

# Ingenious inexpensive graphics apps...but for Windows only

Imaging Applications  
**Xara X**  
**Ulead PhotoImpact 6**

by Kirby Ferguson

Mac users have plenty of professional-level graphics applications to choose from, but more economical options have pretty much gone the way of the dodo. On the other hand, Windows users have superb mid-end applications like *Xara X* (no relation to Apple's OS X, unfortunately) and *Ulead PhotoImpact 6*. Both programs

Raster-like effects coupled with a very high zoom ratio means you can create **PHOTO-REALISTIC IMAGES** entirely within Xara.



boast modest prices, but pack in enough power to merit consideration from professional users who don't need all the features of pricier high-end programs.

## OUT FROM THE SHADOW OF CORELDRAW

I know we're just talking about software here, but one can't help but be struck with a little melancholy when using *Xara X*—the program is so good, it really should be one of the dominant players in the Windows graphics market. Ahead of its time when it debuted as *Xara Studio*, the program had cutting edge features like graduated transparency, anti-aliasing and integrated bitmap abilities. Unfortunately, *Xara Studio* was promptly snapped up by a nervous Corel, where the program lived in the shadow of *CorelDraw*. Ownership of *Xara* has recently reverted to its epony-

# Live Text!

*Xara* doesn't put any limits on what **EFFECTS** you can combine. Here, I've placed a bevel, drop shadow and gradient on live type.

mous developer, and, remarkably, the program is still compelling enough to earn a bigger share of the marketplace, despite other programs having nipped away at its feature advantages.

Chief among *Xara's* strengths is performance—this is simply the fastest drawing program on the planet. And it maintains this speed even when performing advanced features like transparency, brush effects, shadows and feathering. *Illustrator 9*, for instance, turns to molasses when pulling these kinds of stunts. *Xara's* ability to combine effects and apply them to anything is unparalleled. For example, you



can use transparency, a gradient fill, beveling, a drop shadow and a blend on *live* type (it's not pretty, but you can do it). Nothing else lets you create so quickly, with so few inhibitions.

Just as impressive as *Xara's* performance is its usability. Instead of the typical army of palettes, dialogue boxes and pull-down menus that populate most graphics programs, *Xara* relies on a context-sensitive tool bar and contextual menus. Unlike *CorelDraw* or *Canvas*, *Xara* doesn't have live redraw on the canvas, but it does give constant visual feedback as you create. For instance, as you select options for a custom brush effect, the effect updates in the workspace as you select specs.

Perhaps to distinguish itself from *CorelDraw*, *Xara 2* reoriented itself for Web graphics output. In addition to excellent Web export features, the program can now efficiently produce animations, banners and navigation bars. A surprisingly high-end feature allows *Xara* to integrate with *Dreamweaver*, launching native *Xara* source files from within *Dreamweaver*. But despite the nice Web-specific features, *Xara* is every inch a vector program. If you need pixel-level control, you'll want a bitmap editor, such as *PhotoImpact* or its competitor, *Jasc Paint Shop Pro*.

*Xara's* flaws are few. Most importantly, the program's text handling is so basic (no text box linking or columns or even paragraph spacing) it's only suitable for the most modest of publishing tasks. While I admire *Xara's* lack of bloat, beefed-up type tools seem like a sensible addition. As well, *Xara's* various galleries for clipart, fills and colors look positively ancient, with tiny, awkward scroll bars. The program forgoes a printed manual in favour of a CD full of movie demos. This is a pleasant way to be introduced to the program, but a clumsy way to investigate specific issues. And users who need to exchange files with established professional apps like *Adobe Illustrator* should steer clear of *Xara*—AI importing is very unreliable.

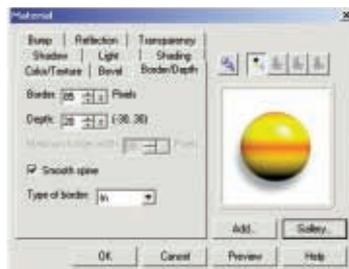
*Xara* is one of those rare programs that combines remarkable technology with a

superior user interface. It's style and substance: fast, stable, easy-to-use, powerful, unique. If you're in the market for lean, mean graphics application, *Xara* should top your shopping list. And if you're using a competing program, you should still check out *Xara* just because it's so cool.

Now where's the Mac version? Carbonized, please...

#### A LOT OF BITMAP BANG FOR THE BUCK

Whereas *Xara* is a vector app with good bitmap abilities, *Ulead PhotoImpact 6* is a raster program with well-integrated vector features. In addition to its vector tools, *PhotoImpact* packs in just about every raster feature possible: extensive painting tools, an image sprayer, layers, masks, loads of effects, even some batch processing. *PhotoImpact* also allows you to set up entire Web pages, complete with HTML text. And as if *PhotoImpact* didn't do enough on its own, Ulead throws in solid



**PhotoImpact has impressive 3D EFFECTS typically found only in rendering applications.**

GIF animation and image cataloguing applications. No doubt about it, *PhotoImpact* gives you a whole lotta bang for the buck.

