Gimp: Creative

Gimp can do more with text than you might think, as our graphics guru **Michael J Hammel** demonstrates with his two beautiful assistants.

Our expert

Michael J Hammel is a contributor to the *Gimp* project and the author of three books on the subject, including his latest, *The Artist's Guide to Gimp Effects*.

Gimp is first and foremost a tool for working with raster images. Most desktop users will prefer to work with *Gimp* when dealing with their digital photographs but might choose other tools like *Inkscape* or *Scribus* when working with text. But don't be fooled: *Gimp* does a great job with text effects, and in ways that most people might think can only be done with vector applications.

This month I'm going to walk you through a little trick with text that my wife found in a design magazine. In that tutorial the process was handled using *InDesign*. *InDesign*, for those who don't use it, is a vector layout tool. It does clever things with text using boxes to align and block objects within the layout. This particular effect, which you can see in the cover image for this tutorial, turns out to be even easier in *Gimp* than described in the original *InDesign* tutorial.

Projects like this have important periphery components beyond just the text. This design requires a source image that has sufficient colour and contrast. Without colour and contrast the shapes within the image won't be recognisable through the text.

The project also requires a suitable font. The font needs to be thick and should not use any serifs. Serif fonts will make the final image appear cluttered, and in most cases won't allow as much detail from the source image to show through, even when bold versions of the serif font are used. It can also make it difficult to recognise the text from the image.

The goal of this project is to map an image on to text but keep the original image recognisable. *Gimp*'s text features make the actual design something that can be done in a few minutes and with a limited set of steps. So before we dive into that, let's take a look at some of these periphery issues involved when working on similar designs.

Select a stock image

To start the project, visit one of the many low-cost stock image sites and search for a human portrait. The picture we want needs to include two important features. The first is a solid coloured background. A cluttered background will make it harder to identify the subject of the image when we apply our text effect.

The second important feature is a fair amount of colour contrast. An all-black image would work just fine, but would end up being nothing more than shadow-filled text. For this project I selected a woman in a black dress with enough skin tones to provide some colour contrast. We'll add to that contrast with a soft vignette a little later.

When selecting stock images you should be aware of licensing issues. If the image is of inanimate objects, you're generally safe. If the image shows a recognisable face, then you'll need to make sure the publisher of the photo (whoever uploaded it) has obtained a model release from the subject of the image. Without the model release, you can't use the image in published work.

» **Last month** In last month's column, author Michael J. Hammel talked about using

design

› **The seated woman has a low contrast between background, skin and dress; the dancing woman is a much better image.**

Fortunately, most stock image sites will either require the photographer to submit the model release or let you know if no model release is available.

Working with comps

So you've scanned a few hundred images and found a few that might work. How can you tell how well they'll work? The answer comes from working with comps. A comp is a small version of a stock image that typically contains a watermark. Most of the stock image sites will allow you to download a comp or, if they don't explicitly offer them, will have large enough sample versions for viewing that you can download without paying for them.

Comps are for experimenting. They're often too small to use in final projects and would be inappropriate considering the watermark. But they're useful for testing an idea. The testing for this project requires only that we use a smaller font size that what we'll use in the final project. I used comps of several images before selecting the final image of the woman in the black dress. If the comps are too small you can double the image size for the experiment even if that pixellates the image.

This effect works best with thick, straight-edged fonts. Script fonts don't show the image very well, even when a bold face is used. In this tutorial I'm using the bold version of the Tahoma font but any sans font, probably using the bold face, will suffice.

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Times New Roman Bold

› **All three text samples are set to 18 pixels with -5 pixel line spacing and -2 pixel tracking.**

The first *Gimp*-specific tip for this tutorial is related to the Text tool options. Select the Text tool and then open the Tool Options dialog (Dialogs > Tool Options). Just above the button labelled 'Text Along Path' there are three options. These options are for, top to bottom, Indent, Line Spacing and Tracking. We won't be using the indent option but we do want to use the other two. We want the value in Line Spacing made smaller (to negative values) so that the lines of text will be as close as possible without overlapping.

Tracking sets the space between letters. This is similar to kerning but is not exactly identical. Again, the technical explanation is not important here. We just want to reduce this setting (also to negative numbers) to reduce the space between letters – the closer the better.

