

Three excellent and diverse plug-ins for Photoshop simplify the masking process. A review of onOne Software Mask Pro 4, Vertustech (Helicon) Fluid Mask 2.0 and Digital Film Tools EZ Mask 1.01.

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Hideaway

MASKING SOFTWARE

Masking. If you're involved in digital imaging, the mere mention of the word can send chills down your spine. Masking is essential in any image compositing, but it also plays a role in color correction, image enhancement and practically every other aspect of digital imaging.

Adobe Photoshop CS2 has several masking tools, and Adobe continues to improve Photoshop's masking capabilities. Few

photographers, however, will ever feel comfortable using the Pen tool to outline complex shapes, drawing Bezier curves, then adding, deleting and converting anchor points. Photoshop's Extract tool is a stab at automating masking, but usually the extracted layer mask ends up being more of a guide for additional painting on the layer mask than a final product. And if you take away too much with the Extract filter and haven't

saved a copy of the layer, you have to redo the entire extraction process.

If creating accurate masks is a frequent task in your digital workflow, consider using a third-party program that automates the process far better than Photoshop and yields far more accurate masks the first time through. It's nice to be able to create a mask quickly, but what's most important is the accuracy of the final mask, so you don't have to invest time in cleaning it up.

Three excellent programs designed exclusively for creating masks are onOne Software Mask Pro 4, Vertustech (Helicon) Fluid Mask 2.0 and Digital Film Tools EZ Mask 1.01. (Corel KnockOut does not support Photoshop CS2.) They're similar to each other and to Photoshop's Extract tool in some basic ways, but each has its own approach and algorithms. The best one for you depends on the kinds of masks you create.

Although these programs are Photoshop plug-ins, each of them takes over the screen, replacing Photoshop's menus and tool palettes with its own, and each needs lots of RAM, particularly for large images or complex masks.

MASK PRO 4

Mask Pro, the granddaddy of the three, was developed by Extensis and sold to onOne Software in 2005. Version 4 is onOne's first full revision. As in earlier versions, Mask Pro 4 operates on the concept of keep colors and drop colors, as defined by the user. Where there's sufficient contrast between the keep

Masking allows you to turn this wedding photo taken inside the church during the ceremony into a portrait that could pass as a studio portrait. Mask Pro was able to remove the church background from the original image, but still preserve the detail and transparency in the bride's veil and a soft, anti-aliased edge around the couple with no trace of haloing. Background: Old Masters digital background from Owen's Originals.



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and drop colors, you can use a highlighter tool (like Photoshop's Extract filter) to define them.

In the Color Decontamination setting, when Mask Pro 4 finds a drop color in a pixel with other colors, it will remove only that value from the pixel, leaving a semi-transparent area and the other colors. This proves one of Mask Pro's two great strengths: removing backgrounds from semi-transparent and transparent objects. If this is one of your principal masking needs, Mask Pro is for you.

Its other strength is the Magic Pen tool. It accurately follows curved surfaces without the need for Bezier curves. It snaps to edges, and if you make a mistake, you can undo it by retracing the path to an earlier point, then continue from there. When you make a selection with the Magic Pen tool or by converting a mask to a selection, Mask Pro 4 provides a tool to convert the selection to a work path, along with several controls to ensure the path is accurate. It's a real time-saver.

Mask Pro 4 works on the image at full resolution in an image window. Every time you adjust the mask, the program recalculates the entire mask, which can be a slow process with a large image or complex mask. In my test, it took about 3 minutes to process a complex mask on a 36MB file. Processing complete, you can view the mask itself or, if you're compositing the image and the new background was a layer in the file before you opened it in Mask Pro 4, you can view the composite image. When you're satisfied with the mask, clicking Save/Apply returns you to Photoshop.

Mask Pro 4 is available for Windows XP, SP2 and later, and Mac OS 10.4.4 and later, running Photoshop CS2. With the introduction of CS3, onOne promises to post a free upgrade to allow masking of 16-bit images, at www.ononesoftware.com. Mask Pro 4 MSRP: \$159.95.

FLUID MASK 2.0

Fluid Mask 2.0 also operates on the principle of keep and drop colors, but in a unique workflow. After opening an image in Photoshop, selecting Vertus>Fluid Mask from the filter menu opens a proxy of the original image in its own workspace. You should work on a copy of your original; like Photoshop Extract, Fluid Mask will make permanent changes to the image file. As the proxy is opening, Fluid Mask automatically finds edges between areas of color contrast. When the proxy image appears a few seconds later, it looks like a completed paint-by-numbers version of the original.

The Keep, Delete and Complex tools are located in the toolbox. For images with good color contrast, you simply select areas that you want to delete, then auto-fill the rest of the image with the Keep Global tool selected.

