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Photoshop Express: Web Photo Sharing Gets Interesting

by Michael Geraci

In March 2008, Adobe Systems [1] entered the Web photo-sharing arena with the introduction of Photoshop Express (currently in beta) [2]. Given its total dominance of the photo, editing, and Web and Interactive design markets, Adobe's offering is more than just a space to show off your photographic abilities, it's a nicely polished set of technologies that demonstrate what's possible on the Web these days, provided you've got the bandwidth.

Photoshop Express is a Flash-based application that allows users to upload, edit, organize, present, and share their photographs. The service is compatible with Mac (10.4 and up) and Windows (XP, Vista) computers running Explorer (6 & 7), Firefox (2.x) and Safari (3.x) browsers. The free Flash Player plug-in (version 9.x) is required but comes installed in the above browsers by default. The site will let you know if you need to update your software and it will start the download and install process automatically.

To browse any of the approximately 50,000 photo galleries posted by end users, you simply need to go to the site and click on the Browse button. To post your own photos, you need to establish a free account. Once you're official, you are given 2GB of storage space on Adobe's servers to store your images.

Uploading photos is a simple process that is enhanced by the ability to add multiple images from different locations on your computer into a queue. Once you've got a batch ready, click the upload button and the images are transferred. I uploaded 8MB of images in under a minute on a cable modem connection, so the response time is adequate. Once uploaded, your images appear in a thumbnail gallery which feels a lot like dedicated photo management applications like iPhoto [3] and
Lightroom [4]. Thumbnails are automatically date-stamped and you can scale them up or down, add captions, and star ratings. The photo library can be viewed in a grid, list or enlargement format, and thumbnails can be rearranged by certain criteria (like star rating) or via drag and drop.

Photoshop Express only accepts JPEG formatted images, so die-hard photographers who shoot in Camera Raw or TIFF format will have to convert images in a dedicated application before uploading. To test the technical capabilities of the service, I uploaded eight images that had different resolutions, dimensions, and embedded color profiles. Photoshop Express handled them all with aplomb, and I was not able to detect any loss of quality in the uploaded images, however they are scaled down on the fly to fit in the browser window, which creates some pixel "shimmering" in the images. Images larger than 2880 pixels on any dimension will be shrunk down to this size when they are added to the library. According to the documentation single images over 10MB in size cannot be uploaded.

Things start to get interesting when you mouse over a thumbnail. A "Photo Options" menu appears which gives you numerous options for managing the photo. There are a few handy features available in this menu like copying a hyperlink link directly to a particular photo for pasting into an e-mail or onto a Web page and basic rotation options. The real feat comes in the "edit photo" option, which opens the photo in an enlarged format and provides a toolbar of editing controls that are too numerous to list here. Suffice it say that basic toning, color correction, cropping, and special effects are all present.
Photoshop users won't be too excited at the editing options as there aren't any histograms, layers or selection tools, but for a Web-based service, I was impressed with the speed and granularity of options available in Photoshop Express. I was especially impressed with the ability to re-white balance images that may have been taken under complex lighting situations and have undesirable color casts as a result – a common error found in digital photography. Edited images can be saved as new images, giving you the ability to create multiple versions from a single base image. Lastly, I'm somewhat awestruck by the fact that all editing operations are applied in a non-destructive format, giving the user the ability to remove individual edits (out of order) or revert back to the original image in a few clicks.

Once your images are ready for viewing, you can collect subsets of photos into virtual albums. Photoshop Express extends the experience by allowing you to drag thumbnails from the library or existing albums into additional albums just as you might create playlists in iTunes. The mouse pointer changes to indicate you are adding photos and the thumbnails being added even shrink down as they are "dropped" into the album. Albums can be shared publicly on the site with the click of a button or, in an interesting twist, you can invite only those you select to...
access your albums by generating an e-mail to them from the service which provides them with the necessary access.

Albums can be viewed as standard thumbnails that can be clicked to view enlargements or animated slideshows can be created in one of four different formats that can include 3D effects (images move in three-dimensional space). End users can only view slideshows, but they have access to all the options for formatting, captions, scale, duration, and auto or manual playback. Another feature that exceeds the typical Web experience is the ability to switch Photoshop Express into full-screen mode so that no remnants of the Web browser or the operating system are visible while viewing images. Galleries (either your own or those of others) can be selected as your "favorites" which makes them easily accessible whenever you log in. You can also access previously viewed galleries from a history list. The biggest feature that is missing from Photoshop Express is the ability for users to tag photos with keywords, which would allow for the creation of "meta" collections of images that all match user-defined criteria. Imagine being able to search for a person or an event and having access to all the photos that have been tagged to
match the search terms come up. Perhaps we can look forward to this functionality in future revisions; it is still a "beta" version after all.

While I am enthusiastic about what's possible with Photoshop Express, my experience was not without some technical glitches. I was unable to upload photos from my primary desktop computer. This might have been because I am running the beta version of Flash Player 10. I had no issues on multiple other computers that differed only this respect. Beyond that, there is the occasional odd behavior in accessing public galleries and performing searches on the service. Both Firefox and Safari report infrequent minor errors in performing functions in the source code or accessing an object in the data structure. The mouse pointer tends to disappear during slideshows, which requires moving the cursor rapidly near the top of the browser to bring it back into view.
Overall, the glitches in the application don't take much away from the well-designed and highly interactive experience offered by Photoshop Express. As a whole, it is an amazing service that rivals the commercial and non-commercial photo-sharing products currently available on the desktop or the Web.


To see the sample gallery I posted for the purposes of this article follow this link: http://geracim.photoshop.com/?trackingid=BTAGC&wf=share&galleryId=f965a03d2b96475f9813d56904a89bc6