Quick tip

Scan multiple stock photo archives, such as BigStockPhoto.com, iStockPhoto.com and Stock.xchng (**www.sxc.hu**).

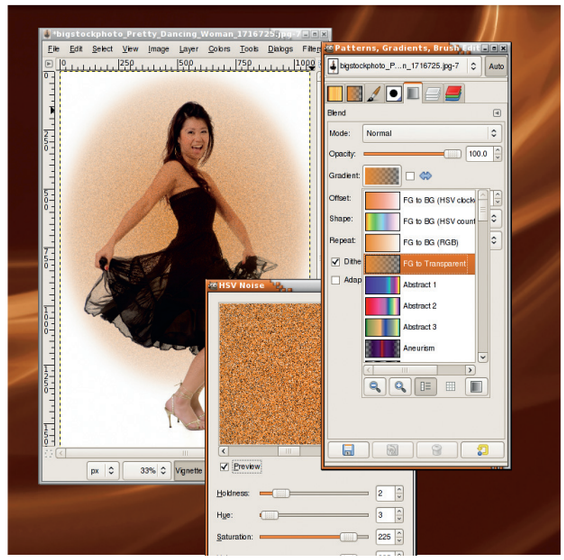
Adding a vignette

The first thing we want is to add a soft vignette. This will make the final image a little more colourful while keeping the woman's shape recognisable. To do this, we add a transparent layer above the main layer (Layer > New) and name this new layer Vignette. Select the Elliptical selection tool from the Toolbox and in the image window draw an oval selection around the girl. Feather the selection (Select > Feather) by 100 pixels. Choose a warm colour for the foreground colour by clicking on the foreground colour box in the Toolbox. I'm using RGB values of 231/127/35 for this tutorial. We now need to add a radial gradient inside the circle.

Choose the Gradient tool from the Toolbox. In the Tool Options dialog (Dialogs > Tool Options) set the Gradient to 'FG To Transparent' and the Shape to 'Radial'. In the image, click and drag from the middle of the selection to just past the top of the selection. Set the vignette layer's mode to Multiply.

At this point I add a little noise to the gradient for an artistic effect, but this step is optional. To add the noise, select Filters > Noise > HSV Noise and set the Holdness to 2, the Saturations to 255 and the Value to 255. The default setting for Hue (which »

› **Choose a warn colour for the vignette, to add some extra contrast to the final image – this really helps in the white areas of the source photograph.**



› **Any noise you add to the vignette might not be visible in the finished image (this depends on the font thickness).**

Quick tip

Vignettes are an easy way to add colour to high-contrast, low-colour photos.

» should be 3) should not be changed. Then apply this to the Vignette by clicking on the OK button. The noise will only be applied within the selection and only to coloured pixels – not transparent ones. You can clear the selection now (Select > None) and merge the Vignette and background layers (Image > Flatten Image).

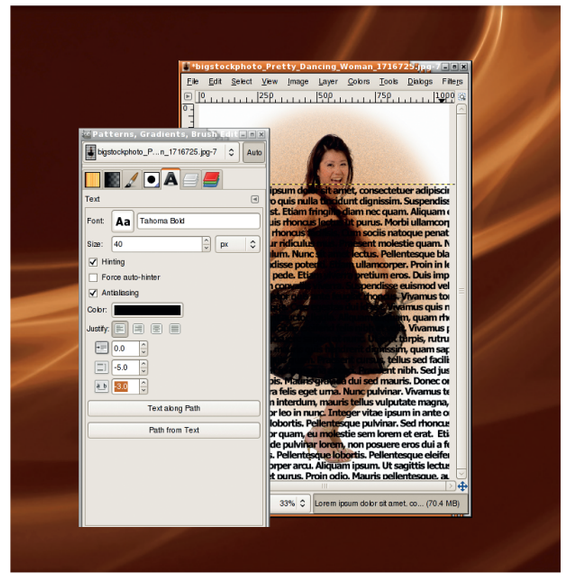
Adding a text layer

The crux of this tutorial is to use text as a mask over the image. To do this, start by resetting the default colours in the Toolbox (the small black and white boxes below and to the left of the larger black and white boxes). Then create a text layer filled with random words. Choose the Text tool from the Toolbox and click in the image. This will open up the Text Editor window. In this window, paste a large amount of text.

