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Multimedia software

Final Cut Express 4 [MacUser]

COMPANY: Apple

PRICE: £129 (£109.78 ex VAT), upgrade £65 (£55.32 ex VAT)

RATING: 

ISSUE: 24 1 DATE: Jan 08

LATEST PRICES: £129.00 (1 Retailers)

Verdict: Needs: PowerPC G4 or better (Intel processor for AVCHD) + 1GB Ram + DVD drive + Mac OS X v10.4.10 or later + 500MB of available hard disk space + Additional 500MB to install LiveType content



Despite an extensive gestation period, [Final Cut Express 4](#) offers few major features over its predecessor. While the application has received some notable additions, oddly enough the new lower price (£129) is perhaps its headline feature.

Since stripping the latest iMovie of many of its more intermediate features, Apple's hope seems to be that aspirational iMovie users will eventually opt to upgrade to the now more affordable Final Cut Express 4. It will doubtlessly provide them with a more comprehensive feature set, but also force them to grapple a true professional timeline-based interface.

Installation is straightforward and once launched, the application interface is virtually indistinguishable from the previous version of Express and indeed its big brother, Final Cut Pro. While comforting for users familiar with Final Cut, expect a significant learning curve if migrating from iMovie 08. There's plenty of reading material to help you on the way, but it's provided as a PDF (all 1152 pages of it), rather than the enormous printed tomes of the Pro version. A more expedient introduction to the application are the tutorial movies at the Final Cut Express section of Apple's website, movies conspicuous in their absence from the installation DVD.

The open format timeline, introduced in Final Cut Pro 6, is of arguably greater practical use in the cheaper Express 4. Consumer video has diversified enormously of late, with personal footage collections often spanning several formats. Historically, it's always been problematic getting them all playing happily together in the same project. Thankfully, formats like DV, HDV and, if running an Intel-based Mac, AVCHD, can now all be cut together on the same timeline, without having to re-size and re-render.

Using the new log and transfer window with newer formats like AVCHD is also a far more pleasurable user experience than capturing from tape. It allows user-selected clips to be imported and converted to the Apple Intermediate Codec in any order, regardless of their respective position on the drive. Once on the timeline, Express also automatically adjusts aspect ratios, meaning HDV 16:9 footage gets black bars top and bottom when cut against DV 4:3.



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Projects also seem to interchange happily between Final Cut Pro 6 and Final Cut Express 4. Our projects made in Express, opened and amended in Pro, and then re-opened in Express, survived with all the features in tact. Sadly, this interchange isn't as smooth with the touted iMovie 08 import feature; while projects can be imported (via XML) from iMovie 08, all transitions are rendered as cross dissolves.

Furthermore, titles, music, sound effects and voice-overs are not exported, and nor are any colour adjustments, keyburn and cropping effects. In summary, the order of your clips and their duration on the timeline may make it to Express, but almost everything else is lost. The

practical execution of this feature is surprising given the lip service made about it in the marketing blurb.

There's bad news for fans of Soundtrack, too: it's missing from this version of Express. While most users new to Final Cut Express will unknowingly substitute its functionality with Garageband - the omission of Soundtrack is indicative of a worrying trend in Express. It isn't just Soundtrack that's missing; many of the LiveType effects have also disappeared in version 4. Again, newcomers are unlikely to feel short-changed, but existing Express users may feel aggrieved that existing program features are being stripped in this 'upgrade'.

And it isn't just applications themselves that are absent. Gone is the Export To functionality for both Soundtrack and Compressor. So, even if Compressor or

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Soundtrack exist on the host system, there is no simple way of exporting the project to them. Therefore, users of Express 3.5 who use LiveType or Soundtrack on a regular basis should consider skipping this upgrade, especially if they don't have an immediate need for the open format timeline.

Final Cut Express 4 remains excellent value for money considering its comprehensive feature set and pedigree. Thanks to its near identical interface, it also provides a sound and relatively affordable apprenticeship for the ubiquitous Pro version.

However, there is a distinct feeling that Final Cut, as Apple's flagship video-editing platform, is in danger of stagnating. Obvious improvements to usability and interface (J,K,L shuttling of Bin clips, contextual HUD interface, usable implementation of speed ramping) fail to be implemented with successive releases making the application feel a little tired. It's also a real shame there's no basic, user-friendly, export to .Mac, YouTube or iPhone, which means you are left with QuickTime conversion as your only export option.

Ultimately, Express 4 represents the most refined and affordable, intermediate version, of the Final Cut platform. However, we hope Apple considers revolutionising the user experience for future iterations.

By Ben Frain

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