned above PSP Photo XI comes bundled with Corel Snapfire Plus SE, which appears to be a replacement for Corel's Photo Album. Snapfire Plus SE is a time limited product that works for only a short time in full usability mode before reverting to the less useful basic mode. If you wish to continue using Snapfire SE with all its features you need to purchase an upgrade to the



The E-mail function

full version (Snapfire Plus) which will cost around £27.

Although a 126-page manual is included, there is an extra CD containing over two-hours of video tutorials titled "Getting Started with Corel Paint Shop Pro Photo XI". Presented by Tanya Staples from Lynda.com this covers in depth some of the more important features of PSP XI and is a very worthwhile and free extra.

Pricing and Availability

Paint Shop Pro Photo XI comes in three flavours: Full version for £60. Upgrade £55 and Educational version £45. Prices from Amazon.co.uk which includes VAT and delivery.

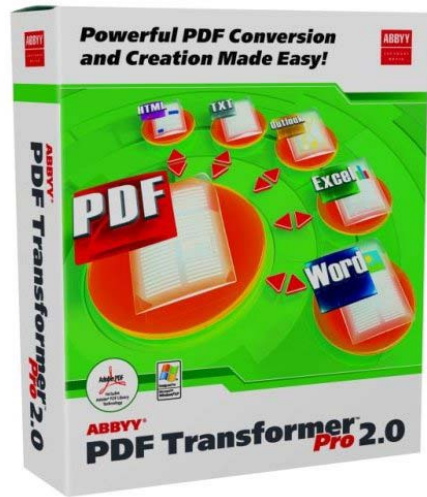
Abbyy PDF Transformer Pro 2

Reviewed by Tony Hawes

Last month we had a look at ScanSoft's PDF Converter 4, which converts PDF files to Microsoft Word documents and vice versa. On the whole I gave it a "thumbs-up" for ease of use.

Shortly after I'd written the review Abbyy software asked whether I'd like to review their PDF conversion utility, "PDF Transformer Pro 2". I said yes as it provided the perfect vehicle to see how well this Adobe Acrobat-type product would cope.

Transformer Pro 2 comes in a standard style box, but apart from the program CD and a slim Quick Reference card it is empty. The reference manual is 23-pages long and can be found on the CD as a PDF file.



Installation

Installation is straightforward, a 20-digit alpha-numeric serial number has to be entered and for full functionality it's necessary to activate the program. This can be done over the web or via telephone or fax. If you choose not to activate, it'll run in the less functional 'trial' mode which allows a maximum of 50-pages to be transformed, whilst in the case of a 'Convert to PDF' operation a trial stamp is added to the converted document.

In Use

Once installed and rebooted; PDF Transformer adds a choice under Word's Drop-down File menu to open "PDF Transformer". Buttons are also installed onto the Word Toolbar for quick access to Transformer's functions. Click the button and it opens your "My Documents" folder where you can choose the PDF file you wish to convert or click the browse button to locate the file you wish to convert.

Depending on the size or complexity of the PDF file to be converted this can take from a few seconds to well over a minute. The

October 2008 ROM — Left original page one. Right as converted to PDF by Abbyy PDF Transformer Pro 2. Note less clear ROM box and "Trial" stamps which are removed when activated.

converted file is then displayed in Microsoft Word with nearly all the original formatting, columns, graphics, tables etc converted ready for editing.

In my experience a good test as to how well PDF conversion works and vice versa is to convert (print) a copy of ROM which I create with Microsoft Publisher. MS Publisher .pub files are not one of the included MS Office file formats designed for direct conversion, this only supports Word, Power Point, Excel or Visio, so the only way is to convert my .pub file of ROM is to use Transformer's 'Print To' function, which is not dissimilar that the method I currently use using Adobe Acrobat, this is easy enough but given that ROM contains relatively complex formatting I was keen to see how Abbyy's PDF conversion would compare with the Adobe Acrobat PDF version when asked to convert this MS.pub document. Remarkably PDF Transformer did an excellent and near perfect conversion, complex formatting such as the ROM masthead was not perfect, but I seem to recall when I reviewed Version

1.0 two-or so years ago the results were pretty dreadful, so obviously Abbyy have put some work into improving this aspect of the program. As can be seen from the screen shots above conversion was almost flawless.

Using Abbyy Transformer to convert a PDF document into MS word format is a doddle, just drag the PDF file to the "Transform PDF File" icon on your desktop; this opens the menu where you can select various options such as the title and where to save the converted file etc. Depending on the size and complexity of the original this can take from less than a minute to well over five minutes (the 16-page PDF of the October version of ROM took six minutes to transform), but this is no real pain when you realise the difficulties of selecting text from a .PDF file for copying and pasting into Word with all the hassle of removing the ASCII carriage returns characters at the end of each line of imported text!

Asking PDF Transformer to convert a password protected PDF document is a no-go — it can't be done.

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

When transforming "Normal" PDFs, such as the ones found on program CD's in lieu of printed manuals, the difference between the original PDF and converted to MS Word document format are almost impossible to tell apart.

Conclusions

I found that for most purposes Abbyy's

PDF Transformer worked fine, it struggled a little when asked to transform graphics-rich documents with complex layouts, but on the whole it worked remarkably well and considerably better than with version 1.0. If your requirements are solely based around converting PDFs into editable Word, Excel, HTML or plain ASCII .txt or creating PDFs from within Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, Power Point or Visio)

Abbyy's PDF Transformer Pro 2 copes very well indeed and is recommended.

Pricing and Availability

Amazon.co.uk Abbyy PDF Transformer Pro 2 for £60 inc VAT and delivery. The less well featured non-Pro version sells for £31.50.

Norton Internet Security 2007

By Tony Hawes

Features of NIS 2007

In the last issue of ROM (Oct-Nov 2006) I gave a preview of the features, some new, and some of the improvements included in the latest (2007) version of Symantec's Norton Internet Security.

Norton Internet Security 2007 Product Description

Norton Internet Security 2007 is a comprehensive set of security tools that helps keep you safe online as you surf and email, swap files, download programs, and chat. The rapid growth of the World Wide Web has created the perfect environment for malicious and damaging entities that threaten your PC and your identity. With Norton Internet Security, you will be able to enjoy your computer with confidence, knowing that viruses and spyware will be either blocked or removed. All kinds of malicious programs will be removed automatically, including the damaging side effects. Includes: Norton AntiVirus, Norton Personal Firewall, Norton Privacy control, Norton AntiSpam and Norton Parental Control*. Network protection configures security settings when logged on at home, or on public networks Full System Scan performs a deep scan to remove existing viruses, spyware and other threats Norton Protection Center provides a central place to easily check overall security settings Includes protection updates and new product features as available throughout the renewable service period Norton Internet Security 2007 Platforms - Windows XP Home/ XP Pro / XP Media Center; Eligible for a free Windows Vista compatibility update the Phishing Protection feature requires Microsoft Internet Explorer v6.0 or higher

Norton have now supplied a full version for review in the form of a downloaded version, so it came with no box, printed manual or install CD and rather go through all the features already covered in the preview I'll concentrate on the performance of this, the latest version.

