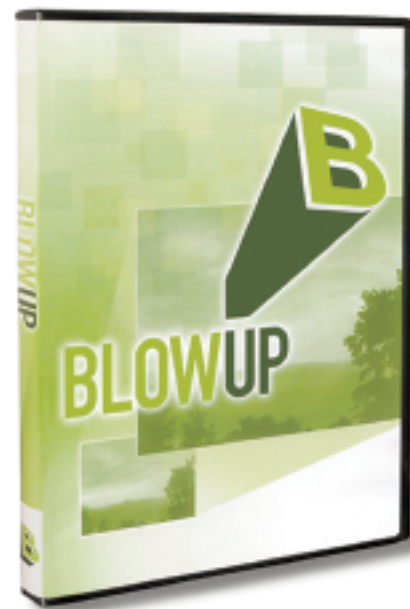


Sometimes you have to create something from nothing, adding pixel information to create a larger image. The Blow Up plug-in makes it look real.

BY WENDELL BENEDETTI

# Bigger

ALIEN SKIN BLOW UP



Enlarging low-resolution images for publication or large-format output can be a real challenge. Most professional photographers would rather retake the shot. Art directors and editors frequently kill an otherwise usable photo, simply because the resolution isn't high enough. Sometimes there's no alternative to up-resing the image on hand.

Early Adobe Photoshop users discovered that low-res images could be successfully

up-resed if it were done in increments rather than all at once. Users could open the Image Size dialog and increase the image resolution 5 to 10 percent at a time, until they reached the desired resolution. This method got the job done, but the enlarged images often displayed pixelation and other defects.

In response, several software makers have developed Photoshop plug-ins and

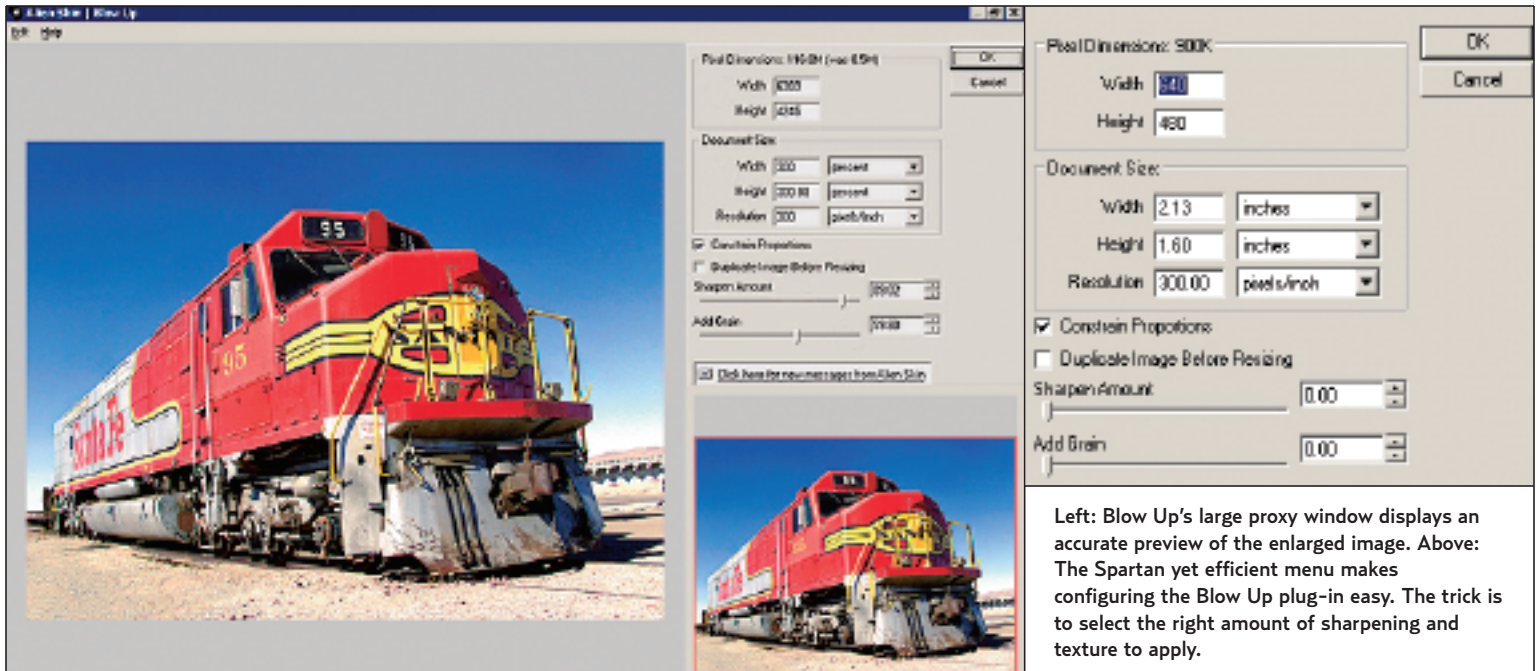
standalone applications to handle up-resing without degrading the quality of the image. Some software works through Image Size to up-res files, while others do the job through sophisticated wavelet/fractal algorithms and proprietary image file formats. I've tried virtually all of them, with varying degrees of success. No application or plug-in in my experience totally solves the problem of up-resing image content when there's insufficient digital content to begin with.

