

A little Flash, but otherwise just fizzle

Draw Software
Macromedia FreeHand 10

by Kirby Ferguson

FreeHand 10 is a bummer, man. Seems like just yesterday the program was Macromedia's pride-and-joy and, before that, a top priority at Aldus, second only to *PageMaker*. Locked in the midst of an aggressive upgrade war, *FreeHand* and *Illustrator* leapfrogged each other to greater and greater heights. It was fun to be a vector nerd back then, but those halcyon days are long gone.

In comparison to the ambitious—and many would say over-ambitious—*Illustrator 9*, *FreeHand 9* was tentative and lacking in purpose. *FreeHand* seemed to toss in the towel as a legitimate *Illustrator* competitor, opting instead to cozy-up with its dominant Web animation counterpart, *Flash*. There was once a clear-cut battle to be waged against a formidable opponent, but now *FreeHand* aspires only to rest unobtrusively—yet somehow essentially(?)—within Macromedia's Web-centric line of products.

Unfortunately, *FreeHand 10* doesn't suggest Macromedia has any renewed interest in this product. *FreeHand's* competitive edge is now dull and this upgrade will appeal only to *Flash* enthusiasts or Macromedia devotees with low expectations.

SOME NEW FEATURES...

Changes in *FreeHand 10* are few and far between. Most notably, the upgrade furthers the program's *Flash* integration, donning a more similar interface and including a *Flash Player* preview. The new Symbols feature, with its auto-updates and separate window behaviour, even manages to top *Flash*. The new Navigation Panel is surprisingly nice to use—much simpler than *Flash* and a good means of producing page-based *Flash* files.

If *Flash* is your bread-and-butter, *FreeHand* is the drawing app for you. Unfortunately, *Flash* integration is one of the few areas in which *FreeHand* still truly excels.

FreeHand 10 marks the welcome introduction of master pages, but features like automatic page numbering and column flowing are absent. *FreeHand* has to assert itself as a decent means of handling even medium length documents. The new brush effects won't knock you out on first blush either, defaulting to a pair of meagre, monochrome presets; more brush effects can be found in the Library. They work decently enough and have the advantage of being Symbols-based, but overall seem a token move to maintain some kind of parity with competitors. Contour gradients are handy, making quick work of embossing and beveling effects, but can't compare with *Illustrator* and *Draw's* gradient mesh features. Printable areas allow you to simply marquee an area to send to print.

FreeHand 10's most notable feature may be its OS X support. This is the first major graphics app to offer a Carbon version, but otherwise it's a straight port without any compelling advantages over the



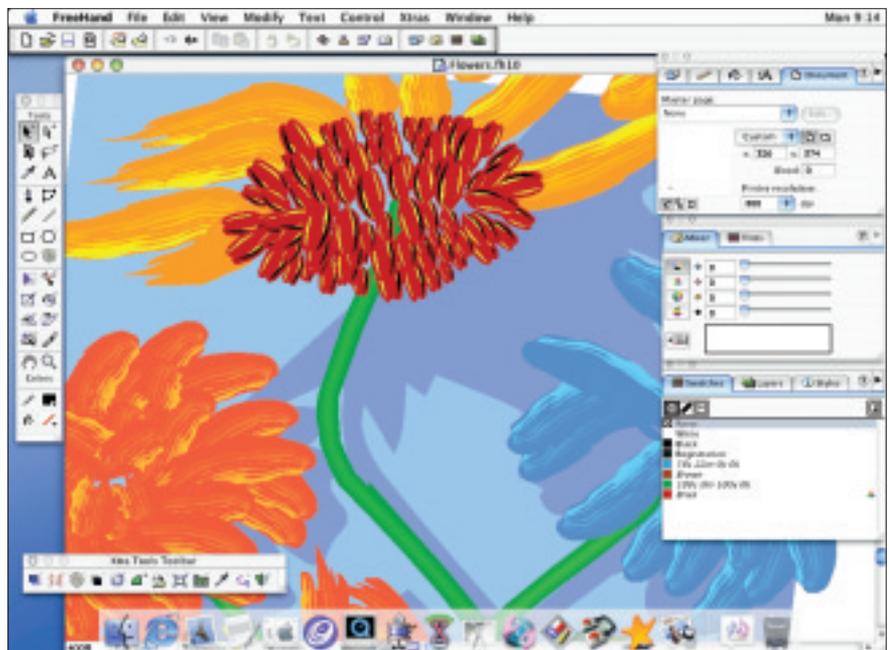
This ancient **OPENING SCREEN** for the Windows version of *FreeHand* simply must go.

Classic version. In fact, under OS X *FreeHand* felt slower and I experienced various tabbed palette quirks. (It seems Apple will need to investigate an alternative to the big, cutesy tabbed palettes.) Gripes aside, I tip my hat to Macromedia for shipping a Carbon app so soon. This jump on the competition could earn *FreeHand* some needed converts.