*Before we begin it's worth mentioning that if you expected the Parental Control function to be available it's necessary to download it from the website after install-

NIS 2007 — Activation Screen

ing. It doesn't tell you this anywhere on the instructions supplied, or in the PDF manual.

My Anti-Virus history.

I first used an antivirus program way back in 1989 or thereabouts when I got a virus from an infected 3½ inch floppy disk. There weren't that many antivirus programs available then and I choose the UK's Dr Solomon's AntiVirus Toolkit which I used successfully until he sold out to Network Associates (McAfee's predecessor I believe) who on taking over Dr Sols promptly raised the price considerably. Money talks, so I changed to the cheaper Norton AntiVirus which Symantec had acquired from Peter Norton in 1990. I then used Norton AntiVirus until around 2000 when I changed to McAfee's AntiVirus. I wasn't too interested in parental controls etc as I had no kids of school age and McAfee suited me well. One of the reasons of changing to McAfee was that Norton which when I started using it was a brilliant piece of software but had since become somewhat 'bloated', I found it occupied too much space, too much memory, and slowed



Task Bar All OK green Tick

down my PC; in other words it was not doing all that it should have done; whether this was a result of poor coding, lack of oversight by the developers, or for whatever reason, Norton seemed to have lost its way and wasn't as good as it was when I first used it nearly sixteen years ago.

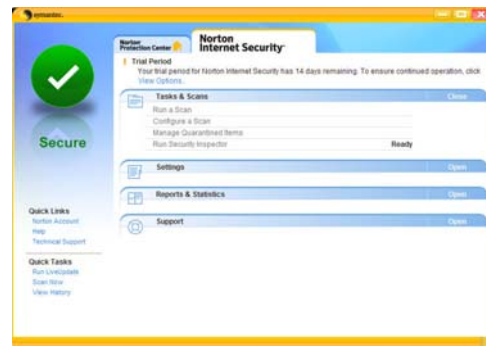
Installation

Anyway back to the latest version. For installation Symantec recommends that all open programs on the computer are closed and you're connected to the Internet. As Norton Internet Security contains an antivirus program (Norton AntiVirus), if you have other antivirus programs installed on your computer, in my case McAfee's Virus Scan, an uninstall panel will appear to help remove them, similarly if you use another company's firewall Symantec strongly recommends that it's removed to prevent installation errors.

Install is easy. Key in the activation code and choose either from Symantec's recommendation as to where NIS should be installed or decide where you want it to go. I choose Symantec's default install option which installs the following features:

- Blocks online identity theft
- Detects and eliminates spyware
- Removes viruses and Internet worms
- Protects against hackers

A full installation is preceded by NIS doing a quick preinstall scan for anything nasty already present on the computer – this took about 20 minutes. Right away, NIS warned me that my security needs attention and invited me to Fix Now by clicking a button. As mentioned above this suggested I uninstall McAfee's AntiVirus and recommended I dis-



....Which when ticked opens the access box.

abled Microsoft's Firewall and Microsoft Windows Defender to enable NIS install Norton's equivalents. The entry of the 24-digit code to activate the program is optional and it's possible to omit the code, but without

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

activation it will only run for 15-days before it ceases working.

Once installed the first thing it does is a full system scan that took the best part of an hour. Nothing too unusual about this as in my experience a full system scan of my rather loaded computer with three largish hard disks take time. However I'm not sure that Symantec's claim that NIS 2007 has "an improved and faster full system scan" was any faster than one done by McAfee on the same computer. So I took this claim with a pinch of salt.

Overall, it did a good job and identified a keygen program that I installed deliberately to see whether it would be identified as malign, and sure enough the scan flagged it as such (see above right) so top marks here.



A reassuring message



And if opening a page searched on Google another reassuring message

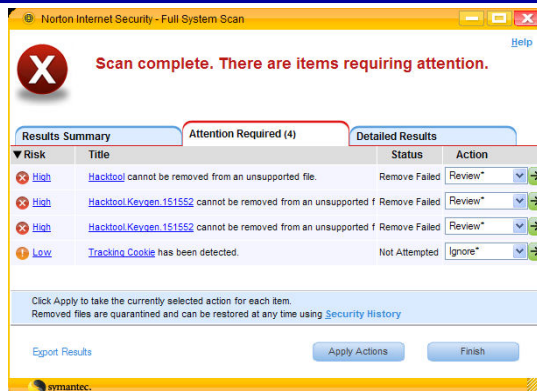
Revised Interface

Not having used Norton for a couple of years it was obvious that Symantec have tweaked the interface. The system tray icon has been replaced by a larger button, which essentially does the same job of telling you whether you're protected or not. Click on it and you get a bit more information, which you can explore further if you want. I rather liked this as it is almost a one-click access to the programs security options.

The product's main screen reflects an attempt to keep things simple, or at least simpler, for the user. It's divided between a "Norton Protection Centre" tab that reports on security status and a "Norton Internet Security" tab that lets you change settings and take action.

AntiVirus

The AntiVirus protection module of Norton Internet Security 2007 ensures that Norton AntiVirus (NAV) is kept up to date with the latest virus signatures being downloaded and installed on an almost daily basis. As this is done in the background with little or no input from you as the user, it reassuringly ensures you're kept protected with the minimum of fuss. According to Symantec a new feature with this version is the ability to identify new types of viruses that use rootkits to hide themselves from security software. This feature can detect hidden threats at all sys-



Scan Results showing a high-risk malicious program

tem levels, including the application, user mode, and deep down into the kernel level of your computer.

Firewall

Symantec also claim that Norton Internet Security 2007's firewall has been enhanced so that it automatically configures itself to allow good applications access, but blocks spyware, viruses, worms and hackers from gaining access to the user's computer. The result is a smart firewall that provides much more effective security and does not require users to make involved security decisions.

Performance Improvements

Also according to Symantec when they carried out internal (company) performance tests both Norton AntiVirus 2007 and Norton Internet Security 2007 delivered significant performance enhancements in year-over-year product comparisons in the areas of memory usage, boot time, scan speed, user interface (UI) launch speed, and HTTP download speed. Additionally, Norton Internet Security 2007 outpaced the industry average results in performance tests against nine competitive Internet Security products. Key findings from the internal product performance review include:

- Less Memory Usage – Size of working set memory for Norton Internet Security 2007 is only 10-15MB — approximately two to three times less than the competitors' average
- Faster Scans – Norton Internet Security 2007 runs a full scan on a 1GB file set in 2 minutes 15 seconds —faster than the average scan time of 2 minutes 49 seconds for tested competing products. And scan were 30-35% faster than last year's Norton Internet Security 2006
- Faster Boot Time – The average boot time impact for tested competing products was 20 seconds —Norton Internet Security 2007 impact was only 14 seconds. Systems boot 5-10% faster than with Norton Internet Security 2006
- Faster User Interface Response – The user interface in Norton Internet Security

2007 launches in under 1 second (following initial launch), about 2 times faster than the competitor's average

In internal performance tests both Norton AntiVirus 2007 and Norton Internet Security 2007 delivered significant performance enhancements in year-over-year product comparisons in the areas of memory usage, boot time, scan speed, user interface (UI) launch speed, and HTTP download speed. Additionally, Norton Internet Security 2007 outpaced the industry average results in performance tests against nine competitive Internet Security products.

