

Infinately Interesting

A Review of INFINITE FX

by Junior Hansen, Jr.

Even if you have just noodled around with graphics or paint programs you are probably familiar with the concept of plug-ins. Plug-ins reside in a special folder and are accessed by the program of choice at launch time; they inevitably make their presence known in a Filters pull-down menu.

Plug-ins extend the power of a program's own offerings, supplementing areas untapped or unrealized by the original programmers. Collections of plug-ins are offered as intriguing packages by enterprising third party vendors. The nature of the plug-in architecture dictates that what is pluggable for one program is usable by any other program that conforms to the first program's architecture. Raster-based programs like Photoshop, Painter, and even Premiere, share and share alike.

Interestingly enough, plug-ins are a relatively new concept in the world of vector-based drawing programs, such as Freehand or Illustrator. The first company to enter the market was Roswell, Georgia-based BeInfinite, Inc, with the INFINITE FX Plug-in for Adobe Illustrator and Macromedia Freehand; it was introduced at Macworld San Francisco, 1995. More recent players include Letraset Envelopes, which only manipulates envelopes, and—coming soon to a plug-in folder near you—KPT Vector Effects Extensions from HSC Software (which from all early accounts does very cool extruded text—can't wait to see that).

BeInfinite's set of 55 plug-ins is an essential addition to any graphic artist's tool belt. The traditional envelope-warping effects (i.e. pinch, balloon, waves, twist) as well as BeInfinite's own envelopes and distortions are included, along with built-in Photoshop filters and other effects. The plug-ins themselves are extremely well visualized within the 3-D preview interface

that allows for direct manipulation and immediate parameter tweaks.

Illustrator's Filter menu and Freehand's Xtras menu house all 55 INFINITE FX filters as a group and are revealed in a singular preview interface. To choose one of the 55 effects, a quick click to the checkboard button accesses the Filter Grid. The grid interface is color-coded and organized quite lucidly, making for ease of use and elegance in dealing with what is essentially a list of 55 filters. Traditional envelope effects are listed in green, while envelope FX unique to BeInfinite's are listed in gold. FXes listed in blue are distortion FXes, while those listed in yellow are curve effects; Photoshop filters are purple; and the ones listed in light blue are "uncharacterizable" effects that have to be used to be fully appreciated—a sort of catch-all category.

Some of the plug-ins have intriguing but not immediately apparent names. Not to worry—even a first-time user can demystify MetaPunk with the online Help which describes each effect.

Feedback is immediate (the faster the machine, the faster the effect). Once your choice is made, you return to the main in-

terface to view the distortion, set parameters for the effect, and further position your image in 3-D space.

The Preview window allows for visual manipulation and spontaneous interaction. The 3-D transformation is invaluable in helping to visualize a particularly intense effect by allowing you to crawl around underneath it in virtual space, as opposed to looking at it straight on. Being able to position your graphic at this moment of creation (or distortion) and within the preview mode saves time in decision making. This level of control is a bit mesmerizing and will give you a feeling of touch, not often experienced with graphics software. It is very hands-on and inviting.

Tweak Your Heart Out

If you create by numbers, the interface allows you to tweak and adjust each effect's parameters specifically (none use all 4 parameters, but this is an interface with room to grow into future offerings).

The parameter name appears when available—above its own colorful thermometer/slider. Alternatively you can control these by a simple click and drag to

Pure Transformation	Balloon Up and Down	Wiggle Everything	AntiSpin It	Waves Atmospheric
Cornerize	Balloon Sideways	Wiggle Corner	Blast	Waves Oceanic
Corner Inward	Balloon Everywhichway	Wiggle Rockers	Fisheye	Vertical Rippling
Corner Outward	Bend Up	Wiggle Inbound	Motion Blur	Horizontal Rippling
Continuous One Way	Bend Sideways	Wiggle Outbound	Pinch	Smart Add Points
Continuous the Other Way	Shear Vertical	Horizontal Wiggle	Pond Ripples	Cylinder Wrap
Exaggerate	Shear Horizontal	Vertical Wiggle	Spin It	MetaBloat
Flip Flop	Taper Up	Horizontal Corner Wiggle	Zig Around	MetaCalligraphy
Perp	Taper Down	Horizontal	Zoom	MetaPunk

Figure 1. The FX Filter Grid allows quick and easy access to 55 effects, grouped by colors.

the desired destination level or by keyboard; type in a specific number or tap the arrow keys up and down. This flexibility speaks to across-the-board “usability” not to mention the precision often needed by power users. However you prefer to tweak, the results are quickly reflected in the preview window, allowing for further adjustments.

INFINITE FX runs in native mode for Power Macs, and inhabits less than a meg of hard drive space. The single high density floppy comes in a CD-ROM jewel case, with a 12-page manual. The manual is concise and to the point and answered all my questions, even to the point of clueing me into some INFINITE FX Easter Eggs.

Plug-ins such as these serve the artist and non-artist alike. Those who think they have no artistic skills or talent will be empowered to explore and discover, while serious power users can intuitively utilize the power at their fingertips. These are powerful additions to already-powerful programs. Any Illustrator or Freehand artist will want these tools at their disposal.

