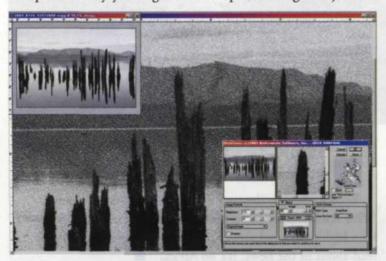# Plug-in Magic

Add versatility and capability to your image-editing software

Text and photos by Jack and Sue Drafahl

One of the most popular software editing tools is the plug-in filter. It's a small program located inside an editing program that further extends the editing capabilities. Since the most popular editing program is Adobe Photoshop (www.adobe.com), plug-in filters are designed by third-party companies to accept a standard referred to as Photoshop-compatible. Other software programs like Corel Paint (www.corel.com), Ulead PhotoImpact (www.ulead.com), and Jasc Software Paint Shop Pro (www.jasc.com) have their own proprietary plug-in filters, but will also accept Photoshop compatible filters.

Plug-in filters are unique in that they are not replaced with new version numbers like software programs. Instead, companies just come out with new filters. The older plug-in filters still work, but the new ones boast improvements or new innovations that provide more control over your images. We still use plug-in filters that we initially installed on our computers many years ago. For example, although we just

The EtchTone plug-in filter from Andromeda can convert sharp edges in a black-and-white photograph into a metal etch effect.
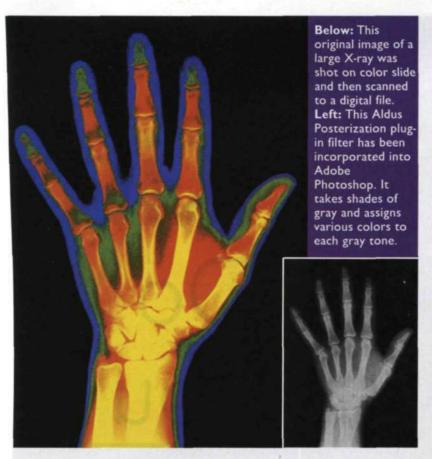
updated to Adobe Photoshop 7.0, we're still using plug-in filters that we installed with Photoshop 5.

In researching the plug-in market, we found more than 100 companies that have commercially created thousands of plug-in filters. In addition, we found hundreds of other Web sites with free, almost free, or trial plug-in filters. Our Web search for "Photoshop Plug-ins" resulted in more than 80,000 hits listing everything from commercial products to tips on how to make your own filters.

In order to make some sense of it all, we decided to break the filters down into four groups: creative, image correction, file conversion, and hardware interfaces.

The largest of the groups is the creative plug-in filters which allow you to do just about anything you can visualize. You can set objects on fire, freeze them, convert images to paintings, add the sun, create artistic borders, zoom blur to a specific point, turn the sky from blue to orange, add 3D effects, and much more. There are so many that it would take a lifetime to explore all the effects that are available today.

Best of all, they are simple to use. Simply load in the photographic image to which you will be applying the plug-in effect, and then go to the plug-in filters pulldown menu. You will be presented with a long list of plug-in filters grouped by manufacturer. When you click on a manufacturer's name, you will be given a list of all their filters with names that closely resemble their effect. Generally you are provided a small thumbnail preview showing before and after effect. You also have additional creative control of the effect with various slider controls. When you are

area in an image that you want removed and replaced by the background, then this is your tool. Just select the area you want to disappear, and select the Smart Fill filter. A menu will appear displaying several sliders that help provide the best blend.

Several filters, like Digital ROC from Applied Science Fiction (www.asf.com), have migrated from scanner hardware applications. They enable a filter to be used on images not scanned or scanned on hardware without Digital ROC capability.

For those of you having trouble color balancing difficult images, the iCorrect plug-in filter from Pictographic (www.picto.com) will be a godsend. It allows you to use a neutral, flesh, foliage, or sky eyedropper to balance various
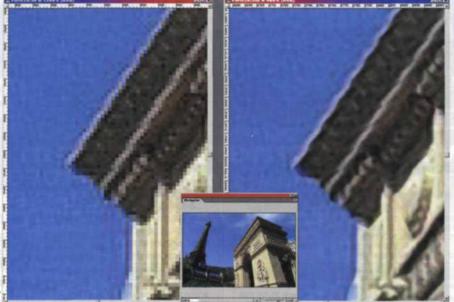

satisfied, just click on the desired plug-in filter and its effect will be applied to your image. Really simple, huh?