In Use

In use I had no problems. I didn't have any malign Viruses with which to test NAV's capabilities, but from what I've read on the web NAV is as good as it gets. Similarly the other features work well (although I didn't test the Parental Controls feature) and overall if you have an Internet Security Suite about to expire, Symantec's Norton Internet Security Suite 2007 should be on your list as a possible replacement, especially as Symantec have announced that it will work with Windows Vista when it's launched at the end of January 2007. However unlike McAfee Internet Security 2007, reviewed in the October issue of ROM, NIS doesn't come with a backup-and-recovery utility — if you want one Symantec's Norton Save and Restore will do this but will cost you more. Currently Amazon.co.uk is bundling Save & Restore with NIS 2007 for £53.99. A personal reminder that Save & Restore includes Norton Ghost, one of the better back-up programs, especially when used with an external hard drive.

Pricing and Availability

Norton Internet Security is available from Amazon.co.uk for £24.97 including VAT and delivery, about half the listed price, which seems a bargain. It's also available bundled together with Norton Save & Restore for £53.99.

Late PS — Vista Compatibility

Symantec have announced that Windows XP Home/XP Pro users who purchased Norton Internet Security 2007 and Norton AntiVirus 2007, are eligible for a free Windows Vista compatibility upgrade. For more information, go to www.symantec.com/vistaupdate.

Symantec have also announced that users can download the public betas of Vista compatible Norton Internet Security and Norton AntiVirus from http://www.symantec.com/home_homeoffice/publicbeta/index.jsp.

This allows you to test the features with the Public Betas and RC1 versions of Windows Vista. The final versions of Vista compatible Norton Internet Security and Norton AntiVirus are scheduled to be available for purchase subject to production release of the Windows Vista operating system.

Roxio Easy Media Creator Suite 9

Reviewed by Paul Kuzmin

It was with some enthusiasm that I greeted this the latest incarnation of the long series of media authoring software. I had a big problem with my version 7 that had been used in video authoring from my camcorder for some time. The DVD Builder (now called MyDVD) part of the programme kept crashing every time it was opened with some stupid timestamp error which from my experience is always unrecoverable. Till then it had been an easy to use adequate though slightly inflexible method of turning DV tape into DVD which served to keep me secure with the two copies that if one got corrupted the other was still there. I'm afraid I have not been a great video editor being quite a hoarder and I just tend to archive everything onto disk for posterity. Apart from the recent crash which seemed to be related to hardware of my computer rather than its software problem, the main inflexibility was over the title screen and menu authoring which were very rigid and not user-friendly to edit.

Coming on two CDs, the Program disc and the Content disc, it is a true and extensive suite of programs accessible from the Easy Media Creator Home and I will describe what each section does.

Importing and Organising Media Files

Media Import. This imports files of all media types onto the computer.

Media Manager. This manages the media in folders and organises them into personalised albums. It enables sharing of files we use outside or inside the home network.

Copying and burning discs

Disc Copier. This creates backup copies of ones audio and non-encrypted video discs and also converts DivX or WMV files to DVD video format.

Drag-to-Disc. The programme that leaves the CD in the writable drive visible as a large icon in the bottom right-hand corner to allow dragging and dropping of files to this.

Creator Classic

What the programme used to look like when it was not a suite, an interface for archiving files to CDs and DVDs.

Protecting your data

Backup MyPC. An automated backup facility, if necessary password secured, to back up anything from just a few files to a complete system including media spanning. Supports Blu-ray discs of up to 50 GBs.

Working with photos



PhotoSuite. An inbuilt photo editor for enhancement editing and sharing of digital photos and the creating of various personalised projects to share with others.

Working with video and DVD projects

VideoWave. A programme designed to add further audio, special effects and transitions to home videos to enhance them.

MyDVD. A programme to compile a full multimedia production on DVD from various sources with professional looking menus and animated backgrounds. Comes in a full programme version and a cut down "Express" version that can be launched from VideoWave to complete the production prior to burning the disc which is performed from this programme.

CinePlayer. This acts as a player for a number of the video based media and projects created by Roxio software.

CineMagic. Another video editing program creating a professional looking compilation of home video, photos and audio.

Working with audio

Sound Editor. Sound editor can be used to edit sound clips and audio files to create audio mixes. It includes the LP and Tape Assistant to capture audio from analogue sources into a digital audio file.

Easy Audio Capture. This lets you quickly capture audio from analogue sources and Internet radio.

Music Disc Creator. Compiles music discs to play on audio or video equipment or simply on the computer

Creating labels and disc inserts

Label Creator. Produces labels and jewel case covers from several professional designs or self-created ones.

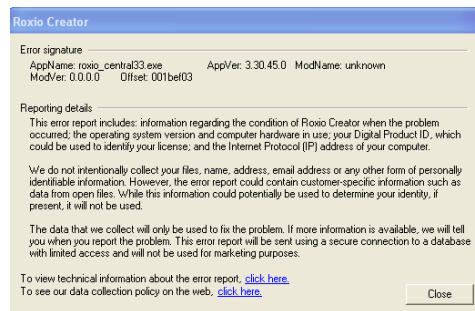
Installation

I chose the "complete" option rather than the other lesser "custom installation" as I

was not running out of disk space. Indeed disk space needs to allow for a good 15GB free after installation as 12 are taken up with each one-hour tape. Official specifications were on the borderline for my ageing machine being a minimum of a 1.4 Pentium with 256Mb of RAM for most features (2GB and 512Mb for DivX or H.264 for viewing in full screen mode) and, as this has to survive till the spring and the Drag-to-Disc programme does not work on Windows 2000, it would have to suffice. It proudly boasts support for Vista in any edition and burning to Blu-ray disc.

I was offered the opportunity to install the Google (*Yahoo? — Ed*) toolbar which I declined being the paranoid person I am I tend not to like this or the Google desktop search as I feel they are likely to act in some way to slow down the computer whether being true spyware or not.

All went well until I tried to open the programme and then it just didn't open just flashing briefly and then closing



I was slightly unsure as to the cause of this error message (shown above) and immediately started editing the registry to remove any trace of the previous Roxio which I thought I had completely uninstalled. I have to say that in spite of an apparent uninstall it left behind almost as many files as Windows itself and I deleted numerous registry entries relating to version 7. These were fairly easily identifiable but took some time to go through. I then reinstalled the product in the hope that this might work but no joy. I then went to the Internet for suggestions as to anybody else who had experienced a similar problem and I hit upon the possibility that it might be the beta version of Internet Explorer 7 although I did have the final release candidate on the computer and luckily for me the full version had just emerged which I upgraded to. It appears therefore that the opening splash screen seems to require a fully fledged browser to actually open it and that was all the error was.