That's why I was intrigued when Alien Skin introduced the Blow Up Photoshop plug-in. Alien Skin markets a number of useful Photoshop plug-ins, including Image Doctor, with its effective JPEG

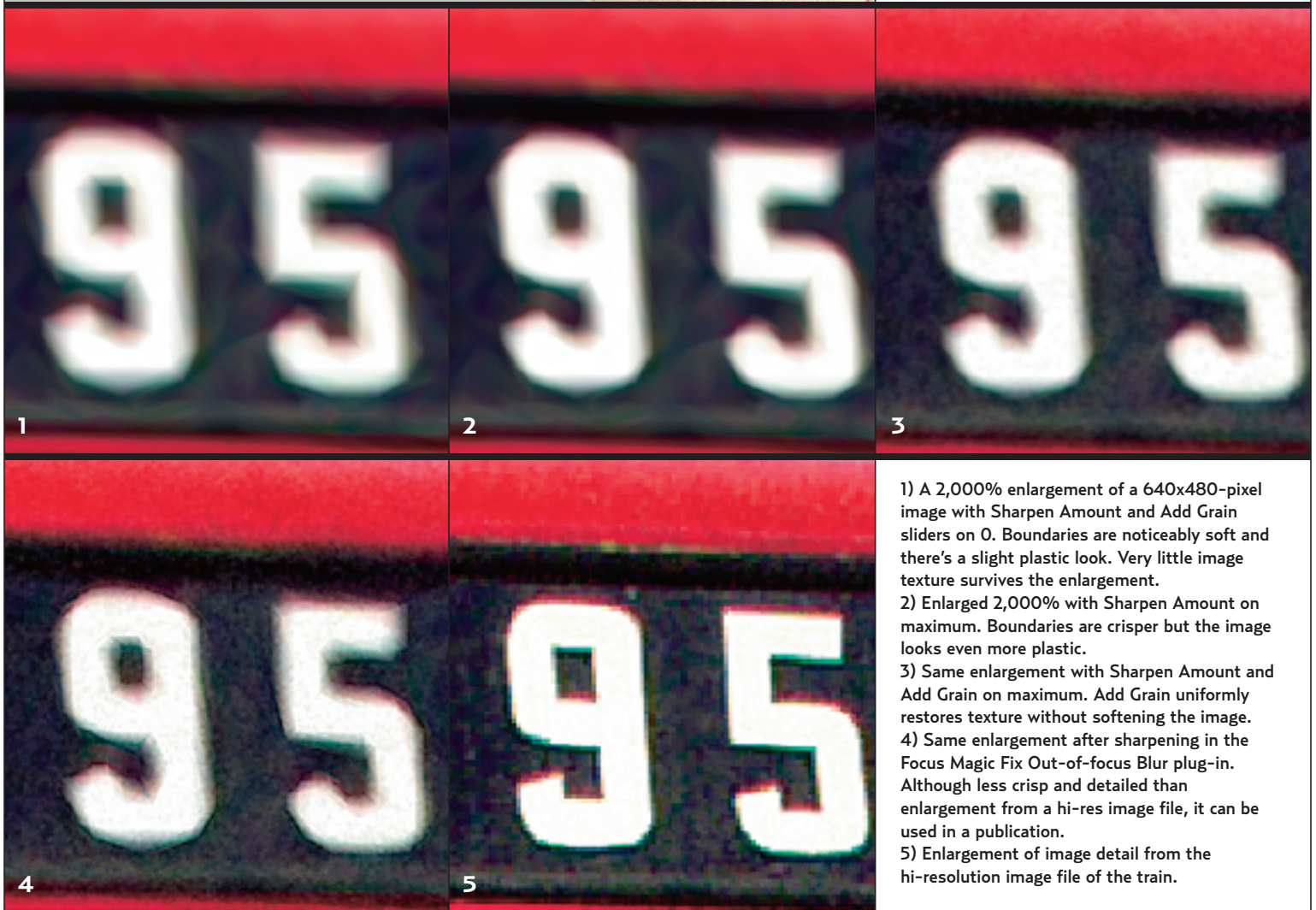


Though nothing compares to having an image captured with sufficient resolution, with Alien Skin Blow Up, the small original image file (above) retains both texture and sharpness after being up-sized (left).

## THE GOODS: SOFTWARE REVIEW



Left: Blow Up's large proxy window displays an accurate preview of the enlarged image. Above: The Spartan yet efficient menu makes configuring the Blow Up plug-in easy. The trick is to select the right amount of sharpening and texture to apply.



1) A 2,000% enlargement of a 640x480-pixel image with Sharpen Amount and Add Grain sliders on 0. Boundaries are noticeably soft and there's a slight plastic look. Very little image texture survives the enlargement.  
 2) Enlarged 2,000% with Sharpen Amount on maximum. Boundaries are crisper but the image looks even more plastic.  
 3) Same enlargement with Sharpen Amount and Add Grain on maximum. Add Grain uniformly restores texture without softening the image.  
 4) Same enlargement after sharpening in the Focus Magic Fix Out-of-focus Blur plug-in. Although less crisp and detailed than enlargement from a hi-res image file, it can be used in a publication.  
 5) Enlargement of image detail from the hi-resolution image file of the train.

Repair tool; Blow Up takes the same approach. It assumes image texture will be lost during the enlargement process, and provides a method of restoring texture in the enlarged image.

The Blow Up interface has a large proxy window that takes up two-thirds of the left side of the screen. The remaining third includes a navigation tool for the proxy window and input boxes for the user to enter the desired up-sized resolution or dimensions (in inches, picas, centimeters, millimeters, points or percentage). There are also sliders here for adjusting the amount of sharpening and grain to be applied, and the Constrain Proportions option, which will apply the enlargement equally to both dimensions.

