MainActor v5 Preview

The Tailor's New Clothes

On August 11 MainConcept released the long-awaited preview of Version 5 for Linux of the popular MainActor video editing software. We put the program through its paces to find out what it is capable of.
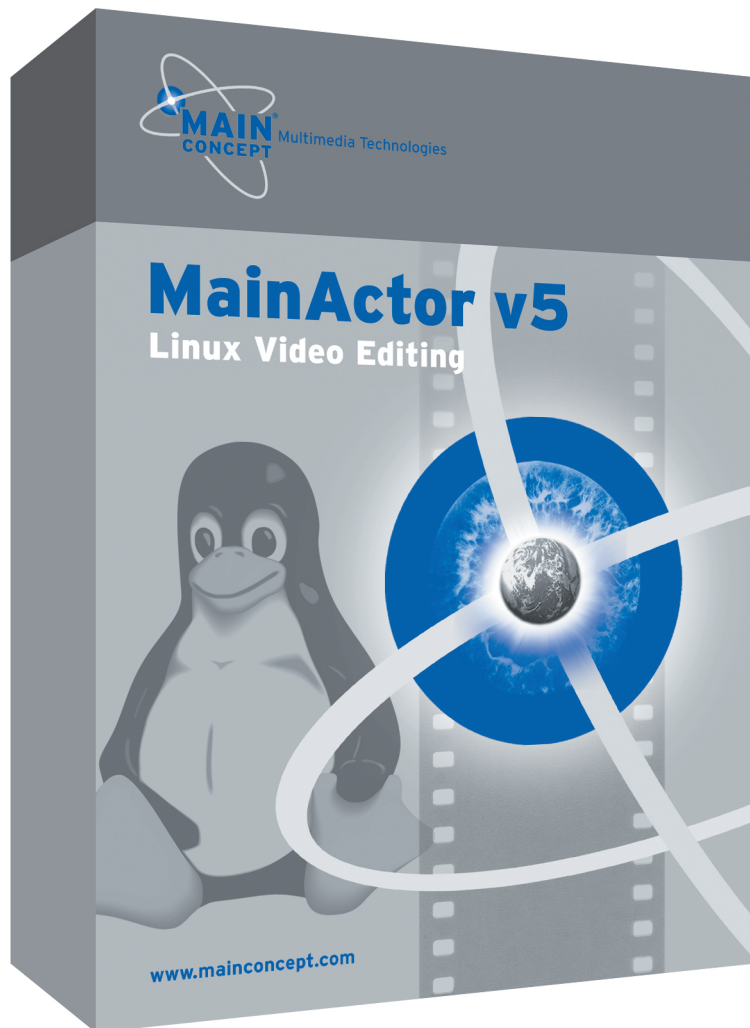
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Besides the free Cinelerra [1] program, the commercial MainActor package is the only video editing program for Linux that you can take seriously. Other programs, such as Kino for example, just do not offer the same facilities. MainActor's ease of use and generous functional range made the program popular in next to no time, and now finally MainConcept has ported the updated Version 5 to Linux.

Availability

Recently, the manufacturer's product policy has been a real pain. MainActor withdrew the previous 3.7 version before releasing test version 5. Users wanting to run MainActor on Linux were forced to update to SuSE Linux 8.2 Professional, as this was the only distribution that bundled the video editing program.

Now a free preview version, optimized for SuSE Linux, is available from [2]. In contrast to the final version, this release is missing quite a few features, such as MPEG support or the recording tools. Linux users also have to do without the OS-specific elements of the Windows version: that means that some "exotic" video formats are missing – although it would have been possible to use the *libavi* library.

The manufacturer requires you to register your name and email address before you start downloading. The download provides you with an RPM file that you should not install on SuSE Linux using the YaST2 installation manager, unless that is you can afford to do without your current MainActor version. If you want to use both versions in parallel, you should use KPackage (from the *kdeadmin3* package) to install the RPM package. After opening the RPM file uncheck the *Update* and *Replace packages* checkmarks – incidentally, our preview version was by no means stable.

Installing MainActor on other distributions is slightly more complicated. The MainActor forum [3] provides some useful tips.

The fact that the download version displays a *MainActor 5.1* caption in every video is another restriction. You need to purchase a key to get rid of this. The key will not only work with this preview version, but also with the final release and the Windows version. And vice-versa, that is you can use an existing Windows key with the Linux version. MainConcept is has some special offers for users looking to upgrade their current version.

New Look

The RPM package drops its contents in the */opt/MainActor_V5* directory, where the main program, *mactor*, is located. Both experienced MainActor users and newbies are in for a big surprise: The desktop has been re-worked to a larger extent and given a new, more modern look (see Figure 3). If you do not like the
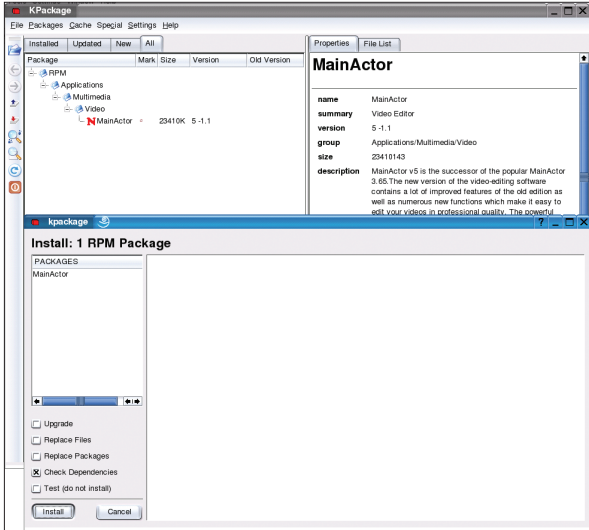
Figure 1: Use these settings to install MainActor v5 without over-writing your current, older version

Figure 3: A swirl effect has been applied to this video. The effects window at the bottom left of the picture is used to fine tune the effect.

supplied layout, you can always define your own.

