Adobe rightfully describes it as "The world-standard photo design and production tool." Adobe Photoshop is simply the best professional image editing software around (not to mention most expensive.) So, does the latest version (5.0) keep up the reputation? Or is it just an over-hyped resource-hungry upgrade?

At version 5.0, Adobe Photoshop is definitely in its best shape ever. The transition from 4.0 to 5.0 was very well-executed (unlike the awkward 3.0 to 4.0 transition, which left many end users confused and angry, due to radical shortcut changes.) Adobe has also, carried a complete face-lift to the code engine (which runs considerably faster now). Last, but not least, are the slew of new features, which are more than just a last day wrap-up. These babies rock!

So, where is the catch? Well, everything comes at a price, and in this case the prices to pay are huge. To work with the new features efficiently at high resolutions, tremendous amounts of both RAM and hard disk space are required. I mean tremendous. If you're still uncertain, just look at Adobe's stated system requirements:

an you see how large Adobe recommend your hard drive be? I will leave the rest to your imagination.

Although Photoshop is pretty good at what it does, various "wish list" features were (again!) omitted. The most shameful is the lack of more "Web-savvy" features (I smelled that it had to do with Adobe's ImageReady which is supposed to be Adobe's solution to Web images). If you think that is weird, then can you believe Adobe added just one new filter this time? (We know quantity doesn't matter, but I would have loved a squeeze filter in there somewhere.) How about a plug-in management system? Why can't we manage our filters like we manage our extensions?

Another point, which everyone might find silly, is numbering. One of the things I liked most about Adobe "was" its ability to number its version correctly (at least Photoshop-wise.) While some programs were in their 20th version, Adobe was still in its fourth.

So why does this bother me so much? The Adobe we know would have named this version 4.5 (at most) because most of the improvements were good but not to the extent of jumping a whole version up. I guess either Adobe's goals are changing (release a new version: make'm pay more for the upgrade, now let's think of version 6.0) or they are trying to catch up with their Illustrator program version (as in number :P).

If you think, that I am just imagining things and Adobe has not changed, can anyone tell me how long it took Adobe to release Photoshop 3.0 from 2.0? Even then we passed through 2.5, and while 3.0 to 4.0 was unexpected (we were really expecting 3.5), the features were enough to justify the jump. Don't get me wrong, Adobe Photoshop 5.0 is a most welcome addition to my hard disk, and I still think that Photoshop is the role model for all the imaging software (but I would have gladly waited a few extra month for even better features). Anyway, enough opinions and let's get to the core: listed below are the new features:

- History Palette: In our graphic lingo often called multiple undos . Sure, it is very handy (especially that I can configure the steps of undos required) but poorly implemented. Although it works seamlessly at 72 dpi, it is a real hard disk muncher at high resolutions (not to mention slow). Excuse my ignorance, but since Adobe is making ImageReady the "Web-savvy" program, shouldn't our first concern in Photoshop, be high resolution images? Personally, I thought that Adobe would get the license for the "FITS" technology used in programs like Live Picture to overcome this problem.

- Online Updates: Adobe has incorporated a direct link with the web providing latest updates automatically via the net.

- Editable Text with Character-level Formatting: This is the feature I like most. Although it has its limitations, it is really a good implementation in such a complex program like Photoshop. The new text engine is indeed a winner.

- Complete Color Management Including ICC Support: Discussing color management systems (CMS) would take a whole graphics section by itself (I am willing to do it, if I get enough e-mails rolling in). All you need to know here is that Photoshop is more color-compliant than never before. This means that end-users get better overall calibration.

- Spot-color Channels: Photoshop 5.0 delivers the ability to specify spot-color

channels for any image. With this capability, users can incorporate varnishes, metallic inks, and other specialty colors into their print jobs, and even add bump plates to their CMYK images to produce richer colors.

- Expanded Support for 48- and 64-bit color: Photoshop has long supported 8-bit color channels that produce 24-bit RGB image and 32-bit CMYK images. However, version 5.0 extends this support to include 64-bit CMYK images, for better-fidelity color ranges.

- Layer Effects: This impressive and nifty feature serves as a pre-made box of chop (channel operations) effects. Simply select the text and choose the desired effect to get some startling results.

- Image Assistant: Think of it as the Apple Guide of Photoshop. These smart little assistants guide you through "some" tasks in Photoshop. Too bad they are so few. Not as useful as Word 98's assistants (far less pesky too), but they do the job.

- The lone warrior: Actually, it is called the 3D transform filter—the sole new addition to the filters menu. Don't expect results you would get from a program like Adobe Dimensions, but the plug-in does some amazing results (considering its simplicity).

- Fine-tuning: Too trivial and too many to mention. Examples are: magnetism (trust me, it sounds much better than it performs) feature implemented in most tools to automatically trace images, and the previewing of duotones.

Verdict

If you are a professional designer, with lots of hard disk space and RAM to spare, then Photoshop 5.0 is for you. Otherwise, you're better off staying with your current version. I don't really think dashing out to upgrade (both in terms of software and hardware) is really worth a few pre-saved chopped actions or even the multiple undos (you've lived without them long enough, you can do it for the next 10 months too.)

Lastly, I am interested in your opinion: do you think Adobe's latest release is really worth the 5.0 or just the 4.5? Just drop me an e-mail with the subject "Adobe Photoshop 5.0 or 4.5." I think it will be interesting to see the results; they will probably be published in the next issue of ATPM.