

Tips & Tricks

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Warm Up To Penguins

Picture-Perfect Editing With GIMP



Once you get past its rather unorthodox moniker, GIMP (GNU Image Manipulation Program) is an extremely powerful tool that, for most tasks, sits in the same league as Adobe's popular image editor. Still, it was with some trepidation that we approached this column, because GIMP has also earned a reputation for being distinctly user-unfriendly.

You'll need to install GIMP if, for some reason, it's not included with your distro. GIMP is preinstalled as part of the base install on a Fedora 7 machine, so you'd have had to explicitly choose not to include it in a new installation. The same is true for most other modern distributions. If you happen to have left it out, however, it's as close as a "yum install gimp" away (or "aptget" for you Debian-based folks).

With GIMP installed, you'll find it in the Graphics submenu of the Applications pull-down menu. After it starts with a rather nice splash screen, you'll find yourself looking at an interface remarkably similar to Photo-shop's. And for simple tasks, GIMP won't throw many curves at a seasoned Photoshop pro.

■ The Mickey Mouse Crop

For example, let's look at a couple of common tasks you might use Photoshop to complete. In the first example, we took a large EPS file with distinct quadrants (think Andy Warhol's "Mickey Mouse") and quartered it according to its quadrants. But before we could do this, we needed GIMP to open the EPS file.



GIMP is installed by default in Fedora 7.

Like Photoshop, GIMP converts the EPS file to a bitmap and asks what resolution the converted bitmap should be. We specified a resolution of 300dpi, and GIMP converted the EPS without a hiccup.

Using our example, let's take one of the "Mickey Mouse" quadrants and use the rectangular selection tool to isolate the quadrant by cropping it. If you've had any experience with an image editor, even something as basic as Paint, the rectangular selection tool should be easy to find in the GIMP toolbar. (And if you're still stuck, it's in the upper-left corner of the toolbar.) Each tool's properties appear below the tool icons, unless you've closed it. After selecting the quadrant, we found the Crop command under the Image pull-down menu GIMP, just as with Photoshop.

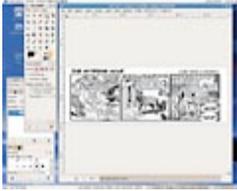
Now that we had a rough crop, we wanted to crop right to the edges. First we used the Fuzzy Select tool to select some white space outside the image proper. Photoshop veterans will know this as the Magic Wand tool; it also looks like a magic wand icon on GIMP's toolbar and works the same way Photoshop's Magic Wand tool does. Once we used Fuzzy Select to select the white space around the image, we clicked Select and Invert before cropping the image. Again, experiencing a little open-source Photoshop déjà vu is normal.

To go one step further, let's take our cropped image and prepare it for the Web. A 300dpi image of any appreciable size will be enormous for Web use, so we scaled our cropped image down to a more modest size. Although we chose to shrink our image to a width of 800 pixels, it's more important to preserve the image's aspect ratio. (This is enabled by default.) To adjust the image,

we clicked Image and Scale Image. In the Scale Image dialog box, we typed **800** in the width field and clicked Scale.

■ A Second Test For Second Life

Another exercise to test GIMP's capabilities is creating a transparent texture for Second Life. To keep things simple, we simply took the image we just cropped and made part of it transparent. To do this in Photo-shop, you'd use the Magic Wand tool to grab the white space around the image, making sure that you have a transparent layer beneath it. Then, delete all the white space to leave only the image floating in empty space.



GIMP's Fuzzy Select tool works just like Photoshop's Magic Wand.

As we've shown, it's easy to replicate these exact steps in GIMP. But at this point, the road forks. Second Life's site offers a nice, downloadable script for Photoshop that automatically takes the transparent areas and turns them into an alpha channel. In Photoshop, you'd create the transparency by saving the image as a 32-bit image with 8 bits each for red, blue, and green, leaving the remaining 8 bits for the alpha, or transparency level.

But GIMP is unable to read a saved Photoshop action script, and you can't save ones you make yourself. GIMP does have a scripting facility (you can even script in Python), but you can't record a series of steps and replay it the way you can in Photoshop.

Without being able to automate the scripts, we examined the steps of the Photoshop script and attempted to replicate them in GIMP. The first thing the Photoshop script does is create a new layer with a transparent background. That's easy enough to do in GIMP.

Photoshop then does a Merge Visible With Duplicate, followed by setting the selection to the transparency channel, duplicating the selection to a new channel, and then deselecting everything. The end result is a new alpha channel that's saved as a TGA and uploaded to

Second Life.

We tried to duplicate these steps in GIMP. Unfortunately, GIMP doesn't seem to combine a Merge Visible with Duplicate. You could manually do it by merging all the layers and then making a duplicate, assuming you first saved a copy so you don't lose all your layers. Then, you would select the transparency area using the Fuzzy Select tool and save the selection to a new channel.

But in the process of doing this, we discovered something: All of this is unnecessary with GIMP. Are you ready for the highly complex procedure? As soon as you create a layer with a transparent layer fill, GIMP automatically adds an alpha channel with the transparent sections set as transparent in that channel. All you have to do is save the image as a TGA file, and it will be set for uploading.

Even though this particular task is easier to do in GIMP than Photoshop, it still doesn't mitigate the lack of action scripts. This is one of GIMP's most glaring flaws. Otherwise, many of the differences we found between GIMP and Photoshop were just that: differences. Like creating a transparency, GIMP's approach isn't necessarily worse; you just have to learn a new trick. More serious Photoshop users could find serious faults with GIMP, but for the average user, GIMP is a suitable image-editing alternative and free, to boot.

Better yet, you don't even have to take the leap over to Linux to try it. GIMP is available for Windows, so it's easy for you to make head-to-head comparisons between GIMP and Photoshop. If it turns out that GIMP does everything you need, then you're all set. If not, you're not out a huge investment, are you? And if you're just diving into image editing, you might as well give GIMP a try. ■

by James Turner

Infinite Loop: This Is Your Grandma's Broadband

When it comes to raw, unbridled throughput, no other private residence in the

world can touch 75-year-old Swede Sibritt Löthberg's 40Gbps fiber connection. Sibritt's son Peter, a Cisco employee, hooked the septuagenarian up to demonstrate fiber's superiority to copper. Thanks to Peter's efforts, Sibritt can now email pictures of her cat really, *really* fast.

www.thelocal.se/7869/20070712

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