OPEN SOURCE ART APP

The GIMP 2.0

The artistically challenged Nick Veitch adjusts his beret and paints a picture of the best-known image-editing package for Linux without feeling the urge to cut off his ear.

Should you ask any group of Linux users to name an Open Source desktop application, chances are the majority would opt for the *The GIMP*. After all, in its long history, it has spawned projects that many other apps have been built on. But long-standing project that it may be (see the *History* box, below) it has also remained largely unchanged for years. Much was hoped for the 2.0 release, as it has been heralded as an almost complete rewrite. But does it deliver anything to the user?

Cosmetic changes

The most immediate change is that *The GIMP* now makes use of *GTK+ 2*. Although many apps have been using this for some time, the intention of developing it in the first place was to further enable *The GIMP* with a more modern look and feel.

This is a bonus to the end-user. Anyone who wanted to use the software for anything more than a bit of picture retouching soon finds themselves with a multitude of window-spam cluttering up their desktop. With a new system of dockable palettes, there is no reason for more than two or three separate windows to be open at once (unless you want there to be, of course!)

A new interface and new layout, but not too much in the way of new features. This is a building block release.

As part of the clean-up operation, the menus have been further rationalised. There is now a menu bar at the top of the image window (where it always should have been), so no

Preferences are handled more sensibly and the entire GUI can be themed, which has prompted some distro vendors to experiment with branding.

A SHORT HISTORY OF...
The GIMP

The *GNU Image Manipulation Program* started its life in 1995. Original authors Spencer Kimball and Peter Mattis wanted to create a comprehensive image editor as part of their Computer Studies training while students at Berkeley. The original structure of the code provided only very basic tools, but instituted a plugin architecture that allowed third-parties to add their own functionality.
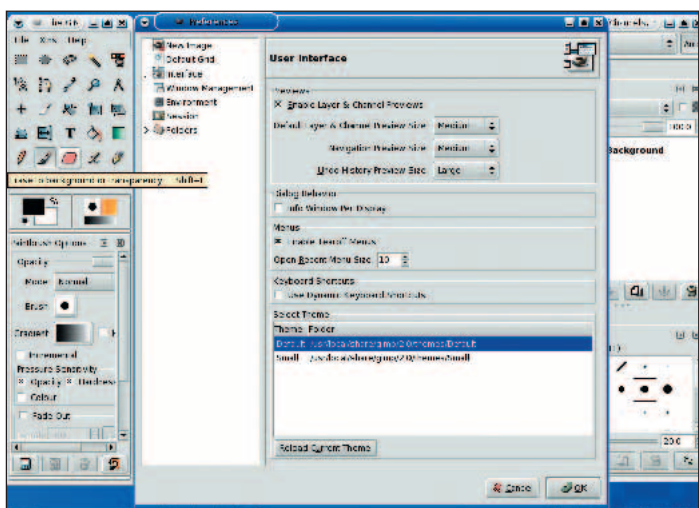
The original *GIMP*, version 0.54, used the well-known *Motif* GUI toolkit, which didn't exactly win it many fans, but one rather notable character gave it his blessing – Larry Ewing used this version to first create Tux the penguin!

Peter Mattis decided to write his own GUI toolkit to use with *The GIMP* and started the *GTK* and *GDK* projects. These were originally intended just to be used for *The GIMP*, but of course, took on a life of their own.

Kimball and Mattis released version 0.99 in early 1997, but it was to be their last release – the two students had graduated and got full-time jobs, and for a long while nobody even knew that they weren't working on *The GIMP* anymore. The project was saved by other developers creating a community around the project – there were no clear leaders from this point, but responsibilities for various parts of the project almost delegated themselves to appropriate people.

Development continued, with more features and functionality added over time, until the landmark 1.2 release in 2000. Until now, though there have been many bug fixes, there have been few dramatic changes to *The GIMP*'s code.

NOW ON WIN32 AND MAC OS X
Free art software for proprietary systems

This is the first release of *The GIMP* that has enjoyed a simultaneous release on three major desktop platforms. The exact same software will run on Windows and Apple Mac OS X as well as your Linux desktop!

While we haven't tested the Windows version, it is reported to work fine. On the Mac, you need to install Apple's own X11 extensions before compiling the software or using one of the many prebuilt versions.

It has to be said that the Mac version is often painfully slow, though it wasn't apparent from our cursory exploration whether this was due to *The GIMP* itself (unlikely) or the implementation of *GTK*

and/or X11 on OS X. Either way it can only improve, and now a great many more people are exposed to the glory of *The GIMP*.

It obviously doesn't look like a Mac-themed application, and it runs rather slowly, but it works!

more discovering that you've applied a filter to the wrong image. Further to this, many items have been shuffled around to put them in more sensible places – for example, colour mode transitions are now in the Layers menu, as they are layer-based and not image-based.

