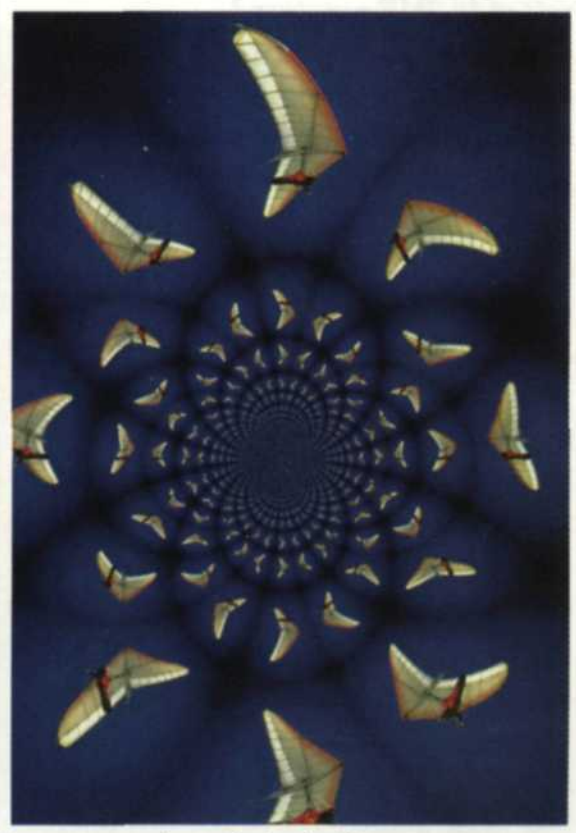
# PHOTOSHOP ACTIONS

Jack and Sue Drafahl

*Original image*

*Special effects were applied to image using a series of action command and plug-in filters*

*Original image*



*Special effects were applied to image using action commands and plug-in filters.*

One of the most powerful tools found in Adobe Photoshop is not an image editing tool at all. The "actions" function is one of the most advanced features, yet it is one of the simplest to use. Unfortunately, very few new Photoshop users even know this function exists, let alone enjoy the benefits.

NEW PHOTOSHOP users are anxious to start editing right away, so they only use the basic editing tools and struggle their way through the program's multitude of features. As they progress and gain confidence, they try their hand at the more complex editing tools. With tutorials and help tips, they become proficient at using the program, but often it is strictly by trial and error.

About this time Photoshop users start adding plug-in filters for additional effects. There are dozens of these filters on the market which range in price from several hundred dollars to "free" off the Internet.

These filters have a variety of controls that allow you to change the way the filter affects the image. Some use special file compression, others accomplish special effects on text objects, while others apply effects to an entire image.

The problem is that it takes several steps to accomplish the effect. Unless you are great at taking notes, or have a photographic memory, repeatability of an effect is almost impossible.

This is where the Actions function comes into play. You will find the Actions menu under the pulldown window at the top of the Photoshop screen. The Actions program works the same way a Macro function works in a word processor. Macros are a combination of functions recorded into one file that are activated with a hot key.

Actions combine Photoshop editing tools and plug-in filters into one file that is activated with a single press of the mouse button. Some of these Actions accomplish more than 50 functions, use a half dozen plug-in filters, and insert dozens of unique data values. Even if you could document this information, it would take forever to correctly re-enter the data each time. This is where Actions save the day.

Actions are primarily used for repetitive tasks or to create very complex special effects. To create a new Action, simply press "New Action" and a red box indicates that every function is being recorded. When you have applied all the editing functions or plug-in filters, simply stop the recording. Each Action is give a unique name and is added to your list. The next time you want to apply that combination of effects, simply touch that specific Action, and all the effects are applied to your image.

The best way to understand how these Actions work is look at a few we use when editing photos. Most were derived from trial and error on test images and then saved as a new Action. We will start with the repeat tasks and then progress to the more complex Actions.

