Filmstrips from photos

MOVING MOMENTS

If you want to capture the attention of your slide show viewer, you need to offer something special. PhotoFilmStrip not only animates your photos, it adds music, too. **BY THOMAS LEICHTENSTERN**

The PhotoFilmStrip [1] Python software creates filmstrips from your pictures in various formats and resolutions. Transitions and background music can be built into your movie-like slide show. Luckily, the PhotoFilmStrip project put a lot of thought into an intuitive user interface, so making your masterpiece is easier than you might think.

Installing PhotoFilmStrip under Ubuntu 12.04 is easy because the PhotoFilmStrip 1.4.0 software is already in the Ubuntu Software Center. If you want to use the newest version – 1.5.0, which is what we used for this article – go to the project website and download the Debian package [2], which you can install by clicking the file manager. To produce the movies, you also need to install the *mencoder* and *non-free-codecs* packages, which you can find in the Medibuntu repository.

First Project

To create a new project, click the icon of the empty sheet and plus sign in the middle of the Welcome window. In the next dialog box, enter the *Project name* and *Folder* location so the software can store your work (Figure 1).

Depending on where you want to see your filmstrips later, select an *Aspect ratio* of *16:9*, *4:3*, or *3:2*. Note that the software doesn't fit the picture to the frame, but crops it if the aspect ratio doesn't match. Photos from an SLR camera usually have an aspect ratio of *2:3*, and compact cameras are *3:4*.

The *Total length* value restricts your project either to a user-determined duration or it is matched up with the length of the accompanying audio file. If you use fewer pictures, you can stretch out the Ken Burns Effect. (Documentary

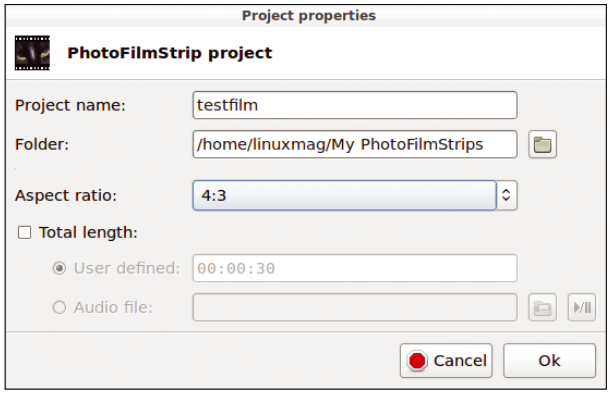

Figure 1: In the project properties, which you can't change once you set them, you can also set the aspect ratio of your PhotoFilmStrip project.

filmmaker Ken Burns is known for his technique of slowly tracking his camera across a still shot and then zooming in, which makes the image more alive.) You are limited to a single audio clip per project. Except for changing the film length, project properties cannot be changed later.

Picture by Picture

After you create the project, an empty main window will appear with a plus symbol in the middle. Clicking the plus symbol opens a file browser so you can navigate to the images you want to include. Clicking each image opens it as a thumbnail. Use Ctrl while clicking to select multiple images. The software currently supports images in the popular formats such as JPEG and PNG only, but not video clips.

When the pictures are added, they show up in simulated movie frames at the bottom of the screen. If there are more pictures than can appear on the screen, a scrollbar appears to help you navigate, or you can use the mouse wheel. Change the location of images on the filmstrip by dragging and dropping them.

The main window (Figure 2) shows the images in two views, each with a movable white rectangle. The left image appears at the beginning of the frame sequence, and the right image is the next one in the sequence. Use handles on the rectangle edges to crop the image. To move the image, move the cursor to the middle of the image and click the left mouse button. To set the image coordinates manually, click the *Adjust motion manual* icon between the two images, then in the subsequent dialog box, set the X and Y coordinates, along with the size of the starting and target positions.

Set how long you want PhotoFilmStrip to display each image with the *Duration* value, in seconds. Under it, you can set the *Transition*, which, unfortunately, provides only *Fade* and *Roll*. The Effect settings are not much better in that you have a choice of only *Black and White* and *Sepia tone*. Follow-up adjustments to pictures are limited to rotating them.

Using the *Subtitle* entry, you can add descriptions or commentary for each picture. The software stores these subtitles in the {*FILMSTRIP-TITLE*}.*srt* file. Ubuntu's standard Totem player shows these subtitles when you click *View* | *Subtitles* | *Select*. VLC is a bit smarter and automatically recognizes the subtitles.