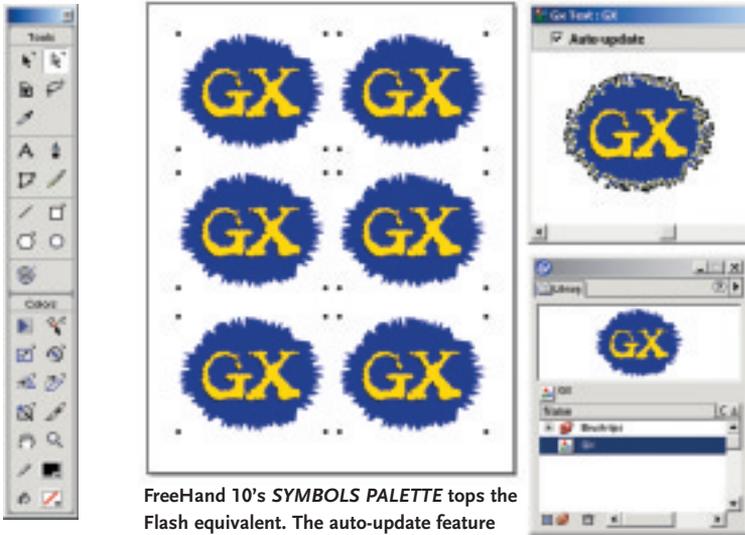
...BUT MOSTLY BUSINESS AS USUAL

The modest tweaks and new features of *FreeHand 10*, however, just don't add up to a lot. Not only does the upgrade not offer any persuasive new capabilities, it does little to address its past shortcomings—most importantly, interface sprawl. The perplexing assortment of Inspectors, Panels and Xtras has yet to be reigned in, and I'm beginning to think it never will be.

(below) Ooooo, a high-end graphics program looking all spiffy and **CARBONIZED**.



Look familiar? But why does FreeHand get more and more FLASH-LIKE, while Flash never really inherits any of FreeHand's superior drawing capabilities.



FreeHand 10's SYMBOLS PALETTE tops the Flash equivalent. The auto-update feature and separate editing window even places this feature ahead of its Flash counterpart.

FreeHand's layers palette is showing its age (remember, it was the first of its kind) and now seems clunky and primitive. As important as new features are, a streamlined interface would make *FreeHand 10* a much more compelling upgrade. The relatively streamlined *FireWorks* suggests Macromedia is capable of reshaping *FreeHand* into a more coherent application, should they be so inclined.

Speaking of *FireWorks*, Macromedia seems intent on forcing *FreeHand* users to shell-out for that program. *FreeHand 10* doesn't add any kind of Web graphics clout, even export previews. If you ever hear boasts of *FreeHand's* Web power, that's actually *Flash* power being referred to. *FreeHand's* bitmap abilities are dismal and eclipsed by all competitors.

A LITTLE BETTER THAN BEFORE... BUT NOT MUCH

None of my complaints undermine what *FreeHand* has been for years: a powerful, reliable drawing application that also doubles as a solid short-document desktop publishing program. In that sense, the program is a good value and many designers happily forsake an *Illustrator/Quark* workflow in favour of it. Because *Illustrator* has always refused to infringe on *InDesign/PageMaker* territory, multi-page features have long remained a *FreeHand* ad-

vantage. *FreeHand* is battle-tested and probably a wiser production choice than *CorelDraw* or *Deneba Canvas*. If you want graphics horsepower and files that won't send your service bureau into a tizzy, this may be the program for you.

Two upgrades have gone by without *FreeHand* making any real strides in terms of power and usability. The program has been clearly left behind by *Illustrator* and, in many ways, *CorelDraw*. In almost all departments, *FreeHand* is trumped by *Illustrator*, which is too bad for *Illustrator* users, too—unchallenged dominance just makes for complacency.

The *FreeHand* faithful, *Flash* users who can't handle that app's weird drawing interface, and Carbon junkies may find *FreeHand 10* a worthy upgrade. And if you (wisely) passed on version 9, the combined features of the past two upgrades will make 10 seem more substantial.

Like the once-mighty *Director*, *FreeHand* now lives in the shadow of *Flash*. Treading water as an upscale drawing counterpart to *Flash* seems like a doomed long-term plan. OS X support is to be commended—*FreeHand* is ready for the future—but if the program continues to receive such uneventful upgrades, the outlook looks bleak. And I can't help but feel this veteran deserves better than to drift off into oblivion. 🍷



MACROMEDIA FREEHAND 10

System Requirements

WINDOWS

Intel Pentium processor
Microsoft Windows 98/NT 4.0/2000/ME
64 MB of available RAM (48 MB+ recommended)
70 MB free hard disk space
Netscape Navigator 4.0 or Internet Explorer 4.0 or later

MACINTOSH

PowerPC processor
Mac OS 8.6, 9.1, or OS X
32 MB of available RAM (64 MB recommended)
70 MB of available hard-disk space

Import/Export File Formats

WINDOWS

Import—EPS, Illustrator 1.1/88/3/4/5.5/6/7, CorelDraw 7/8, Photoshop 2.5/3/4/5, Acrobat PDF 4, FreeHand 5/5.5/7/8/9, DCS 1/2, DXF, RTF, ASCII, TIFF, GIF, JPEG, PNG, Targa, BMP, WMF, EMF
Export—Macromedia Flash (SWF), Generic EPS (RGB and CMYK), Photoshop 5 (PSD), EPS for Photoshop, EPS for QuarkXPress, Illustrator 1.1/88/3/4/5.5/6/7, FreeHand 5/5.5/7/8/9, Acrobat (PDF), DCS 2, RTF, ASCII, TIFF, GIF, JPEG, PNG, Targa, BMP, WMF, EMF

MACINTOSH

Import—EPS, Illustrator 1.1/88/3/4/5.5/6/7, Photoshop 2.5/3/4/5, Acrobat PDF 4, FreeHand 5/5.5/7/8/9, DCS 1/2, DXF, PICT, PICT2, RTF, ASCII, TIFF, GIF, JPEG, PNG, Targa, BMP
Export—Macromedia Flash (SWF), Generic EPS (RGB and CMYK), Photoshop 5 (PSD), EPS for Photoshop, EPS for QuarkXPress, Illustrator 1.1/88/3/4/5.5/6/7, FreeHand 5/5.5/7/8/9, Acrobat (PDF), DCS 2, PICT, PICT2, RTF, ASCII, TIFF, GIF, JPEG, PNG, Targa, BMP

Pricing

Suggested list US\$399

Macromedia

Telephone (415) 252-2000

Web www.macromedia.com