For example, if you select the fire plug-in filter, you may be given choices of flame color, length of the flame, a variance in size, and flame movement. After you touch the OK or Apply button, the plug-in filter goes to work on your image. The process can take from a couple seconds to several minutes depending on the complexity of the plug-in filter and the size of the image file. Some of the latest creative plug-in filters are so large and complex that the main program is minimized while the plug-in filter is at work. This type of plug-in filter is called a jump program, and acts like the ImageReady program that is installed with Adobe Photoshop.

The second group of plug-in filters is used for everything from basic image corrections to enabling you to add a lens flare. It's sort of funny, as it took us years to work on techniques to reduce a lens flare, and now we want to put it back! With these filters you can correct color balance and faded images, perform scratch removal, increase shadow detail, control sharpness, and remove unwanted blemishes. These filters give increased control over a specific filter application when compared to a similar function in the main editing program.

At first only the basic image problems were addressed with plug-in filters, but as technology improved, so did the filter quality. A most recent technology break through called Smart Fill comes from Alien Skin's (www.alienskin.com) Image Doctor series of plug-in filters. When you have an

portions of the image. You can use more than a dozen different eyedropper selections to color balance all the different color layers in the image.

The third group of filters is a small group of file conversion plug-in filters. Depending on the manufacturer and type of plug-in the filter, it will either be located in the applications file manager, or the import/export command. Most of these filters concentrate on the conversion of JPEG, TIF, and BMP files to the Fractal or Wavelet compression formats or combinations of both. The advantage of these

LizardTech's Genuine Fractals Print Pro can increase the size of a file by more than 1000%. This reduces the size of the image pixels and increases the detail.

You find that you have a trial version mixed in with the same purchased product. The solution is to start using a plug-in manager to control how the plug-in directory interfaces with your editing program.

We checked the Web in a search for a "plug-in manager" and found several choices, but selected Plug-in Commander Pro from The Plugin Site (www.thepluginsite.com) to organize our ever-increasing plug-in directory. This program will search your entire computer and catalog all types of plug-ins including Photoshop-compatible plug-ins, other editing-software plug-ins, video-editing plug-ins, Internet-browser plug-ins, and 3D object-editing programs. The program then helps you organize your plug-ins, delete those that you no longer use, and convert filter factory filters from one program to another.

plug-in filter formats is that the files are usually smaller than JPEG, higher in quality, and allow larger print enlargements.

For example, Genuine Fractals Print Pro from LizardTech (www.lizardtech.com) can take an eight-megabyte file, save it out as a Fractals file format and then you can reload the file up to one gigabyte in size with no JPEG jaggies visible at mural size. Wow!

The forth group of plug-in filters is designed to interface with various hardware devices. In most cases, these hardware devices can operate as a stand alone, but the convenience of directly importing images from the hardware into the editing program makes these plug-ins valuable editing tools. Film scanners, digital cameras, monitor calibration devices, film recorders, and pen or mouse tablets are just a few of the plug-in devices available today.

One of the newest hardware plug-ins to come into our lab was the SilverFast (www.silverfast.com) Nikon Scanning software. This high-tech scanner plug-in expands on many of the scanner features by providing more sophisticated control. A second version of the plug-in called Silver HDR is used as an after-the-fact application for features you did not modify during the initial scan such as scratch removal.

Another exciting hardware plug-in is Kodak's (www.kodak.com) new ERI (Extended Range Imaging). It imports a new JPEG format from the Kodak DCS digital cameras, which expands the exposure latitude up to four stops.

If you get as excited about plug-in filters as we do, you may find that over time your plug-in directory will start getting full.

The best part of the plug-in world is that most program creators offer a trial or demo program so you can see if you like it. When you find one you like, most companies make arrangements so you can download the full version, or unlock the limited plug-in with a serial number via email.

We have been so impressed with potential of the plug-in world that we have convinced our book editor at Amherst Media (www.amherstmedia.com) to allow us to produce a complete guide to Adobe Photoshop-compatible plug-in filters that will be available Spring 2004. Check out our Web site (www.jackandsue-drafahl.com) for information about our upcoming workshops, trips, seminars or to order autographed copies of our books. ∎

Above Left: This image was overexposed by two stops (left), corrected with traditional Photoshop tools (center), and fully corrected with the new ERI plug-in filter (right). **Below:** This original portrait was intentionally overexposed by two stops. **Below Left:** The image was repaired with a special ERI filter that is available with high-end Kodak digital SLRs.