So what text should you use? I first copied 1,500 words from the Lorum Ipsum generator into a 100-character-wide text terminal. I then used the *Vi* editor to remove all line breaks (Shift+J on each line, making one long line) and mapped the text to fit the window with line breaks (In *Vi*: G+Q+J). If this isn't long enough, join all the lines again, copy and past below it to extend the text. The select and copy this text into the Text Editor window. Using a 100-character-wide terminal allowed me to create text that would be wide enough to cover the image but still include line breaks which *Gimp* needs to block the text.

Pasting the text will update the image window immediately. You can now close the Text Editor window. In the Tool Options dialog you're ready to set the font, size, line spacing and tracking as mentioned previously. Choose the font and size before changing the spacing and tracking. Remember I used Tahoma Bold, which you can find in the Corefonts project on SourceForge. You'll also want the text in black so you can see it in the image window.

Set the line spacing to -5 and the tracking to -3. This is sufficient to push the letters up against each other horizontally and vertically without overlapping, at least for this specific font and size.



› **Initially the text will not be aligned with the rest of the image, but we'll fix that with the Align Tool.**

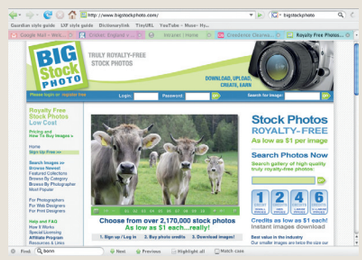
Getting the source images

The source images from this tutorial were purchased from BigStockPhoto for $2 each. The image IDs are

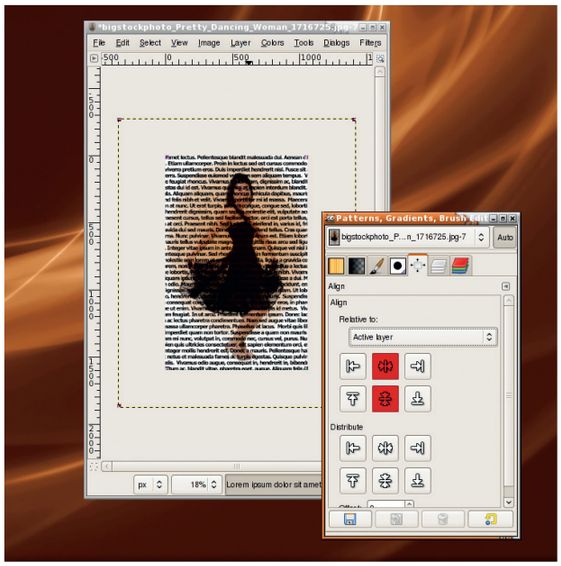
» Pretty Dancing Woman (black dress): 1716725 (size: 1066 x 1600)

» Sunflower Girl: 2861058 (size: 900 x 900)

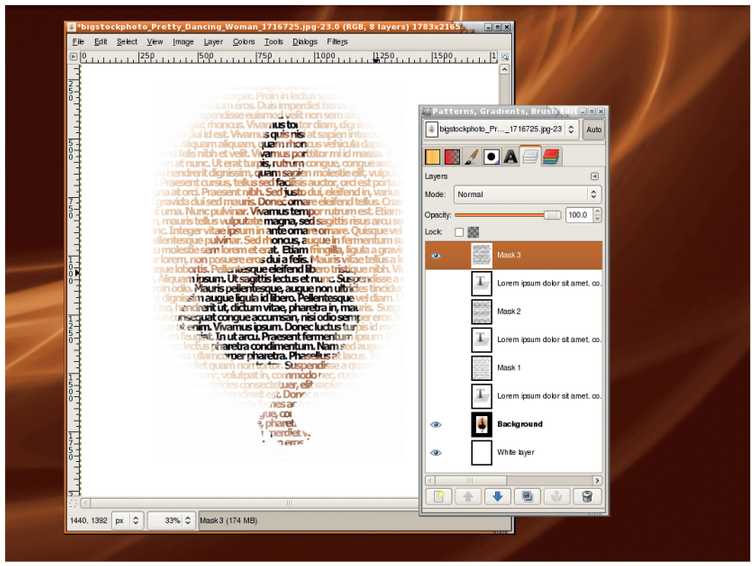
Pixel amounts specified in the tutorial are based on these source image sizes.



