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Adobe Photoshop Elements 8

REVIEW DATE: 09.23.09

BOTTOM LINE:

If you're new to the worlds of digital photography and image manipulation, Photoshop Elements 8 offers everything you need, and much, much more. But users of previous versions are unlikely to find much in it a reason to upgrade.

PROS:

Powerful, well-balanced consumer-level photo editing and organizing tools. Photo recomposition feature as amazing as its CS4 counterpart. Tight integration with online services and Premiere Elements 8. Extensive selection of help and tutorials.

CONS:

Few major changes from previous version. Some tutorials require paid Plus membership.

COMPANY:

Adobe Systems

SPEC DATA

Price: \$99.99 Direct

Type: Personal

OS Compatibility: Windows Vista, Windows XP, Mac OS

EDITOR RATING: ●●●●●

By Matthew Murray

It can't be easy for major [software](#) companies to keep releases of their flagship products fresh year after year. Case in point: Photoshop Elements 8 (\$99.99 direct). Adobe's super-powerful consumer version of its industry-leading Photoshop has just arrived in another iteration for 2009 that looks and feels pretty much like last year's version. With a user interface that looks like it's barely been touched, and packing new features that for the most part are best described as superficial, Photoshop Elements 8 bears the hallmarks of a service-pack release that somehow ended up in a box. Because the software remains remarkable for the breadth and depth of its capabilities, it still earns our Editors' Choice. But, with one noteworthy exception, it offers few compelling reasons for owners of older versions to upgrade.



The most exciting new addition—if not the *only* exciting new addition—is the Recompose [Photo](#) tool. A distillation of the astonishing content-aware scaling that appeared in Photoshop CS4 Extended, it lets you resize images with respect to their contents, reducing unused or underused space but keeping the most important parts, or remove unwanted elements (such as people) without affecting their surroundings. If it takes a steady hand and some tweaking to get it just right (starting with a high-quality image helps), it's still an unparalleled—and practically magical—way to tighten up the composition of your images.

The other editing changes are mostly useful if low-key embellishments on functions that already exist. Photomerge now also comprises exposure functionality, letting you blend a series of over- and underexposed [photos](#) into one that looks perfectly lit. (Corel introduced this feature in its own Paint Shop Pro Photo X2 last year, and Serif in Photo Plus X3 [Digital Studio](#) a couple of months ago.) Quick Fix previews in Quick Edit mode now let you examine prospective changes to qualities such as light level or color saturation before you commit to them, making it a lot easier to get the effect you're aiming for.

The biggest changes to Photoshop Elements 8 come in the area of organizing. Tags are even

easier to use than before, with a "tag cloud" to help you rapidly sort or search for files matching your most frequently used criteria. The new Auto-Analyzer can automatically apply Smart Tags [on Yahoo!](#) to files you import, which identify images by their quality (low, medium, or high), contrast, objects, lighting, the number of faces, and so on. People Recognition works exactly as the name suggests: Tag faces of friends and family in your photos, and Photoshop Elements 8 can detect and tag them with the proper names later (well, usually). If you also have Premiere Elements 8 installed, you'll be able to launch it directly from the Organizer when you click to edit a video.—[Next: Other Enhancements](#)

Other Enhancements

One particularly useful update (given digital cameras' ever-increasing resolutions), is the new full-screen mode, which lets you make simple changes to images that fill your whole display. Sharing is improved, too. You can now synchronize your photo and video clips between multiple [computers](#) the way you can songs in iTunes 9—an ability I love in either app—and you can share photos and videos together via special online albums at [Photoshop.com](#). There's also a variety of new professionally designed clip art, templates, and themes to add sheen to the final version of your finished product. These are all good changes that will undoubtedly benefit some users, but they're not world-shaking.

Of more immediate usefulness is the software's expanded help section, which includes a raft of tutorials (some with video) that help you learn how to perform certain common tasks. Unfortunately, you can't derive the full benefit from them without dropping an extra \$40 on a one-year Plus membership—some tutorials are available only to subscribers. That membership also nets you extra art, themes, and storage space (20GB as opposed to the 2GB you get with the software itself), but these benefits aren't going to be worth the extra money for most people who just want to get on with perfecting their photos.

Adobe Photoshop Elements 8 remains the best option for consumer photo editing. It offers more than the competition in a package that's as attractive and unthreatening as this kind of software can be. Newcomers can rest assured they're getting the tip of the top, an app with a glimmeringly extensive feature set and unparalleled ease of use that's worth the \$99 payout. But if you own Photoshop Elements 7, which behaves almost identically, even the \$79 upgrade price (counting a mail-in rebate) is probably too high. If you still want to upgrade, consider getting the Photoshop-Premiere Elements combo package, which gives you both apps for just \$149.99. Otherwise, you can safely wait until at least version 9 to see if the tide of truly impressive innovation starts flowing once again.

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