

Enhance Computer Navigation With New Input Tools

Jack and Sue Drafahl

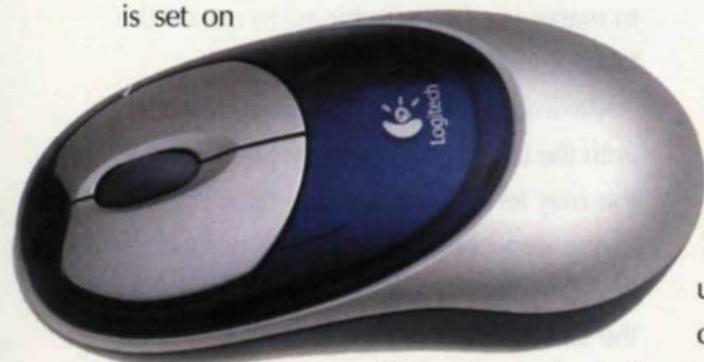


In the digital lab there is always concern about computer processor speed, hard disk space, output devices, and software upgrades. And, there are also some things that technicians take for granted, like the mouse or its counterparts. After all, it's just a simple interface that helps us communicate with the computer.



WE'VE MENTIONED the humble mouse many times in our articles as a human interface device or input tool, but in truth, ever since its invention the mouse has been one of the primary tools for image editing.

The basic mouse design uses a rubber ball inside an oval 3D device attached to a communication cable. When the mouse is set on



a flat surface, the ball inside rolls against small rollers that electronically determine the X or Y direction as you move the mouse. Manufacturers have even devised mouse pads in all shapes and colors to allow the roller ball to rotate smoothly. For years this simple concept has worked well, and a great many computers today still use this type of mechanical pointing device.

Although the mouse is a fairly simple device, there are still some problems that can affect its operation. The biggest issue is dust and residue in the work environment that eventually get caught up inside the mouse.

We realize that most labs pride them-

selves on cleanliness, but even the smallest particles can collect on the inside rollers. When the rollers inside get dirty, the mouse starts to hesitate, become jerky, and may even stop functioning. Don't worry; you can just take it apart and give it a periodic cleaning.

More Interface Options

Another time saving solution for the digital photo lab is the optical mouse. The ball and rollers inside the mouse have been replaced with an optical system. It sends out a confined beam of light that is picked up by a sensor. Any movement of the optical mouse on a flat surface will electronically read out as X and Y coordinates on your editing screen. With this input device, there is no more worry about dust rolling up inside, which allows smoother movement, making it easier to operate.

The next problem confronting the mouse user is the communications cord. Many a photo editor has been frustrated by the mouse stopping because the cable is hung up or too short. The solution was a modification of the optical mouse by adding a transmitter box at the end of the communications cable, and a receiver inside the mouse. This required that the cordless mouse use batteries, but the added weight is not a factor, as the mouse sets on a solid surface.