MainActor v5 is quite obviously oriented on its role model, Adobe Premiere. A new clip has to be added to the project in the *Browser* window, before you can drag it into the timeline in this window. In return, the enhanced *Open* dialog box provides a preview that allows you to set start and stop tags, or apply one of the new de-interlacing filters.

You can use multiple timeline windows. That allows for a clearer overview of large-scale projects: one timeline could contain the opening credits and another timeline the closing credits. You can then go on to compile the complete film from individual timelines.

Those are not the only changes to the timeline. The well-known Va, Vb, and Fx tracks are missing; the older version used them to arrange transitions (cross-fading). The new MainActor version treats these just like effects instead: a

separate *Effects* window is used to specify the settings. Inside the timeline itself only a small bar is displayed below the video to indicate each effect.

Keyframes

Besides the new GUI, keyframes are the other major innovation. Keyframes are normally the domain of high-end video editing products; this allows MainActor v5 to provide a low-budget entry to the world of compositing.

Each keyframe you create maintains its own settings for the effects it applies, allowing for precise frame-by-frame control. MainActor extrapolates appropriate settings for the images between the frames. Thus, you can define different degrees of brightness for different parts of a clip, for example. Keyframes are also supported by polydiagrams that allow you to use graphs to describe the way an effect changes on a timescale.

The fact that keyframes and graphs occupy a window of their own makes frame-by-frame compositing slightly tricky – especially considering the fact that the preview does not follow suit when you make changes in the effect window. This soon leaves you guessing which image you assigned to which keyframe.
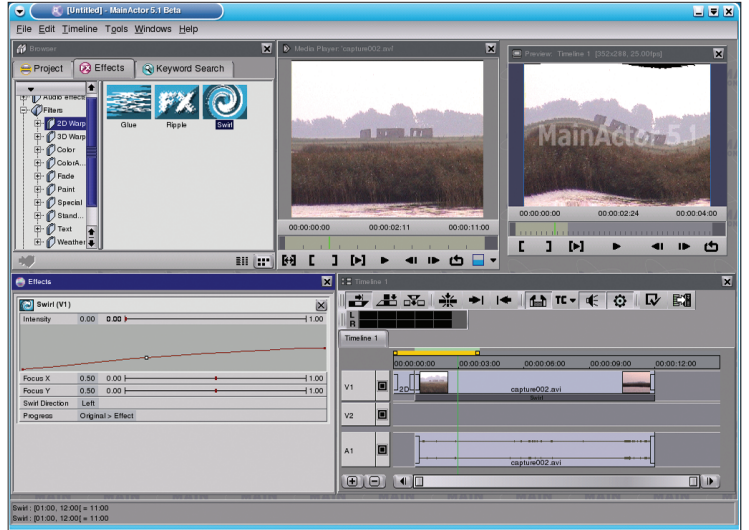
The program now offers a larger selection of effects and transitions; even if the manufacturer proved a bit miserly with regard to audio effects, the *Simple Audio Switcher* being the only exception. Additionally, the fully-featured 3D caption generator seems to have been chopped.

Conclusion

We were quite impressed with the new MainActor version, but MainConcept will have to work on improving the stability of the final release – the program crashed continually throughout our test series. Some lists also appear to be slightly bug-ridden, one example being the file selector in the *Add media data* window.

It would be a good idea to integrate the effect window – or at least parts of it – in the timeline. Sadly, as the Windows version has already been released without this, it does not look like our wish will be fulfilled any time in the near future.

Having said that, the Preview did whet our appetites for more. MainConcept says to look out for the final release at the end of this year.
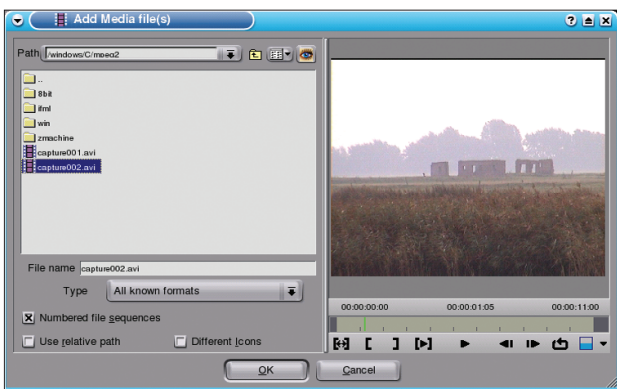

Figure 2: The re-worked add media file dialog box

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[1] Cinelerra Homepage: *http://heroinewarrior.com*

[2] MainConcept-Homepage: *http://www.mainconcept.de*

[3] MainConcept-Forum: *http://forum.mainconcept.com/*