BRING OUT THE GIMP

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The Mac. Graphic Design. These phrases are practically inseparable. Before 1984 there was an entire career option missing, that of 'Mac Operator'.

The next generation UNIX OS, Mac OS X will, no doubt cement Apple's domination of the creative industries further with its improvements to the system such as the Acrobat based Quartz Display Layer, pre-emptive multi-tasking and protected memory. Graphic Design, however, isn't always about expensive London based studios. There are many smaller design houses and indeed freelancers using Apple technology and with the great OS X lock-out for pre-G3 machines, powerful and expensive computers are going to become expensive paperweights unless they adopt another strategy.

So what has this got to do with Linux, you may be asking? Well, PPC/Linux makes a great operating system for older Power Macs. However, it doesn't matter how good your OS is if you don't have the applications, and the titan of graphic design – Adobe Photoshop is not available for any version of Linux. In true open source style, however, there is an alternative.

The GIMP - The GNU Image Manipulation Program

GIMP is a bitmap graphics editing application. This in effect means that unlike for example, KIllustrator, which produces graphics according to mathematical principles, GIMP and programs like it give you a blank canvas on which you can slap around virtual paint. This kind of application is ideally suited to photograph manipulation and the creation of website graphics.

As was stated last month GIMP on Mac OS X is a fudge. This is because it is effectively a quick and dirty port of the PPC/Linux version and requires that Mac users install not only the application, but also the X Window system, a window manager and the GTK+ toolkit, none of which are otherwise required for OS X. With PPC/Linux these are all part of your distribution, as is the GIMP itself.

GIMP, a Linux stalwart, is perhaps more important to PPC/Linux users than to their x86 cousins. The Macintosh is a de facto standard in Graphic Design and given Apple's OS X strategy alienating owners of older Power Macs, a combination of a modern UNIX based OS and a professional level graphics application may well be irresistible to some Mac users.

From the perspective of a Mac based designer, the GIMP is a step backwards – but a relatively small one. GIMP is, in terms of look and feel, most like Adobe Photoshop 3.0. With Photoshop now approaching version 6, this may seem like going back too far, but it is important to note that developments in the open source world are surprisingly fast and those willing to try out bleeding edge and experimental releases will see progress soon. Remember that by version 3, Photoshop had become more or less what we're used to today.

Upon booting GIMP you are presented with a screen that is undeniably Photoshop-like, or Macromedia xRes-like for that matter. The first thing to do is set the dimensions and resolution of your image. After this tools can be accessed from a palette on the left of the screen. This includes all of the usual tools such as Brush, Airbrush, Pencil, Text, Lasso, Fill, Magnify, Smudge and Clone. In addition, images are built up in layers, as in Photoshop. These layers can then manipulated individually offering the artist total control over the image.
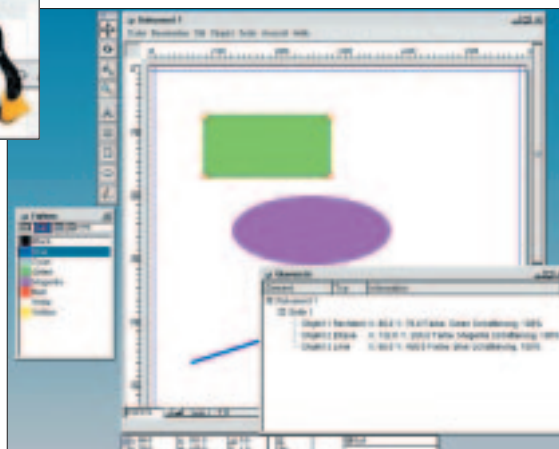
GIMP has built-in support for many file formats including GIF, JPEG, PNG, XPM, TIFF, TGA and BMP. This is important to professional designer.

Plug Ins vs Script FU

One of the key features of Photoshop's domination of the graphics market is its extensibility. Through the use of small helper applications, known as Plug Ins,

Scribus vector drawing

Photoshop can be expanded into a tailor made graphics powerhouse. In fact, Photoshop Plug Ins are so ubiquitous that many other graphics applications support them. GIMP, however, does not. Provided instead is a basic series of effects such as Blur, Motion Blur, Mosaic and so on.

Added to this is the impressive Script-Fu system. This is a built in method of scripting the GIMP to create impressive effects time and time again. In essence, Script-Fu allows the user to create scripts that can be invoked within GIMP. For Mac users, the best example is probably Applescript meets Photoshop Plug Ins.

The only drawback here is that there is an entire branch of the software industry dedicated to creating Photoshop Plug Ins. With GIMP, the majority of regularly used effects are included or are available.

The Downsides

The biggest single drawback of the GIMP is its lack of support for CMYK. CMYK is an acronym for Cyan, Yellow, Magenta and blacK – the four colours used in professional printing scenarios. GIMP developers have pledged support for CMYK separations.

So where does this leave an otherwise professional application? Well, despite lack of support for the CMYK process I have described GIMP as a professional application, and such it is. For heavy duty RGB (Red, Green Blue - images designed to be displayed on screen) work, such as JPEG manipulation it works like a dream and the entry requirements aren't too steep. A 120MHz PowerPC 603e copes admirably. Perhaps more important here is to have a lot of spare RAM and a capacious and speedy hard drive as image size is limited by the amount of available RAM and disk space. I would recommend at least 128MB RAM and a 7,200RPM drive. As any designer will know, this is quite light compared to modern Photoshop requirements.

The other main contention is not with GIMP itself, rather it's what else is available. Photoshop is only one piece of the design puzzle. What is desperately needed for PPC/Linux is a suite of graphics tools. Clones of Quark XPress, Adobe Illustrator & Macromedia Director, Dreamweaver and Flash. These programs form the basis of around 90 per cent of studio work these days.

GIMP can be wholeheartedly recommended, but what about the rest? Well, KIllustrator is coming along and though it's decidedly lower level. Director, however, is another matter. Only Macromedia can provide this.

A new open source DTP layout application similar to Quark XPress and Pagemaker is available. It is called Scribus and can be obtained from :
http://web2.altmuehlnet.de/fschmid/scri_en.html

Info

The GIMP home page:	*http://www.gimp.org*
Mac GIMP. OS X GIMP resources:	*http://www.macgimp.org*
Adobe's website:	*http://www.adobe.com*