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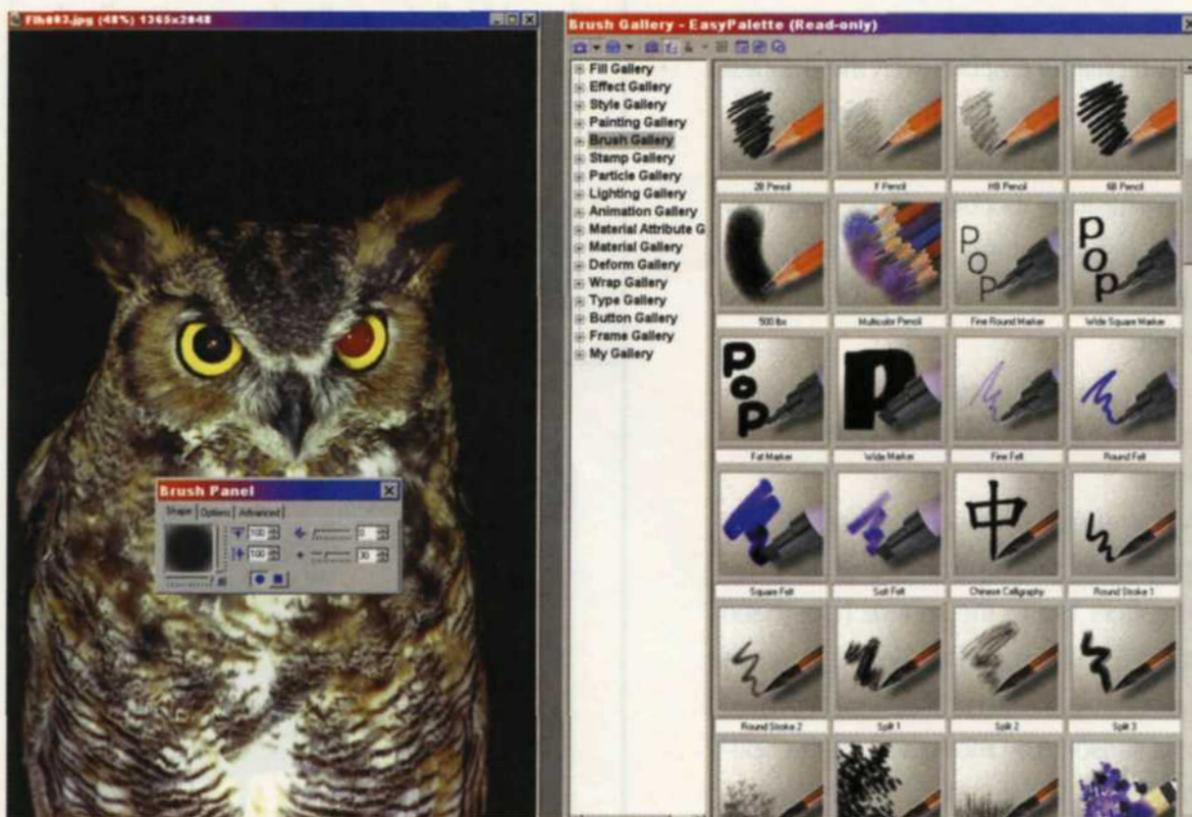
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The pressure of the Wacom tablet pen will determine the size of the brush as you paint on brush strokes. Corel Painter 7 uses a variety of special brushes that take advantage of this feature.



The pressure sensitive tablet brush can also be used with the Ulead PhotoImpact 7 photo editing program to remove the red eye in this image.

Radio-Controlled and Cordless

For those who still like the older roller ball configuration, there are radio-controlled roller ball versions that are cordless. This mouse uses batteries, but the transmitter draws its power from the computer link.

Another version of the cordless radio-controlled mouse is often used for laptop presenters who want full control over their presentations. This type of mouse is carried by the presenter as he or she moves around the room speaking. It usually has a left and right button for forward and reverse plus a

thumb roller on the top allowing cursor control.

Over the years the mouse complexity has increased beyond the customary two or three buttons. These additional buttons are used to program custom functions to save you editing time. For example, if you open a lot of files, you could program one button just to open files. If you do a lot of copy and pasting, you could assign different buttons for those tasks.

Another nice time saving addition is the finger roller wheel found in the center of some of the more expensive mouse units.

When your program supports this wheel rotation, you can scroll up and down the screen instead of using the scroll bar on the right side of the menu. We find that this feature saves us lots of editing time when panning up and down an image. Some units will also allow you to use the Alt key in conjunction with the roller wheel to scroll left and right across your image.