› **Cows do not require a model release.**



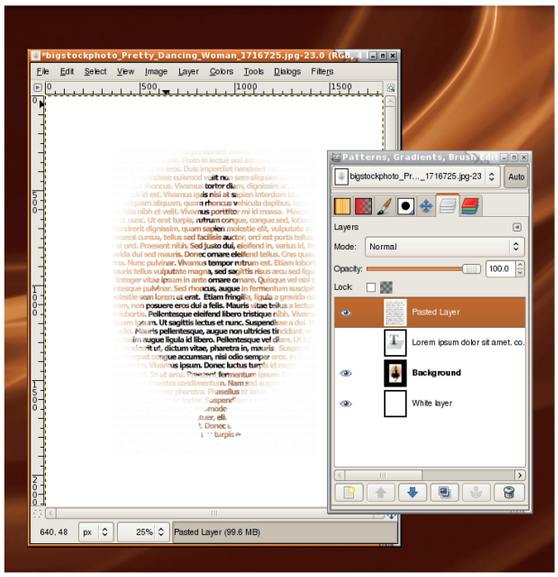
The text layer is much larger than the canvas window (which has been zoomed out to show the text layer boundaries).



Keeping multiple versions of the text layer and masks lets you compare the masks and return to the version that looks best without having to recreate it later.

Now align the text layer with the Align tool (it looks like a box with arrows pointing away from all four sides). Click on the image window over the visible text. This adds the text layer to the set of layers to be aligned. Hold the Shift key down and click on the background layer (the woman in the dress) in the image window to add it to the layers to be aligned. Now the text layer and the background layer are included in the set of layers to be aligned. You can tell this is the case by looking for small black boxes at the corners of each layer that will be included in the alignment.

In Layers dialog make sure the background layer is the active layer, and in the Tool Options dialog, set the 'Relative To:' menu to Active Layer. In the Tool Options dialog there are two sets of six buttons that look identical. The first set are for alignment (the other set is for distribution, which we aren't concerned with here). Click on the horizontal and vertical alignment buttons, which each look like two arrows pointing to a central line, which is either horizontal or vertical. Now the text is aligned over the image. Resize the canvas to fit the text layer, zoom out and shrink-wrap the window (Ctrl+E) around the canvas.



This is the final image, except that you may want to adjust the position of the mask over the background image.

Create a mask layer

Now we're ready to create our mask. We start this process by adding a White layer to the image (Layer > New, set Fill Type to White). Drag this layer into the Layers dialog below the background layer. At this point you should drag the text layer below the background layer too.

Click on the Text layer in the Layers dialog to make it the active layer, then create a selection of the text (Layer > Text to Selection > Text to Selection) and invert the selection (Select > Invert). This provides a selection of everything except the text. Click on the White layer you just added to make it active. Create a copy from the selection (Edit > Copy) and then paste the copy (Edit > Paste). This creates a Floating Selection layer in the Layers dialog that must be converted to a new layer manually (Layer > New).

What you've done here is to paste a white layer with the text stamped out of it over the source image. Where the text was stamped out, the source image shows. Turn off the visibility of the Text layer by clicking on the Eye icon to the left of the layer thumbnail in the Layers dialog.

Click on the background layer in the Layers dialog to make it the active layer. Choose the Move tool from the Toolbox. Hold down the Shift key and click and drag in the image window to move the woman and vignette around under the mask. Moving the source image around under the mask may not be enough to get a good result – you may need to adjust the text layer font size, tracking or line spacing. You may even need to try a different font. If any of this becomes necessary, turn off the visibility of the mask layer first and then duplicate the Text layer. Duplication is necessary so you keep a copy of the last settings. Adjust the font settings in the text layer duplicate. Then repeat the selection, invert, copy and paste process to create a new mask. LXF

Quick tip

Generate lots of random text using the free Lorum Ipsum generator: **www.lipsum.com**

» **Next month** Gimp has tons of selection tools – we'll look at the most useful.