## Grain Reduction

When we have a grainy high speed film image, we use our "Grain Reduction Action." This Action uses the despeckle filter followed by the sharpen filter. The despeckler reduces the grain a lot, but it also softens the image. That is why we use the sharpen filter—to bring the image sharpness back to the original spot, but with less grain.

## File Conversion

Another Action we use is what we call the "MacTiff Action." We use a PC for our image editing and many of the magazines we work for use a Mac. When we finish all the images for an article, we use the batch Action function and apply it to a group of images.

We sit back and watch the Action load in a file, convert it to a Tiff file, set it up for Mac, save it out, and close the file. Who says PC and Mac can't live together in harmony?

When we sold a group of images to a company for educational CDs, we used a special Action named for that specific client. That Action took a group of images, reduced the image size to 25%, sharpened, and converted them to Mac Tiff files. This Action processed over 650MB of large files down to a brand new set of CD images while we worked on other projects.

We have several versions of JPEG, Wavelet, and Fractal compression setups in the Actions menu. When we archive images, we open the batch Action and start the conversion process.

We never have to use an outside file conversion program to convert files, and we know they will always work in Photoshop. (Some file converters are not fully compatible with Photoshop, especially for Tiff files).

## Color-Gamma Correction

There are times when you will have a group of images all with the same color shift, or gamma errors. This is usually caused by poor scanning or poor film processing. Since these groups of images are unique, you can create a special Action to correct them all at one time.

Load in your first image and start recording the corrections you make to that image. When you have the final correction, turn off the record and it is saved to your Action menu. You then select the batch Action and apply it to all the images.

In no time the images are all fixed just like the first one. If you get images with a similar problem at a later date, you don't have to remember how to fix them. Just pull up that special Action and apply it to the new images.

*Text samples using Action type effects.*

### Thumbnail Preview

Images brought in from other programs may not have a thumbnail preview. You have to guess what the image looks like or use a "Thumbnail Action."

This Action loads the files and saves them in a duplicate directory. When all have been converted and you preview the thumbnails in the load menu, then you can safely delete the first directory. Vertical images come in sideways, so you can use a second Action to load these files, rotate, and resave them as new files.

### Memory Control

One of the features of Adobe Photoshop is the Undo function. As you work on images, Photoshop holds layers, clipboard, and filter applications in memory in case you want to back up a step. If you are working with several images at the same time, your computer memory may become overloaded and slow down when it goes to hard disk.

To access the purge control requires several steps. When we edit images, we use an action hot key that automatically purges all memory for editing. It is very fast and keeps our image editing at maximum speed.

### Special Effects

Combinations of plug-in filters can give you neon text, perspective shadows, exploding objects, fancy backgrounds, and a multitude of effects to extend your creative potential.

The best way to learn how to create these effects is to log onto the Net and type in Photoshop Actions. There are dozens of home pages dedicated to Photoshop plug-ins, filters and Actions. Some offer short trial periods and many are free. The best part is that the files are very small and you can download dozens in less than an hour.

When you load one of these new Actions, use the down arrows to open the Action and see what it does. It will list each step in plain English. If you like most of the Action but want to change one part, you can click on that line of instruction and change the val-

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ues, or even delete that step. Customizing is really simple.

### Setting up Groups of Actions

After you have mastered the Actions function, you may find yourself overloaded with too many. This will be especially true if you start downloading Actions from the Internet.

Fortunately, the Actions menu lets you form sub-groups that can be loaded and updated on a daily basis. You can have one group for file conversions, another for text effects, and one just for image editing.

Best of all, you can custom design Photoshop to your specific editing applications. Complex tasks can be repeated exactly the same way each time. Large batch processing of unique commands can be done unattended. You can create your own special effects that have your special technique embedded into the Action.

We guarantee you that the time it takes to learn to use Actions will be compensated for the first time you have to repeat a complex task. Take action and learn the Photoshop Actions.

*Jack and Sue Drafahl are digital imaging experts and professional photographers based near Portland, Ore.*

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