For more complex images, or where there's fine detail between the Keep and Delete areas, you can use the Complex Exact tool to paint in them. For a quick preview of what the mask will delete, select the camera icon and draw a rectangular area. Fluid Mask will do a test rendering of the proxy and display it against a gray and white checkerboard or a background of the solid color of your choice. It's much quicker and more efficient than the Extract filter Preview mode. Unfortunately, there's no provision to preview it against another image.

When you're satisfied with the test, you render the mask on the whole proxy. It takes less than a minute with a 36MB file. Tabs allow you to see the Source, the Workspace and the Output views, but not the mask itself. You can do additional work by returning to the Workspace view. Selecting File>Save and Apply starts the final full-resolution rendering and sends you back to Photoshop. This task takes less than a minute with a 36MB file. Masking is both accurate and fast, but unlike



I've always liked this fall scene that I took in Connecticut, but never liked the sky. I used the Fluid Mask Region Picker tool to highlight the upper portion of the image. I deleted the blues from the color palette that opened, and Fluid Mask deleted nearly all of the original sky in the areas between the leaves of the trees. I have added a green background to make this easier to see. The final image shows the sky replaced with a more dramatic one.

the other programs, Fluid Mask doesn't automatically create a layer mask in Photoshop. You must take time to do this if needed.

A tool unique to Fluid Mask works well for replacing dull skies in landscape photographs with more dramatic ones when you

need to remove small areas between leaves and branches before doing so. After making rough Keep and Delete areas, select the problem area with the Region Picker tool. This opens a window with a palette of the colors in the Keep, Delete and Complex areas, each in separate tabs. Selecting and moving the blues from the Keep to the Delete tab easily removes all of the sky.

Fluid Mask 2.0 is available for Windows 2000 and later and Mac OS 10.2.8 and later running Photoshop 7.0 and later versions. Fluid Mask 2.0 is available from www.vertustech.com for \$199.

EZ MASK 1.01

EZ Mask 1.01 is a newcomer in masking software, but its maker, Hollywood-based Digital Film Tools, is an old hand at producing plug-ins for Photoshop, Avid Editing Systems, Adobe After Effects and Apple Final Cut Pro, as well as tools for the movie industry.

With its simple interface, EZ Mask is the easiest of these programs to master, yet its masks are extremely accurate. It too uses the keep/delete technique, but in its own way. After opening an image in Photoshop, you have to unlock it by double-clicking, then add a layer mask, then click on the color image to make it active. If you are compositing the image, load it on a layer beneath the foreground image. In the EZ Mask program, you can preview the foreground image against the background after the mask is generated.

After preparing the image(s) in Photoshop, selecting Filters>Digital Film Tools>EZ Mask opens a proxy of the foreground image in the EZ Mask workspace. With simple images, you can simply create a stroke around the area to keep and a stroke around the area to delete, then do a test render. Test

rendering a 36MB file takes 10-45 seconds, depending on which of the three rendering resolutions you choose.

For complex images, such as those with hair, feathers or smoke, you paint the troublesome areas with the Paint Unknown brush, then fill the keep and delete areas with a paint bucket. When you're satisfied with the preview mask rendering, pressing the Done icon takes you back to Photoshop with a progress window displayed in the center of the screen, and final processing begins.

Unless you're working on a low-res image, it's time for a coffee break. EZ Mask is slow in rendering the final mask. I often thought the program had hung up because the progress bar wasn't moving and the Elapsed Time display was stopped. You must be patient. On a 3GHz hyperthreaded Windows computer, it took just over 14 minutes to render a moderately complex 36MB file. It did crash Photoshop when I tried to render more complex masks on larger files, but I had exceeded the recommended file size for the amount of RAM I have installed. I hope future updates will run faster, but accuracy is the real issue.

The reward for your patience is an extremely accurate mask, with none of the solarization-like artifacts or other weirdness you sometimes get with masking techniques. If you have the patience and the system resources for the images you need to mask, EZ Mask will do a great job without the complexity of the other masking programs.

EZ Mask 1.01 is available for Windows XP with Microsoft .NET Framework 2.0 (although it runs fine on my Windows 2000 machine with .NET 2.0) and Mac OS 10.4 and later running Photoshop 7.0 or later. Required RAM for 8-megapixel images or less is 1GB; for 12-megapixel



I was curious to see how EZ Mask would handle the feathers in this image if I knocked out the background. I first painted the feathers with the Paint Unknown brush, then filled the area I wanted to keep and the area I wanted to delete using their respective paint buckets. The processing time was over 12 minutes on the 36MB original, but the result is excellent. I have filled the background with red to make it easier to see the quality of the mask. Model: Sarah.

images, 1.5GB; and for 16-megapixel images, 2GB. EZ Mask is available at www.digitalfilmttools.com for \$150. ■

A downloadable manual and tutorials are available for each of these programs on the makers' Web sites, and all are available for trial downloads.