There were no errors opening up any other part of the programme including, to my delight, the DVD builder (now called MyDVD). Previously it had been highly frustrating to have captured perfectly reasonable material from tape and then not be able to open up a

(Continued on page 9)

(Continued from page 8)

programme that would allow it to be burned to disc.

New Features

These are these are described by Roxio as below (note some duplicates where an overlap of media occurs):

Video

- Convert DVDs, TiVo files, set-top DVD recorder shows, DivX files and more into compressed video formats to enjoy on your iPod, PSP, mobile phone, or other portable media player.
- CineMagic turns your raw SD or HD camcorder video into a high quality production automatically - featuring scene selection and exciting themes with Hollywood-style intros.
- VideoWave now features unrivalled editing power with a 32 track timeline, batch video removal, timeline markers, and automatic colour correction and background noise removal.
- Fast and efficient digital video and HD video capture with SmartScan.
- Video Doctor auto correction of video colour, contrast and brightness to improve video recorded under poor conditions.
- File conversion of virtually all video formats.

Music

- Instantly capture Internet radio, streaming music services, and any audio playing on your computer right from the desktop featuring "pre-roll" cache and "system sound mute."
- Pick a single song that fits your mood and AutoMix arranges a mix of songs that sound great together. Burn your mix to CD, DVD, or send to your portable player or mobile phone.
- Enjoy over 50 hours of music on a standard DVD, now with on-screen entertaining customizable TV menus for easy navigation and random-play shuffle mode.
- Archive your entire music project including all songs and background artwork.
- Automatically rename incorrectly tagged song files turning each "Track_01" into a real title.
- Fast transfer of music to iPod or mobile phone.

Photo

- Automatically organize and keep track of thousands of digital photos. Make every picture unique and your memories unforgettable. Crop, rotate, correct brightness and remove red-eye with a click of a button. Automatically correct exposure, sharpness and colour saturation. Get creative with advanced tools like cloning, effects brushes, smart

edge detection and masking.

- Photo Assistants make it easy to create panoramas, greeting cards and calendars from professionally designed templates. Personalize every photo and video project with premium content, including: 340+ Special effects and transitions, 80+ Photo content projects, 25+ Pre-designed disc labels, 20+ Premium DVD menu styles.
- Turn still images into stunning, wide-screen, multi-image HD slideshows with collages, motion effects, transitions, titles and background soundtracks. Preview in full-screen or export in standard or high-definition video to burn to DVD or DivX HD disc. Your high quality, multi-mega pixel photos deserve an HD slideshow.
- Easy photo transfer from mobile phone camera to PC.
- E-mailable photo postcards every occasion.

DVD

- Enjoying your photos and video on DVD has never been easier, or looked better, with dazzling new menu styles, menu-to-menu transitions, and exclusive Fit-to-Disc encoding.
- Backup and store a lifetime of precious memories on a single Blu-ray disc which can hold up to 50 GB - up to 12,500 music tracks, up to 50,000 photos, or 4 hours of raw HD Video.
- Turn still images into stunning, wide-screen, multi-image HD slideshows with collages, motion effects, transitions, titles and background soundtracks.
- Fit-to-DVD compression optimises video quality and disk space.
- Impressive new 16:9 widescreen styles as an option with matching chapter menus.
- Easy removal of commercials from set-top DVD recorder discs.

Mobile

- Import photos and videos captured with your mobile phone camera. Create personalized ring tones, and transfer music, photos and videos to your mobile phone to enjoy on the go. Live-Share technology is used for peer-to-peer sharing.
- Open your favourite song in the Creator 9 Sound Editor, trim 30 seconds, add a smooth fade-in and out, transfer it to your mobile phone and create a personalized ring tone.
- Convert DVDs, TiVo files, set-top DVD recorder shows, DivX or WMV files and more into compressed video formats to enjoy on your iPod, PSP, mobile phone, or other portable media player.
- Media access and play back from

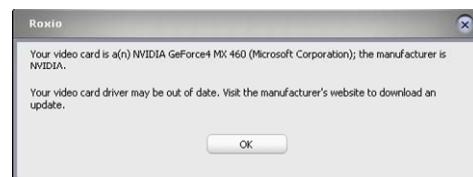
UPnP-compliant living room devices with PC remote control.



In Use

The features appeared to be functional if slightly slow on my 1.2 Athlon with 512 meg ram. When capturing from my camcorder it seemed initially to take absolutely forever to open up the Roxio Media Import programme or to capture anything at all even leaving it for some hours with the programme apparently ready for use. It could operate the control buttons moving the tape backwards and forwards but nothing else. My theory as to the cause is this roll-back feature which watches the computer's media so that the media that is playing on the computer so that hitting capture effectively rolls the recording back to the beginning. This proved to be correct. A programme that was placed in the system tray by the Roxio installation called Media Manager Services had been enabled to watch the "My Pictures" and "My Videos" folders as I thought I might make use of this later. When I stopped this feature, resulting in an X being placed through the icon, the whole programme seemed to work in every respect at a speed expected for a computer of this age.

RAM usage appeared to be between 625 Meg and 1.4 Gig depending on how many programmes were running clearly using cache to try and get this to work so one couldn't expect miracles. The end result of my first video capture was very jerky but there had been a message flashed up at my graphics driver was out of date. I had actually used the



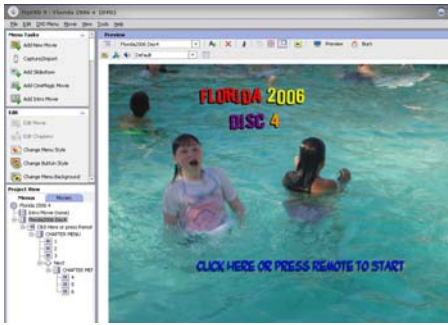
Microsoft driver that came up automatically on my recent reinstall rather than the official driver. Unfortunately using the latest drivers from NVIDIA the "ForceWare" causes severe constant restarting of my computer (doubtless due to a BSOD) and I luckily had a backup NVIDIA driver of 2002 which corrected the choppiness resulting in a smooth clear rendition on DVD.

The design section in my DVD appeared much more user-friendly with more pleasant default background music and an excellent Project Video staggered menu as below.

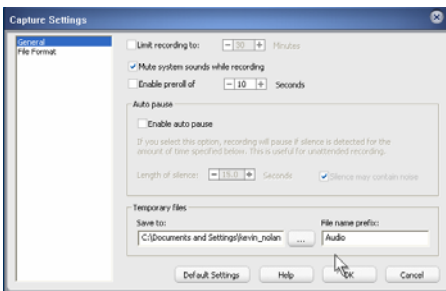
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The disc copying functioned after the same slightly slow opening up, but once running copying speed was absolutely fine.