Film Away

To transform the images with the chosen settings into a movie, click the check mark icon on the menu bar to open the *Render filmstrip* dialog box (Figure 3). Under Profile, you can select various format sizes: *VCD*, *Medium*, and *Full-HD*. The software generally determines the profile by the selected aspect ratio.

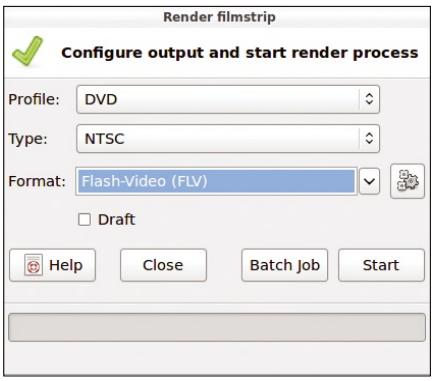

Figure 3: The Render module allows you to generate filmstrips up to Full-HD resolution.

The *Format* setting sets the audio and video encoding for the filmstrip. Selections include *MPEG-XVid/MP3 (AVI)*, *MPEG(1/2)-Video (MPG)*, *Flash-Video (FLV)*, *Motion-JPEG (AVI)*, and even *Single pictures*, which saves all frames as separate JPEG files. The little gear icon next to Format opens an Output properties dialog box so that you set the *Bitrate* and, through *RenderSubtitle true*, save the subtitles as part of the filmstrip.

The quality of the filmstrips created by PhotoFilmStrip was convincing, but a moiré effect haunted the XVID format with very slow movements, especially in fine details such as hair, grass, and clothing patterns; the same thing didn't happen with Flash format.

Fazit

PhotoFilmStrip made a good first impression, even if the software rendered with one audio file only and no video clips. Additional transition types wouldn't hurt either. Still, PhotoFilmStrip was easier to use than many of its competitors. The program also wins points in its encoding, in that it provides the XVID codec and even extends to Full-HD resolution. ■

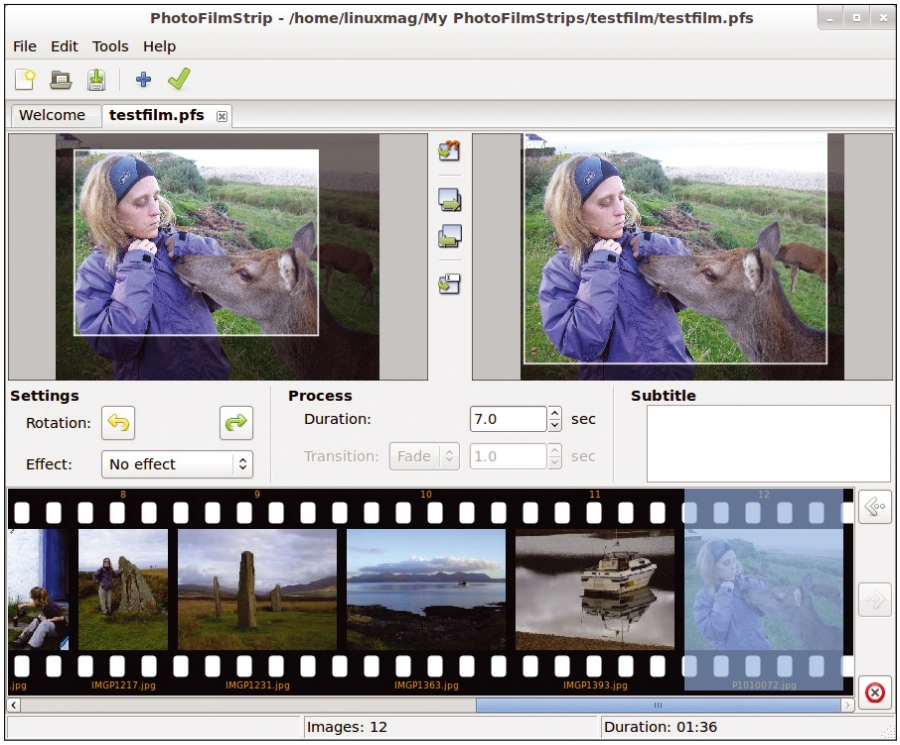

Figure 2: Use the movable image rectangles on the before and after shots to determine how you want the sequence of pictures to flow.

INFO

[1] PhotoFilmStrip *http://www.photofilmstrip.org/1-1-Home.html*

[2] Download PhotoFilmStrip: *http://www.photofilmstrip.org/4-1-Download.html*