Adobe CS6 back in black

The new version of Photoshop's dark background hints that Adobe has something different in store with this latest iteration of the Creative Suite, we're now on CS6, and it does, introducing genuinely improved processing performance, new and extended tools and capabilities and refinements to interfaces across the range.

As the default software for education and the creative industries, there's not much choice but to accept what Adobe is offering up, it's comforting though that this version of CS is a step forward and not a reshuffle.

Grey/black background aside, past users will find the interface familiar, tools are in their regular places and some of the more popular ones have been placed up front, like the adjustment tools in Photoshop.

"We've found that the best way to meet our customers' expectations is to ask them what they want. One of the things that we always hear is that users like to be able to move between the different products in the range and find some familiarity there," Adobe Creative Suite Product Marketing Manager Michael Stoddart says.

This version of CS has emphasised transferability of skills.

And Adobe has kept an eye on the way designers' work is changing with multiple media and versions and inexorable migration towards digital platforms – new features enhance and speed up the repurposing of design work.

But much of the revolutionary stuff comes from CS6's underlying Mercury graphics engine, which has souped up performance by giving the software access to all of the RAM on a compatible computer – 64 bit support – so effects in Photoshop and memory hungry vector graphics in Illustrator chug along happily.

A standout feature of the last Photoshop was Content Aware Fill, which has been extended to become Content Aware Move. Items can be moved around in an image while the tool seamlessly fills in the background, very cool.

Photoshop's new 3D image rendering is nice new feature, you can extrude text and manipulate the orientation of scenes and elements, and quickly too. That's just to mention a couple, there are more than 50 new features and enhancements in this version.

In page layout software InDesign, CS6 files can be linked so work performed on one layout can be immediately replicated in another with a single command. Other tools like alternate layouts and liquid layouts let you see how a certain type of content might appear on tablet or mobile devices as well as on the printed page.

Illustrator CS6 sports a new tracing engine so you can easily copy and convert imported
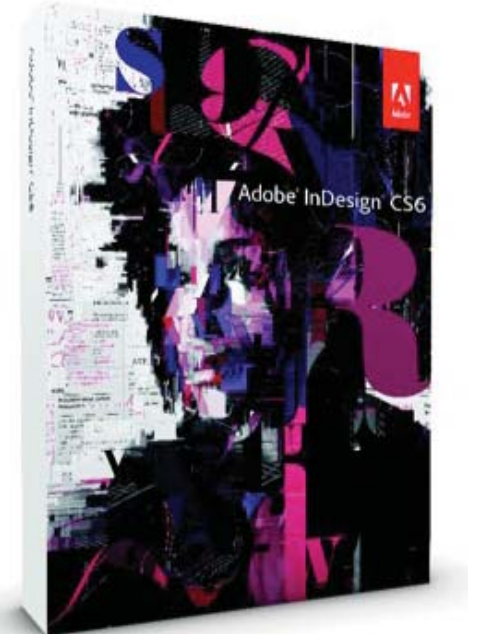
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images into vectors. Again, the underlying Mercury graphics engine delivers the same industry standard illustration software but at breakneck speed, there is even a noticeable difference in the way the mouse flits nimbly across the workspace.

Apps, apps, apps, everyone's talking about apps and Adobe has listened, making the design of apps in native languages iOs, Android and Blackberry very easy with Flash Professional. Designers can test and debug on locally connected mobile devices or a mobile emulator. Speed coding is accessed through enhanced tools and interactive step-through debugging.

New in Dreamweaver CS6 are fluid grid layouts, which let users easily reinterpret work for phone, tablet, and desktop screen resolutions. This was time consuming in the past because the designer had to create each as a separate project with separate elements and style sheets.

Fluid grid layouts are like visual starter templates that enable you to begin designing multiscreen projects quickly. The layouts are generated using HTML5 and CSS3 code that displays in current browsers.

The new CSS Transitions panel in Dreamweaver CS6 enables you to visually create transitions that are written in CSS3 code making for a nice snappy result, no JavaScript or other libraries are required. It's as easy as opening the CSS Transitions panel and using the interface to create transformations.

Adobe Idea is rapidly becoming a favourite iPad app for designers, using your finger or a stylus you can sketch and develop ideas on the spot and access a surprising level of sophistication. Everyone at a meeting can have immediate input, which crystalises the process of sharing thoughts and initial sketches can be easily exported to be finished in Photoshop or Illustrator.

One valid criticism of Adobe is that the software is expensive, Photoshop alone can set you back $700, which is a lot, especially if you're only using it occasionally. Now though, for a membership fee of $62.99 a month Adobe's Creative Cloud lets you use any part of the CS suite as needed, downloading the entire suite or single applications as and when required. The student pricing for Creative Cloud is $24.99 per month.

"The Creative Cloud addresses the peaks and troughs of workflow, an agency or creative professional can save significantly by using Adobe products as needed," Mr Stoddart says.

Another benefit of Creative Cloud is that it provides access to other Adobe tools outside of the Creative Suite such as Adobe Muse – a web design program – which has been put together with a focus on ease of use for designers, enabling them to build smart looking websites while working in a way familiar to them, all without needing to know a line of code. ET