Drag to disc (normally used with rewritable media) was also perfectly functional but crashed when I dragged my documents and Christopher's documents over though not Margaret's or Rebecca's. This crash seemed to be associated with dragging over mp3 files. Obviously there is a limit to what can be dragged over as I have only reached the stage of double layered DVD writing, though if ever I ended up buying Blu-ray disc player (now the best part of £500 for the disk drive), it would be quite



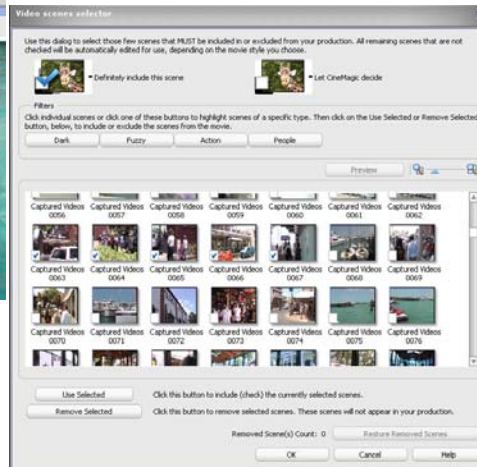
useful to drag important huge chunks of data from the computer onto this. Remember that the Drag-to-disc this produces is not compatible with the rival Nero and it's InCD programme. It worked correctly on a previous version of Drag-to-Disc on another machine however. Some JPG files, it claimed, would not to come over with full integrity warning the user about this with an error message, however this was a false alarm as they copied perfectly.

Audio seemed pretty well sorted out with the pre-roll possible and muting of computer generated interrupting sounds. It has the ability to save captured media to any level of quality or type.

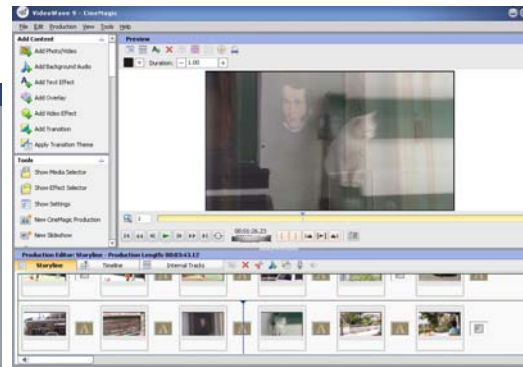
I thought I would challenge the programme with a couple of this although certain female artists appear determined they will never be converted to MP3s. Having legitimately bought the CD I object to this in the extreme and have been trying to get these tracks onto my daughter's Rfo. Even downloading and paying again for the tracks from Napster results in a message and inability to play the track. This all worked out very well and even the tracks showing as data could be recorded with Roxio's Audio Capture

and successfully transferred to be perfectly playable.

Serious video editing comes in the form of VideoWave, but just for fun I thought I



would try the programme CineMagic that sounds like a ride at Disney. I used the imported last tape of our Florida holiday



random selection of scenes and matched them to the music with various degrees of emphasis and tampering to create a pop video like effect which was really quite entertaining and amusing especially from my daughter. A track from the above female vocalist featured as the accompaniment. This integrated with and opened

VideoWave to finely polish the scenes and transitions that had been randomly allocated.

Quite ghostly transitions are sometimes achieved such as that on a tour of Ernest Hemingway's house where several descendants of his cats still survive and a cat image is faded in after a scene looking at a portrait

Video editing can readily be achieved pretty well similar to the more expensive packages with the ability to shorten scenes detected by the program with Video Trimmer and mix the following extra tracks visible in the Timeline view:

Native Audio. The Native Audio track contains any audio that is part of a video clip that you have added to the Video track.

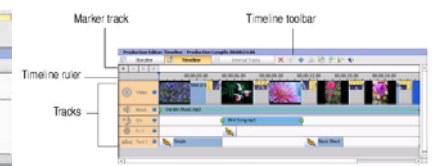
Music. The Music track contains any audio added to the production or item as background audio.

Narration. The Narration track contains any narration you have recorded into your production or item.

Sfx. The Sfx (Sound Effects) track contains any audio files you have added to your production or item as sound effects.

Fx. The Fx (Effects) track contains any video effects you have added to your production or item.

Text. The Text track contains any text you have added to your production or internal tracks.



Overlay. The Overlay track contains any overlay effects, photos, or video clips you have added as overlays to your production or internal tracks. These are video mixing tracks.

It was possible certainly to add narration without losing the other sounds but I didn't really have much time to play with sound and video effects.

Conclusions

Easy Media Creator Suite 9 with its many and varied copying, organising, video editing and DVD authoring is a cracker of a program. When you add to this features such as the backing up the PC either selectively or the whole lot, this is really a very good value programme. Don't be put off by the impression that it's a 'jack of all trades and master of none' program. The individual elements and applications work well together or can be used separately and individually. As almost all of the features have massively improved since version 7.5 (my previous version — I skipped version 8), I give it a hearty recommendation and with a current price of only £36.95 from Amazon.co.uk, it is truly amazing value for money!

CanonScan 8600F Flatbed Photographic Scanner

Reviewed by Tony Hawes

Having seen this new scanner in action at the November meeting when we put it through its paces to see how well it coped with all we could throw at it, to do a review is rather superfluous other than for me to say its definitely one of the most versatile and easy to use photographic scanners I've yet tested.

As a reminder of what I said during my demo here is Canon's description of its capabilities.

Description

For professional results when time is precious, the CanonScan 8600F delivers. With ultra high-speed previews and FARE Level 3 saving hours of manual retouching, you'll be free to get on with creating.

Features

- 4800 x 9600dpi, 48 bit colour depth
- FAU (Film Adapter Unit) — 12 x 35mm film strip and 4 x 35mm slides
- FARE (Film Automatic Retouching and Enhancement) Level 3 dust/scratch removal for film
- Super-fast scan engine
- Comprehensive software package with SilverFast SE
- USB 2.0 Hi-Speed
- 7 EZ buttons
- Fast Multi-photo mode

Performance scanning for the advanced user.

Professional quality. With a 4800 x 9600 dpi CCD sensor capturing incredible detail, the CanonScan 8600F delivers superb, crisp images suitable for enlargement and high-resolution printing. The 48-bit colour depth ensures your scans have exceptionally accurate colour reproduction.

Film scanning

The CanonScan 8600F is equipped with a versatile built-in film adapter unit (FAU), allowing you to scan 12 x 35mm negatives in a single operation. It can also take up to 4 mounted slides and 120 format film.

Automatic retouching. Using infrared scanning detection, FARE Level 3 technology automatically restores scratched, damaged or faded film to its former glory, saving hours of manual retouching. It also reduces graininess resulting from high speed film, and includes backlight compensation. QARE Level 3 performs the same functions for photo prints.

Ultra-fast scans. The CanonScan 8600F's super fast scan engine optimises your productivity, providing previews in just 4 seconds. Even when scanning at maximum resolution, workflow remains



Looking down with the cover closed

efficient as the USB 2.0 Hi-Speed connection ensures speedy data transfer.