Although it is easy to dismiss a lot of the new changes as purely cosmetic, that doesn't reflect the fact that from a usability point of view, cosmetic changes can be very important. Take for instance, the Text tool. This has remained pretty much unchanged for around seven years. Select the Text tool in earlier versions of *The GIMP*, and then click somewhere on the image: up comes the requestor. Here you can fiddle around with the settings, hit OK and the text appears on the image. Then when you realise that it's completely the wrong size, or the font looks terrible and you go back and do it again. And again.

In *GIMP 2.0*, this trial-and-error is a thing of the past. For a start, the docked panel dealing with text now has a Font Preview option in the menu. While it only shows a capital and lower-case A, it does give enough of a hint. Plus, whatever text you type is now previewed in real-time on the actual image – changing the type size or font will let you see what it could look like immediately. So although this is mainly a cosmetic change, it actually makes the business of adding type to images far quicker and less frustrating.

One area of functionality that has seen a major overhaul is the system for handling paths. Paths were always handled in quite a primitive fashion in earlier versions of *The GIMP*, and had to enclose some sort of area. There is no longer any need for all paths to be closed, nor does it need to be entirely composed of the same type of nodes to distinguish between creation, editing
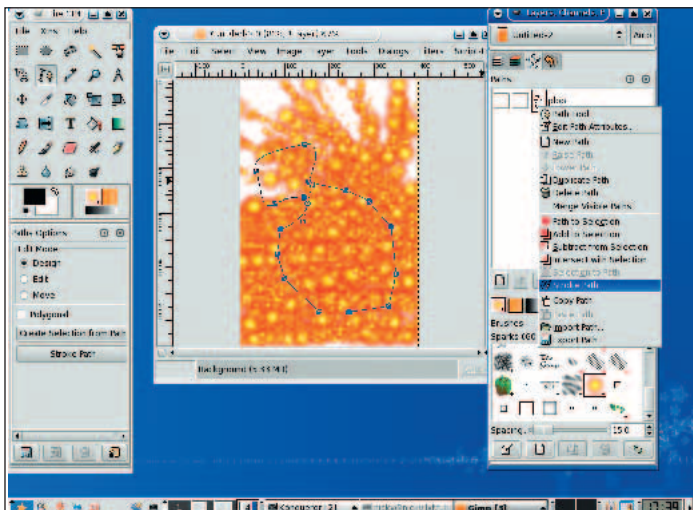
Enhanced path support makes handling SVG images easier, and opens up new uses for this often overlooked feature.

The Undo buffer now includes thumbnail views for easy regression – handy when experimenting with filters.

and transforming or moving the path. Of more interest to web designers is the fact that SVG images can be imported with the paths intact.

Things that are sorely missed
Probably the biggest, most glaring omission from the software is the handling of different colour models. If it's RGB you are after, fine. If you want grayscale, that's OK too. Want any other sort of colour model? Forget it!

This is a problem for a lot of people who want to use *The GIMP* more productively. CMYK images are the *de facto* standard in the world of print for example, simply because those are the colours of the inks used to print. Yes, you can use RGB images and convert them with whatever you use to print, but you do face the prospect of not really having the vaguest idea of what the output will look like.

Yes, CMYK does make it into *The GIMP 2* as a colour model for selecting colours, but that's as far as it goes. It isn't just the odd print-artist who is inconvenienced by this. A lack of CMYK support also means that *GIMP 2* is still completely unprepared for images that are created in this format that users might try to load in.

Better code
With what is trumpeted as a major release, there may be some understandable disappointment from users to discover that – apart from different icons and an overhauled look-and-feel – there isn't anything substantially different here. True, some long-term issues have been addressed, and it's certainly a winner on the usability

stakes, but in terms of features and functionality, its still way behind Corel's *Photopaint*, which briefly appeared on the Linux scene four years ago.

What we are promised is that, with a complete restructuring of the underlying code, the whole application is now more easily extensible. So, this should be the beginning of a golden age of *GIMP* coding, with the features flowing thick and fast from now on. Time will tell. **LXF**

NEW FEATURES
- New GUI using *GTK+ 2* toolkit
- Interactive text editing
- Enhanced path support
- Menu bar on image window
- Full-screen mode
- Toggle viewable effects
- Tab and dock interface
- Theme support
- Image templates
- New layer modes
- Crop using active selection
- New Color display filters for Gamma correction *etc*.
- EXIF data preserved in JPEGs
- SVG support
- Support for MNG animations
- New channel mixer filter

LINUX FORMAT VERDICT

FEATURES	**7/10**
PERFORMANCE	**8/10**
EASE OF USE	**8/10**
VALUE FOR MONEY	**10/10**

Obviously still the best Linux art application, but we could do with more up-to-date features next time – and useable CMYK handling for print use.

RATING **8/10**