

The right photo-editing program

Levels adjustment may be more helpful than brightness/contrast

Most photo editing programs come with an arsenal of tools for adjusting images. Frequently the tool used by many new photo editors is Brightness/Contrast, as the terminology are familiar.

However Brightness/Contrast is generally not a very good tool to use because it makes the same amount of change to all information in the image.

Let's compare Brightness/Contrast to the volume controls on your car radio. Brightness would be equal to volume and contrast would equal the single tone control for treble and bass.

If your favorite song were to come on and you wanted to emphasize the bass, you wouldn't reach for the volume control because that would simply amplify all of the sounds, not just the bass. And if your car had one of the simple single tone controls, you would only gain bass at the loss of treble. And this, basically, is why Brightness/Contrast controls may not be the best tool to give you a good picture.

More advanced car radios offer advanced tone controls with something called a graphic equalizer. The simplest of these equalizers usually offers three separate controls for bass, midrange and treble which allow for individual adjustments of the tones. Adjusting all three tones equally would be the same as increasing the volume. But moving the sliders separately allow you to enhance certain tonal ranges without sacrificing others.

A tool for making tonal range adjustments in images, comparable to a graphic equalizer, is called Levels and is found in many photo editing programs. In a previous article, I discussed the importance of a histogram in the



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Discover a new world with macro-photography

One of the great things about fixed lens digital cameras, or point-and-shoot photos, is the range of focal lengths they encompass. Not only can they have great telephoto ranges, they can also take extreme close-ups called macro photography. These compact wonders, having just one lens, can take pictures that would require a camera bag full of lenses to equal with a full size camera.

The operation of cameras vary, but the use of the macro focus on a camera usually involves pressing a few buttons, look for the flower icon which seems to be a near universal symbol. Then between zooming the lens and positioning the camera you can usually get an incredibly close focus on a small object.

Not only will this create new photographic possibilities, it can serve a very practical purpose in being able to make a photographic record of small valuable objects like jewelry.

evaluation of exposure in your camera. This same graph is found in the Levels tool and is invaluable in determining how to improve the image. In addition to the histogram are several sliders that allow you to adjust the shadows, midrange and highlights of an image. Usually an underexposed image can be improved simply by sliding the shadow slider underneath the histogram to where the there is data shown and then the same can be done for the highlights. Then with the midtone slider, adjustments can be made to suit. Note the locations of the sliders in the

accompanying images showing before and after adjustments. Moving these sliders can have a very dramatic effect upon an image and can often rescue what might have been considered an unusable image.

Spending a little time with the Levels tool and learning how it works will provide much more satisfactory adjustments than Brightness/Contrast.

If your editing software does not have this tool, perhaps it's time for a change. PhotoShop, the 800-pound gorilla of photo editing is often beyond the budget of



PHOTOS PROVIDED

The top image is dull and underexposed, while after a levels adjustment, the above image looks bright and properly exposed.

the casual editor and is simply overkill. So consider PhotoShop's little brother, PhotoShop Elements, which can frequently be obtained for less than a tank of gas. Even if this doesn't fit the bill, this tool is in a free photo editing program called Gimp which an open source program comparable to how Open Office compares with Microsoft Office.

Levels can also be used to adjust the color of an image, which I will address in my next column.



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New driving game has great graphics; is fun to play

When the clock hit midnight on Dec. 31, 2007 we said good bye to the old year and hello to the brand new 2008, where we would also say hello to new games and for this gamer, the new Xbox 360.

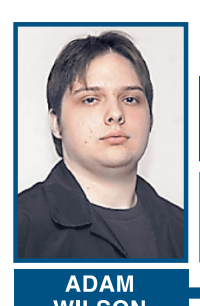
Back in the 1990's, my friends and I loved to play the game "Burnout" when it was on the original Playstation. Now EA has taken the legacy of "Burnout" to a whole new level with "Burnout: Paradise."

In Paradise, you cruise the streets of Paradise City in various cars, which you can pick up at your junkyard. The junkyard is a pretty much a garage for all your cars. You can store your cars and customize them as well.

You are also given a Paradise City License, where you start off at Class D, and have to work your way up to the top. To achieve this goal, you have to win various races to do this. To get from D to C Level you have to win five races, and from C to B 12.

To enter a race, you drive up to a traffic light, and rev your engine while holding the breaks. Paradise City is huge with eight different points to the city. There are various events in Paradise City, including actual races where you race seven other opponents from point A to point B. But what kind of "Burnout" game would it be if you couldn't smash up your opponents' cars?

Speaking of smashing cars, the legacy of continuing with Road Rage. Road Rage is where you drive for some many minutes and smash into your opponents cars, getting a "take down." Though its not just mindless destruction of vehicles, no, you need to take down a certain amount of cars before you can win. Though if your car is totaled



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and you didn't make the number, you lose.

Smashing your car can also get you points in the event known as "Stunt Run." In Stunt Run, you take your car anywhere and do as many insane stunts as you possibly can within the time limit. But remember, if you total your car and didn't make the mark, you lose the event. Jumping through billboards is also a way to earn points and respect.

You've also got "Marked Man," which for this even two cars race you to a certain point in the city, but the catch is, they're trying to smash your car up to the totaled point. So be on your guard, if you don't make it to the point, that's right, you lose. But, don't forget, you can also smash their cars up, but they will return with a vengeance. The game will tell you when there are various cars on the road. If you smash them up and take them down, they are added to your junkyard. Which brings us to the last event in Paradise, "Burning Route." In this even you take a certain car and race against the clock to a certain location. If you don't have the car required look for it on the street, then take it down to add it to your collection.

The graphics for Paradise are amazing. When I saw the trailer, I figured, OK, here is another trailer with great graphics, but the game play

graphics will probably be poor. But, I was wrong!

The game play is different from what I expected. On the 360 version, your right trigger is your gas and ignition. Before you can drive the car, you have to hold down on your right trigger to turn the car on. Most racing games I've played, the accelerator has been one of the buttons, not a trigger.

The game seems to depict crashes very well. If you smash into a wall, you will see your car being crushed from the force of impact in slow motion. Also, if you hit another

car and wreck, you will see the action in slow motion. Various parts of your car will fly off, such as tires and doors. When you smash into a wall, opponent, or a civilian vehicle, the colors of the game are muted.

Unlike other games, there are not game menus or a level of difficulty option. It sucks you right into the game. There is also a radio station in the game called "Crash FM," where you can jam to great hits like Seether's "Fake it" and of course, the setting namesake, "Paradise City" by the legendary Guns 'N' Roses.

Like any racing game, remember, do the racing and smashing in the game and remember the rules of the road in reality.

Burnout: Paradise" is a must have for any racing or "Burnout" fan. It is available for The Xbox 360 and Playstation 3. Paradise receives a 5 stars out of a possible 5.

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