Powerful software. The CanonScan 8600F is bundled with a suite of powerful software tools that deliver outstanding functionality, performance and productivity. LaserSoft's SilverFast SE gives you professional level control over the scan process, reducing the requirement for post scan image processing. Also included are the award winning Adobe PhotoShop Elements, for powerful image processing, and ScanSoft OmniPage SE for Optical Character

Recognition. Canon's ScanGear and CanonScan Toolbox have been upgraded to include better than ever image quality and functionality.

EZ buttons. Offering flexibility and saving you time, seven scan buttons provide one-touch operation of common scan tasks. Customise these to perform the functions you use most: copying, scanning, PDF file creation, or sending to your e-mail program. Four of the buttons are dedicated to scanning straight to PDF, including scanning in colour or mono.

(Continued on page 12)

(Continued from page 11)

Scan Multi-photos. The CanonScan 8600F further saves time with Canon's fast Multi-Photo mode, which allows you to scan up to 10 separate images in a single pass, then work on each one separately. Multi-Photo automatically identifies, crops and straightens multiple images, even recognizing the type of original you use (film or photo).

Conclusions

What did I like most? The ability to scan documents, brochures, magazine articles and similar as PDF files. As my usual PDF creation application is Adobe's Acrobat, I was very surprised at how well it did this. User input is minimal. Place the original document face down on the platen, select the EZ PDF button, colour button for colour PDFs, or Black and White (Greyscale) buttons if you want it in that format and off it goes and scans. When the first page has been scanned you're asked whether you want to scan further pages etc. When you've finished, the PDF is created, saved to the location you select, given a file name like 0001.pdf and that's it. Give it a better and recognisable file name as you wish, but retaining the .pdf extension — it's remarkably simple and easy.

Scanning your photos or transparencies is just as easy and as an SE version of OmniPage Pro is bundled this makes OCR scanning and recognition painless and easy.

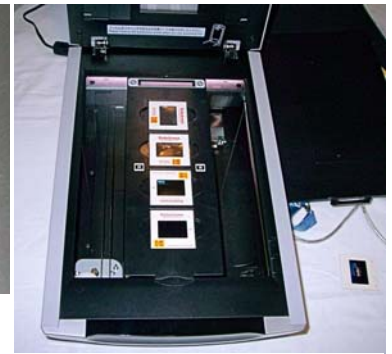
With its bundled software which includes Adobe Photoshop Elements 4.0, SilverFast SE, OmniPage Pro SE and first-rate optical performance, this scanner is in my opinion superb value for money.

Pricing and Availability

£137 from Amazon.co.uk



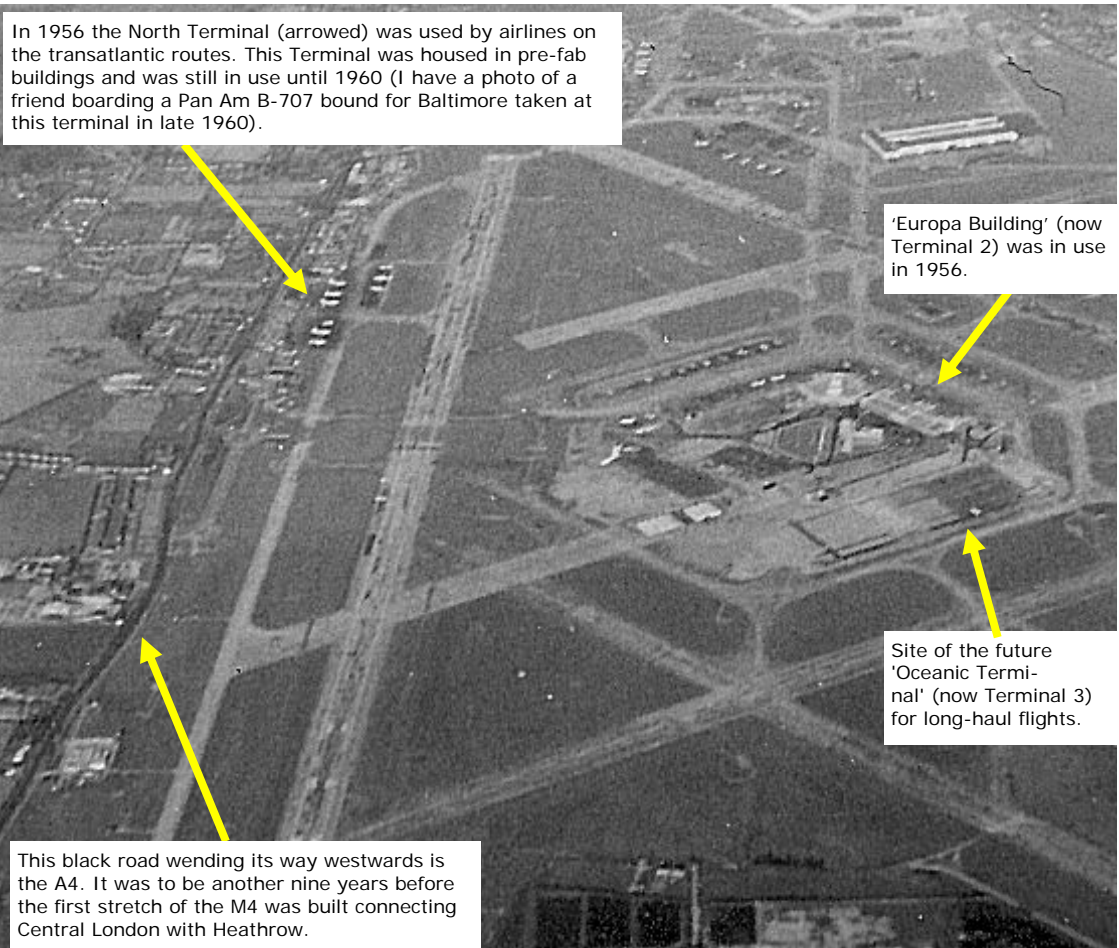
The EZ One-touch buttons. PDF scan choices left. Colour, black & white, e-mail. Main scan buttons right.



Set up & ready to scan 35mm transparencies



As an example of how well the CanonScan 8600F scanned a relatively poor original, have a look at the over 50-year old photo of London Heathrow (above), taken by me in June 1956 from 10,000 ft looking east. Note the then North Terminal (arrowed) and compare with the scanned and improved image below. The scanned image was enhanced using Corel Paint Shop Pro Photo X1.



In 1956 the North Terminal (arrowed) was used by airlines on the transatlantic routes. This Terminal was housed in pre-fab buildings and was still in use until 1960 (I have a photo of a friend boarding a Pan Am B-707 bound for Baltimore taken at this terminal in late 1960).

'Europa Building' (now Terminal 2) was in use in 1956.

Site of the future 'Oceanic Terminal' (now Terminal 3) for long-haul flights.

This black road wending its way westwards is the A4. It was to be another nine years before the first stretch of the M4 was built connecting Central London with Heathrow.