What's most immediately striking about *PhotoImpact* is the sheer number of cool, fun special effects it puts at your disposal. For instance, you can apply advanced 3D effects like bump maps and multiple light sources to vector shapes. But the hub of *PhotoImpact's* special effects power is the EasyPalette, which acts as a store-house for the program's vast collection of effects and art. Templates, shapes, clip art, mask effects, filters, custom brushes—the EasyPalette packs in a lot of good-



## XARA X

### Minimum System Requirements

Windows 95/98/2000/NT4.0  
Intel compatible 486 or better  
Min 12 MB RAM (64MB recommended)  
20 MB available hard disk space  
Screen resolution of 640x480

### Pricing

Single copy US\$149  
Upgrade copy for owners of CorelXARA and Xara Studio US\$69

Xara

Tel: +44 1442 350000

Web: www.xara.com



## ULEAD PHOTOIMPACT 6

### Minimum System Requirements

Intel Pentium or above compatible system  
Microsoft Windows 95/98/NT4.0 SPE (or above) or Windows 2000  
64MB of RAM.  
240 MB of available hard disk space.  
CD-ROM Drive.  
True Color or High Color display and monitor.

### Pricing

Box US\$99.95, download US\$89.95  
Upgrade from PhotoImpact or Photo Express:  
box US\$59.95, download US\$49.95

Ulead Systems

Tel: 800-85-ULEAD

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MACROMEDIA DREAMWEAVER

## WEBSITE DESIGN

For direct clients

## GRAPHIC DESIGN

Ads, posters, logos, brochures, direct mail, magazine layout for direct clients

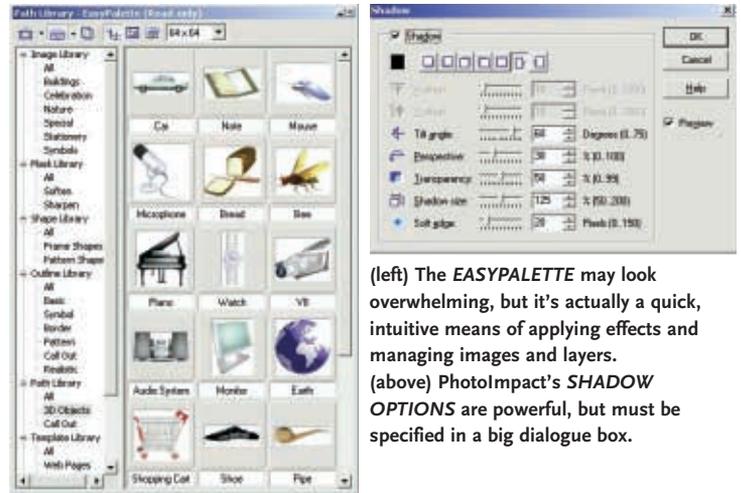
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ies. Overwhelming at first, the palette's graphical approach and Windows Explorer-like layout is easy to come to grips with.

While *PhotoImpact's* interface is logical, relying mostly on a context-sensitive toolbar (similar to *Xara*), it does suffer from sprawl and segmentation—considering how many features are packed in here, this isn't surprising. The HTML layout tools, for instance, are relegated to a pull-down menu and feel rudimentary



(left) The *EASYPALLETTE* may look overwhelming, but it's actually a quick, intuitive means of applying effects and managing images and layers. (above) *PhotoImpact's SHADOW OPTIONS* are powerful, but must be specified in a big dialogue box.

and awkwardly implemented—kind of like miniature applications within the program.

Perhaps as a result of *PhotoImpact's* breadth, some of its features are quirky. The Soft Edges slider, which lets you easily apply feathered edges to an item, didn't produce a smooth fade and somehow even picked up imagery from layers below. Weird. Also, after the feathering is applied, that data around the edges is lost, unlike *Xara*, where you can remove the effect later. Like other programs of this calibre, *PhotoImpact* doesn't do CMYK, so it's not suitable for serious print work.

Users who think they need a more expensive Web graphics app like *FireWorks* or *ImageReady* may be startled at the amount of power they discover in *PhotoImpact*. While it certainly doesn't compete with the high end features of these programs, it does offer most of their functionality. *PhotoImpact* is fun to use, inventive, fast and feature-packed. Just be careful with all those special effects...

### TRY FOR YOURSELF

*Xara* and *PhotoImpact* are clever, powerful and bafflingly inexpensive. If you have to pick one, I'd go with *Xara*, which truly is one of desktop publishing's hidden gems. Really though, *Xara's* vector strengths and *PhotoImpact's* bitmap power make a nice pair—you can't go wrong adding both to your arsenal. (*Paint Shop Pro* is similarly feature-packed and economical, but lacks the originality of *Xara* and *PhotoImpact*.) But don't take my word for it—drop by the *Xara* and Ulead websites to download fully functioning demos and find out for yourself. 🍌