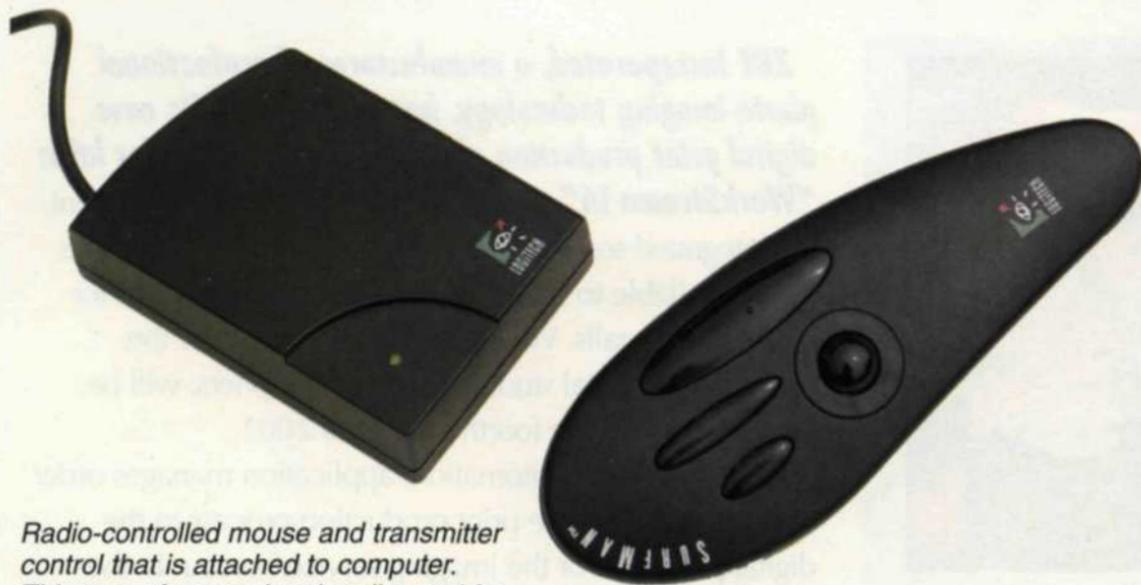
The Wacom Tablet

If your lab is serious about getting into image editing, you should consider moving up to an editing tablet like the Wacom Tablet. Most of the more advanced editing programs will support Wacom compatible tablets. They come in different sizes and your choice will be determined by space allocation and budget.

Tablets generally use a pen and mouse that move across a pad that represents your editing screen. The upper left corner of the tablet becomes the upper left corner of your editing screen and the lower right corresponds to the right edge of the screen. The mouse is cordless, very accurate, easy to maneuver, but is restricted to use on the tablet area on the tablet.

Maximum image editing control comes with the tablet pen, but for the mouse user, this may feel alien at first attempts. The end of the pen corresponds to the pointer on the screen and as you move the pen across the tablet, its movement is represented on the screen. If you use certain brush types that support pressure settings, the harder you press, the more the brush is applied. You can also vary your brush strokes in width depending on the applied pressure.

You will also find that the tablet pen allows for quicker editing, but it takes some practice. Let's say that you are using the dodge tool lighten an area in the image. You will quickly find that light pressure slightly lightens the area and increased pressure lightens more. The same goes for cloning. As you increase the pressure, the cloning becomes larger. If your program supports the tilt function of your pen, you can tilt it to create a pattern that resembles an airbrush. Don't get frustrated, just



Radio-controlled mouse and transmitter control that is attached to computer. This type of mouse is primarily used for lecturing and live presentations.



Optical sensor on bottom of cordless optical mouse

remember that practice makes perfect!

Guess what's at the opposite end of the brush? Yes, the eraser-well, it's really not, but it sure acts like one. When you turn the pen over, you can use it to remove areas where you might have done excessive editing. That never happens, right?

If you need to use the right or left click function, you can press the front or back edge of a button on the side of the pen to access those commands. Some pens will even have a finger wheel that allows for quick scrolling. Most tablets will also have a software/hardware combination of commands at the top of the tablet to access the most common commands. Move the pen across the top of the screen, and the function number will appear. Simply press the one you want and the operation is completed.

After using the Wacom tablet for some time, we found that we liked to switch back and forth between the tablet mouse and pen

depending on the editing project. The 6x8-inch tablet worked best in the space beside our computer. We didn't like to use the entire editing area of the tablet, so we used one of the tablet's custom controls to define our work area. Once we became accustomed to using the tablet, we found it more accurate, and faster to use for image editing than a traditional mouse.

There are many more input tools available for use in your lab than we covered here. The key is to understand that you have a choice, so take your time and select the ones that allow you to work efficiently and accurately. Remember that the secret to success in today's digital lab is the effective use of time. The proper input tools may help you avoid a bottleneck that can cut into your profit. ●

Jack and Sue Drafahl are freelance writers and professional photographers living on the Oregon Coast.

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