Microsoft Flight Simulator X

Piloted by Tony Hawes

Back in the summer we had a demonstration at our monthly meeting of the trial version of Microsoft Flight Simulator X. Why X I wonder? I assume because this is the tenth version of the simulator so X was the logical choice and followed the precedents of programs like Corel Paint Show X and others, that having reached their tenth anniversary dispensed with the number ten and substituted the roman numeral X. Either way Microsoft's Flight Simulator has been around for nearly 25-years and I've been flying it since 1987 and my first PC, an Amstrad PC1640 with 20Mb HDD!

When FS 2004 "A Century of Flight" was released in 2003 it was an evolutionary release, based very much on its predecessor FS 2002. FSX on the other hand is a revolutionary "new" release, with a host of new features and in most respects is a vastly improved product

Standard or Deluxe Edition

Flight Simulator X comes in two editions, Standard and Deluxe.

Standard Edition

- 2 DVDs (DVD Drive required)
- 18 airplanes
- 40 high-detail airports (16 new to Flight Simulator)
- 28 high-detail cities
- 30+ structured missions

Deluxe Edition

- 2 DVDs (DVD Drive required)
- 24 airplanes
- 45 high-detail airports (21 new to Flight Simulator)
- 38 high-detail cities
- 50+ structured missions
- Glass panel (G1000) cockpit
- Tower controller
- Software Development Kit (SDK) included on the DVDs

What's New

New features in Flight Simulator X include:

- Improved graphics including enhanced texture resolution, new Earth model facilitating polar flights, true road data, region-specific textures, 3D animals, star constellations, etc. Also, the scenery textures now line up with the automatically generated (Autogen) buildings. Maximum rendering-engine-supported scenery resolution of 7cm/pixel (not available with default scenery).
- Improved default airport functionality—appropriate dynamic vehicles, jetways to meet the opening doors now



featured by default where they exist in reality.

- The built-in GPS has been upgraded to the Garmin G1000 integrated glass cockpit—featured in select aircraft in the Deluxe version only.
- Improved ATC featuring certain non-Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) procedures where appropriate (for example, altimeter/QNH scale in European (millibar) units) and numerous minor updates such as an improved progressive-taxi feature.
- Improved and new default aircraft including, for example, an Airbus A321.
- Improved weather system, including better visibility modelling.
- Revamped multiplayer functionality featuring Shared Skies, a feature allowing multiple users to share the same cockpit.
- Tower Controller, a feature in the Deluxe version allowing users to simulate local control at many airports worldwide (multiplayer only).
- Revamped sound system with support for 5.1 surround sound.
- Dozens of missions ship with the product, and a mission level editor is expected to be released on-line shortly after release of the main product.
- Most of the vintage aircraft that were a key theme in the previous version have been dropped, with the notable exception of the DC-3, which is even featured in one of the missions. On the other hand, mouse-as-yoke, a feature that allows the mouse to be used in steering the aircraft, is re-introduced, after having been absent for the last two versions. This will make FSX more accessible, for instance, to many users with motor disabilities.
- The maximum altitude in the game has been increased to 100,000,000 feet, compared with the 99,999 feet in FS2004.

Aircraft

- Airbus A321

- Air Creation SL450 Ultra light
- Bell 206B JetRanger III
- Boeing 737-800 NG
- Boeing 747-400
- Bombardier CRJ 700
- Bombardier Learjet 45
- Cessna 208B Grand Caravan
- Cessna 172 Skyhawk SP
- de Havilland Canada DHC-2 Beaver Floatplane
- DG 808S 18 Meter Sailplane
- Douglas DC-3
- Extra 300S Aerobatic plane
- Grumman G-21A Goose Amphibian
- Maule M7-260C Super Rocket
- Mooney Bravo
- Piper J-3 Cub
- Beechcraft Baron 58
- Beechcraft King Air 350
- Robinson R22 Beta II

The absence of many of the vintage aircraft that shipped with FS2004 or FS2002 for that matter is regretted and there doesn't seem any simple way of importing or copying them across from FS2004 into FSX, which is a pity. An omission is the absence of a big turboprop. These are still widely used at some of the new and improved airports, especially in the Caribbean. Oddly the new Airbus A321 is so similar in size, weight and performance to the included Boeing 737-800NG that you wonder why the A321 has been included too, but then that's one of Microsoft's idiosyncrasies.

Installation

Unlike FS 2004 which came on four CDs, FSX comes on two DVDs with a full install occupying over14GB of hard disk space! — depending on the speed of your computer a full install can take anything between 30-50 minutes. Following the trend with their hi-end business products like Office etc. it is now mandatory to activate the product for full functionality.



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As is the norm with programs from Microsoft nowadays, apart from a mini Quick Reference leaflet and a 22-page “Insider Information” getting started booklet, the main instruction manual “The Learning Centre” is only accessible once the program is installed and running. The entries describing the aircraft are extensive and in addition there is a very comprehensive selection of reference material relevant to using the simulation, which covers basic training, flying the aircraft, navigation and in particular using the new ‘missions’.

In Use

Just as in previous versions, you can still make your own flight choices. Go to Free Flight, select an aircraft, select a location



It's now possible to zoom up to the stratosphere



High-quality graphics

from any one of the 24,000 airports and airfields built-in to the program and off you go. With this many airfields almost any airport of significance anywhere in the world can be flown to or from. The new high-detail airports show off Microsoft's new “living world” emphasis in FSX. Visit any of these enhanced high quality airports and you'll see passenger access Jetways extending to connect with your arriving airliner and refuelling and luggage trucks meeting your aircraft.

Microsoft's new living world shows other enhancement features. Select “Show Road Traffic” in the scenery selection menu and it's possible to see moving cars and lorries on the roads below your aircraft (Tony's recommendation choose to fly a helicopter alongside a motorway and ‘chase’ the cars — good fun! And for what it's worth when flying in the UK traffic drives on the left whilst in mainland Europe and in the USA traffic drives on the right). Similarly when flying low over the water you can buzz

pleasure craft, even a cruise ship! When flying over Africa Microsoft have included herds of grazing elephants, supposedly, because I've yet to catch sight of any!

Enhanced Scenery

Other aspects of scenery Artificial Intelligence (AI) have been considerably enhanced, including as mentioned above, airport vehicles, other specific scenery locations have had the scenery enhanced and include: the pyramids outside Cairo; the Eiffel Tower in Paris; Australia's Uluru (Ayers Rock); Japan's Mount Fuji; the Himalayas; Beijing's Forbidden City; in London you'll find Parliament, Big Ben and the London Eye; Kenmore Air Harbour in Seattle; Florida's Cape Canaveral Space Shuttle launch facility; an oil platform off



Missions. Pushpins show the location of the various missions. Hover over the pin and the mission is described



Tower Bridge with false Landmass—since rectified

the Texas coast; Honolulu city in Hawaii, San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge; Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon. There's many more to add to the enjoyment!