Freeware Whose Time Has Come

In order to contort, bend, or otherwise perform creative magic on an object in a vector-based drawing program, that object has to have enough points to work with. A stock rectangle with four points (one in each corner) cannot be made to ripple like a flag unless you add extra points along the way. Similarly, text needs to be converted to outlines, which adds the appropriate number of points required to define each character. As you work with elements of varying complexity, inevitably extra points will be added (a Smart Add Points choice with INFINITE FX, a default with others). The final graphic can become cumbersome and inelegant where file size, screen redraw, and printing are concerned.

In knowledgeable response to the needs of other artists, the BeInfinite team has recently created Smart Remove Points, a stand-alone Freeware filter with one, simple function—the removal of geometrically redundant points. An extremely valuable utility created and given away. No matter what filters (or whose) you used to create your image, Smart Remove Points will work its magic effectively.

The first-of-its-kind, free-floating non-rectangular interface (designed by

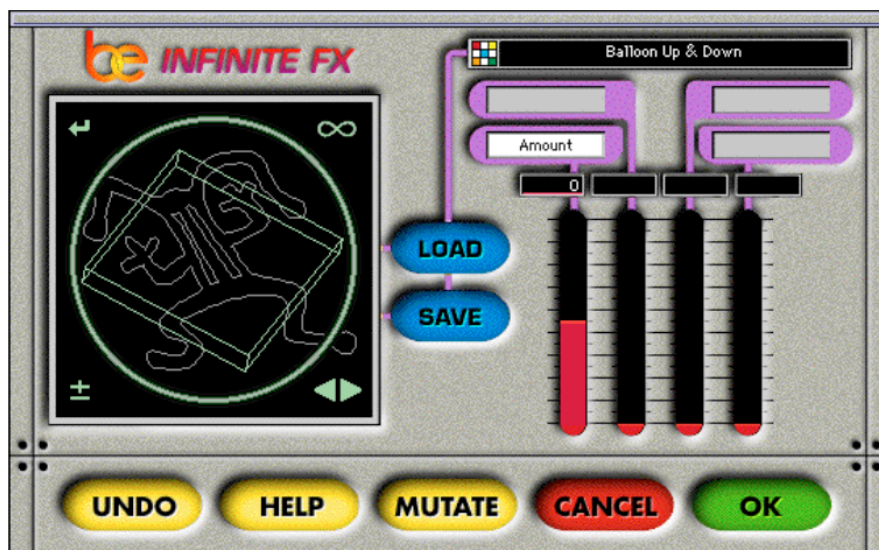


Figure 2. The INFINITE FX interface and Preview window, showing a 3-D transformation on a Petroglyph character (Shift-H).

digital artist Bert Monroy, and most likely soon-to-be co-opted by others for its coolness factor) offers a Do It button, and another button which accesses the INFINITE FX interface. Look for it uploaded everywhere, and download it as soon as possible.

The Who behind the FX

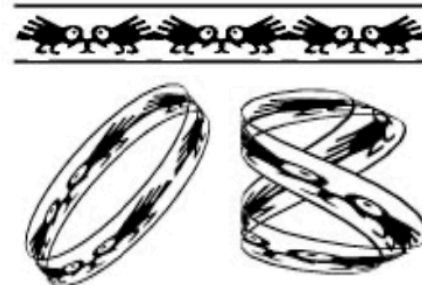
The team of programmers and artists creating these plug-ins have been creating tools for artists since the early days of computer graphics, so understanding the user’s needs and user interface is second nature.

Programmers Keith McGregor (PixelPaint Pro) and Darin Buck worked together on the first 55 plug-ins in a frenzied 20-hour burst, in what Keith describes as more a process of getting a great idea out of his system and into code.

The interface designed by Bert Monroy and his long-time collaborator, David Biedny, speaks for itself. Both are considered technical and creative pioneers in interactivity circles. They have written, consulted, and otherwise been engaged in most cutting-edge projects within the industry, since its inception.

Besides his lecture, teaching, and film-consulting credentials, Monroy’s creative work as an artist has accompanied the introduction of software (ImageStudio, PixelPaint) and books about computer art (*Photoshop A to Z*, *Making Art on a Macintosh*, *The Photoshop WOW Book*, and *The Art of Digital Painting*).

Biedny is an industry pundit whose continuing work in interactive multimedia includes creating digital effects for Industrial Light and Magic and serving as Contributing Editor to a fistful of industry periodicals. He also co-authored *The Official Photoshop Handbook* with Monroy. ☐



Figures 4, 5, 6. Cylinder Wrap 1, 2, 3. I started with the Petroglyph font, created outlines, and used Cylinder Wrap after adding points with Smart Add Points. I then re-applied Cylinder Wrap to the already-Cylinder-Wrapped art.

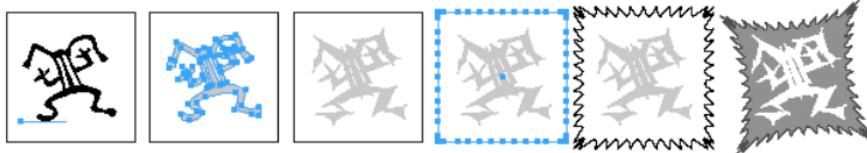


Figure 7. Petroglyph Series. I started with a Petroglyph character in a box, created an outline of the font in the second box, and applied the TCB filter in the third. Then, I added points to the fourth box, applied the MetaBloat filter to the fifth box, and then used the Balloon EveryWhichWay filter and a 3-D transform on the sixth.