November 4, 1999
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ePicture

SRP: $179 (download), $199 (boxed)

Pros: small footprint, great animated gifs, support for layers and Javascript rollovers

Cons: slow on non-G3 systems, better suited for larger monitors

Headline Studio

SRP: $199

Pros: small footprint, great animated gifs

Cons: unusual interface, lack of support for layers or Javascript rollovers

Joining the ranks of Adobe's Photoshop 5.5, Macromedia's Dreamweaver 2, and a slew of other graphics applications geared towards the web, BeatWare and MetaCreations have released competing GIF animation utilities aimed at the intermediate web designer with a particular focus on banner ad creation. Metacreations' Headline Studio is a robust, full-featured tool armed and ready to create complex web animations while BeatWare's e-Picture offers similar features with the added ability to create Javascript rollover effects and a couple other unique features.

e-Picture uses a familiar, almost Photoshop-like interface combining the usual assortment of toolbars and palette menus. However, those same palette menus take up quite a lot of space, and can overcrowd the screen at times. Additionally, the default view when initially launching e-Picture seems to be set up for a resolution of 1024x768 or higher; at 832x624 or lower the majority of the menus are only partially visible, a downfall for many users with 15" monitors.e-Picture's system requirements are also slightly misleading. While any PowerPC will do, a G3 is really needed to run the application at the speed it was designed for.

According to BeatWare, e-Picture is "...the first professional web graphics program that dramatically simplifies and streamlines the creation of animated
graphics”. All marketing hyperbole aside, e-Picture does make the process of creating animated GIFs a simpler, more user-friendly one. It offers numerous templates in “banner” and “button” sizes. It combines both vector and bit-mapped functionality, effectively giving it the base functionality of Illustrator and Photoshop in one product. It also offers RGB and CMYK support, and can import and export a slew of file formats, including: GIF, animated GIF, JPEG, TIFF, PICT, and others.

Many of the features in e-Picture center around the “Tool Inspector” palette menu. The Tool Inspector is vaguely similar to the Color menu in Photoshop with many enhancements. It houses all stroke and fill options for drawn objects, and can be used to draw with solid or transparent strokes, gradients, or patterns. The Tool Inspector, combined with a convenient “Catalog” menu used for housing custom patterns and gradients, allows easy, on-the-fly editing of text and images.

Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of e-Picture is its support for layers. Aside from some slightly different icons, all the usual layering options are present. A nice complement of effects are also available, including bevel, emboss, and drop shadow, and text and objects that have had effects applied to them are always editable — an undeniably handy feature for those who find themselves frequently changing the wording of the text. These features, combined with both vector and bitmapped-based editing, make e-Picture both a unique and impressive graphics application.

Headline Studio employs MetaCreations’ visually interesting “Meta OS” interface, which puts a heavy load on the processor while sacrificing the familiarity and intuitiveness of the Mac OS. All the window widgets are non-standard, which can lead to some confusion; there doesn’t appear to be any way of collapsing a window; double-clicking the window bar doesn’t work and the normal widget on the right of the title bar simply isn’t there. The desktop isn’t visible in the background, either. Instead, it is inexplicably replaced by a blank, earth-tone pattern.

Questionable interface aside, Headline Studio still produces clean, crisp, web graphics, using a time line-based approach to creating animation. The time line is then coupled with “key points” where properties of text or images are animated. From there, various transitions and 3-D effects can be incorporated into each key point including: speedy text, bouncing objects, “click here” banners, splitting text by word or letter, opening letters, and cycling colors through letters. Much like e-Picture, text is editable even after filters and effects have been applied.

Despite what might seem to be a confusing process, Headline Studio carries a relatively modest learning curve, and there are detailed tutorials included that are both well-written and well-diagrammed. One major detraction, however, is Headline Studios lack of support for layers. Anyone even slightly familiar with Photoshop will notice this omission right away and miss the functionality that it adds.

While both programs are certainly good, they have their share of low-end competition. Gif-Builder, from Yves Piquet, is a bare-bones web animation tool that gets the job done more often than not. It may not have Javascript support or layers, but it’s free. For those needing more power, more options, and more flexibility, e-Picture is a winner. Headline Studio is a capable program, but its lack of Javascript support, layer support, and its decidedly non-Mac interface make it less attractive when better tools are available.

BeatWare and MetaCreations both currently offer heavy rebates on these two products. BeatWare’s is a $100 competitive mail-in rebate for e-Picture that requires proof of purchase of Adobe Illustrator, ImageReady, ImageStyler, Photoshop, Macromedia Fireworks, MetaCreations Headline Studio, or Ulead Photoshop and expires on 12/31/99. MetaCreations offers a $75 mail-in rebate on Headline Studio if purchased between 7/1/99 and 3/31/00.

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