FSX De Luxe Enhanced Airports

The deluxe version of FSX has far superior enhanced airports, these include: Amsterdam, Anchorage, Auckland, Beijing, Boston, Chicago, Copenhagen, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Frankfurt, Helsinki, Hong Kong, Kitty Hawk, Las Vegas, London Heathrow, Los Angeles, Madrid Barajas, Mexico City, Miami, Minneapolis, Tokyo, New York JFK, Oshkosh, Oslo Gardermoen, Paris Charles de Gaulle, Phoenix Sky Harbour, Rio, Rome Fiumicino, Salt Lake City, Seattle, Seoul, St. Louis, St. Maarten (Netherlands Antilles), Stockholm, Sydney, Taipei, Toronto, Vancouver and Washington DC. These enhancements add considerable detail and allow for very realistic arrivals and departures.

Missions

Choose a Mission for a more structured experience. Missions include briefings, and you're evaluated on your performance. Succeed, and you'll earn rewards. Start with tutorial missions, then work your way through the missions that appeal to you. Fancy Air Racing? Then try to beat the record flying a Red Bull race course (it's hard!) Take a sightseeing flight over Hawaii (very nice) Fly a re-supply mission to climbers in the mountains of Alaska. Try landing your Piper Cub on a truck racing down a runway at Seattle. Or fly a realistic airline flight, there are many to choose from and if you really want to test your skills and nerve try the more hairy missions.



Loopy Larry lands on moving trucks!



The Trike and London's Gherkin & NatWest Tower

Sneaky!

One mission I particularly like is the flight over the Austrian Alps in a single-engined plane, all is fine, you're enjoying the ride and admiring the scenery as you come over a mountain ridge when suddenly your engine cuts out — cunning Microsoft have put a sting into the tail of this mission as you're then faced with having to make a gliding ‘dead-stick’ (engineless) landing at the airport nestling in the valley ahead of you. There is only one way and it's down. With high valley walls on each side it's necessary to keep your air-speed up as you glide downwards, contriving to put yourself into a position where you can land from this approach, remembering you've no engine power so you're losing height all the time and there's no second chance — the aim is to manoeuvre yourself to arrive over the runway threshold with enough speed to make a successful landing — it can be done, but if you are to successfully survive this mis-

(Continued on page 15)

(Continued from page 14)

sion it needs cool and quick thinking. Sounds hairy but I found it rather fun!

Weather

With the addition of the advanced DG 808S 18 Meter Sailplane, so realistic the long wings droop when on the ground and curve upwards when airborne as they aerodynamically support the weight of the fuselage, it's great to see that Microsoft have added more realistic thermals, so essential for sailplane/glider flight.

Set the wind to blow at right angles to a ridge of hills/mountains and as the wind hits the ridge you'll find the relevant up-



DG 808S sailplane awaiting its tow with wings drooping on the ground at Farnborough. TAG Aviation's new hangars in the background.

draft, all that's necessary is to fly along the ridge, you'll hit the updraft and the Variometer will show you going up, just as in real life, which is very neat. Adjust the settings menu and a 'coiled spring' graphic is superimposed over the scenery showing the location of the various thermals and updrafts as they rise from the ground.

And whilst we are on the subject of the DG 808S sailplane. Try starting it on the ground, use the keyboard shortcut Ctrl-Shift-Y and you'll find yourself attached to a Maule M7 tow plane — change to spot plane mode with your view positioned behind and looking forward. You'll see the tow plane take up the tow rope slack as it accelerates down the runway whilst you as sailplane pilot keep the wings level and ensure you leave the ground before the tow plane, all the while maintaining a shallow angle of attack above the tow. The whole thing is mind-bogglingly realistic.

Scenery Again

Although flight sim purists reckon that basic scenery is all you need when flying, real-world pilots will be concentrating on their instruments and the runway ahead, or listening to and interpreting instructions from air traffic control. However the included high-class and detailed scenery makes for a much more 'immersive' simulation and this feature will be appreciated when you fly one of the low performance aircraft that spend much of their airborne time at relatively low altitudes which is where the enhanced scenery comes into its own.

Another way to explore and understand this scenery is search for familiar holiday destinations, you'll probably be surprised at

how good it is. In Austria familiar mountains and landmarks look real and are located where they are in reality. Recreating a recent trip to the south of France the coast with it's many bays and inlets was easy to navigate.

Another example relates to Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Whilst in the RAF I flew low over the top of this 19,000ft high dormant volcano taking photos looking down into the crater. FSX has Kilimanjaro in all its glory and it's possible to recreate a similar flight, which is quite remarkable. Also for the first time, in this version Microsoft have depicted the Victoria Falls on the border of Zambia and



Kilimanjaro's peak silhouetted against the African sunrise



Ctrl+Shift+Y attaches you with a tow-rope to the Maule M7 tow plane which then accelerates down the runway towing you airborne.



Airborne before and behind the tow plane and the wings curve upwards showing the aerodynamic load.

Zimbabwe in some detail complete with animated water flowing over the falls into the Zambezi gorge, which is recognisably good for an ex-Central Africa hand like me.

Oddies

When Microsoft released FS2004 in 2003 one immediate problem was that they'd played around with the bridges, so that suspension bridges that were so elegant in FS2002 had been replaced by horrible cantilever structures. It took a year and a half for Microsoft to issue a patch to restore these bridges to what they really look like. So it was a surprise to find that when flying FSX for the first time over the river Thames there were big landmass-bridges rising out of the river connecting both banks (see Tower Bridge screen-grab on page 14), which was so weird and so reminiscent of the bridge problem of the FS 2004 version.

Happily it was fixed quickly with a patch, but this in turn added its own problem, Somerset House which used to sit so elegantly on the embankment north of Waterloo bridge has been replaced by a sandy beach — one just can't win!

Sloppy Proof-reading

One final nit-picking criticism I have is with the multitude of careless spelling mistakes that show when accessing Learning Centre documents. For example the table listing the locations of enhanced scenery spells British Parliament, "Parliment"; degrees on one occasion is spelt "degress", Beijing Airport is spelt "aiport" and so on. The company concerned is Microsoft and their Word program has a more than adequate spell checker which if used would

have immediately highlighted these mistakes. I'm astonished that for a company like Microsoft with a reputation to uphold, the document wasn't proof-read or sub-edited before publication.

Conclusions

Forgive it its relatively minor faults and FSX is in many ways a worthwhile if evolutionary improvement over the earlier version. The scenery and graphics are splendid and promise even more when DirectX 10 arrives (rumoured to be launched when the consumer versions of Vista are released in late January 2007).

The structured missions are excellent, the Deluxe version comes with 51 missions which will keep me busy for quite a while, some of the flights can last for hours! The hard ones are really quite hard, but there is a nice sense of achievement if you do manage to complete it in the time allowed.

Downside it that the attractive veteran aircraft in FS2004 have been removed, but already both commercial and 'freeware' designers are hard at work and free FSX compatible aircraft are already available for download from sites like Avsim.com and others.

Pricing and Availability

Microsoft Flight Simulator X Deluxe is available from Amazon.co.uk for £43 inc VAT and delivery whilst the less well featured Standard version costs £37.

Given that there is only £6 difference between the two, I strongly recommend you opt for the Deluxe edition — you won't be sorry.

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