Blow Up is launched from the Photoshop Automate menu (File > Automate). Before you set anything, the plug-in automatically maps the image that's active in Photoshop, factoring in the boundaries between dissimilar colors or densities. The two-step up-resizing process begins when you set the desired enlargement. The plug-in then applies what appear to be vector-based algorithms and displays the enlarged image in the proxy window. Usually the unmodified proxy image is a bit soft (when Sharpen Amount and Add Grain sliders are set to zero), and has the plastic look that's characteristic of wavelet or fractal enlargement schemes.

If needed, you can use the Sharpen More slider in step two to sharpen the image and the Add Grain slider to reduce the plastic look. Although it seems counterintuitive, the Sharpen More slider actually increases the plastic look if used alone. Boundaries and edges become crisper, but the image appears to lack texture overall. The Add Grain slider puts back the texture that the Sharpen More slider removes. The trick is to apply just the right amount of sharpening

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and texture. When the Blow Up proxy image looks acceptable, selecting OK completes the enlargement process.

While no scheme can faithfully enlarge all low-resolution images, Blow Up works well for many images that might otherwise be unusable for print reproduction.

Blow Up is compatible with 8-bit and

16-bit RAW and 32-bit HDR digital images. It supports RGB, grayscale, CMYK, LAB and Duotone color, layered images, Mac OS 10.3.9 or later, and Windows 2000/XP systems. Blow Up requires Photoshop CS or later, or Photoshop Elements 3 or later, and sells for \$199. You can download a demo version from [www.alienskin.com](http://www.alienskin.com). ■