

a leap forward, although this one falls into the "much awaited" category rather than "unexpected." Sonic, the maker of the most user-friendly DVD-making software for Windows, acquired Roxio, which makes Creator, and Version 8 adds the Sonic technology to the bundle. The result is the most comprehensive, easiest-to-use multimedia bundle for Windows. A unified, task-oriented interface makes it a breeze to make do everything from putting your home movies on DVD to managing your digital photo and music collections. **Toast 7**, the Mac counterpart, is a more modest advance mainly focusing on keeping the software up to speed with support for multilayer DVD and High Definition technologies.

Nero, Easy Creator's archrival, also is out with a new version: **Nero 7 Ultra Edition**. As is typical with Nero, it is more technically advanced in some respects than Creator, but not quite as user-friendly. It supports MP4 encoding (known to iPod users as "AAC"), for instance, and its burning tools are more tolerant of multitasking. However, an ambitious attempt to build an integrated media player/recorder/editor interface, Nero Home, did not work with my PC's TV tuner card. Nero still has some work to do on the package.

Adobe has upgraded its consumer-oriented "Elements" lineup to **Photoshop Elements 4.0** (graphics) and **Premiere Elements 2.0** (video). The former, already my favorite graphics editor, really gains only a few minor bells and whistles in this update. Premiere, however, has become much easier — and faster — to use, making it the hobbyist/home user tool it was supposed to be. Since the best deal on these products is to buy them as a bundle, think of it as getting an important video upgrade with some photo tools as an extra.

Security — the plague of Windows computers — has gained a new top dog in do-it-all suites: Zone Lab's **ZoneAlarm Internet Security Suite 6.0**. While I continue to like **Norton AntiVirus** and **Webroot's SpySweeper** in those categories, ZoneAlarm's included anti-virus and anti-spyware components are robust, and the overall package simply offers more protection than the competition does.

Amateur audio editors with Macs are the beneficiaries of the new **BIAS Peak 5 LE**, the consumer version of the company's professional sound-editing software. It also is sold in a "Studio Edition" bundle with **Deck LE 3.5**, a multitrack mixer (for manipulating multiple sound sources — you know, the way pop producers put a snip of symphonic music into the background of a rock song). BIAS consolidated a couple of different versions into one consumer product that, among other things, is great for creating soundtracks for Mac iMovie and iDVD projects.

Speaking of Mac, Apple users have just gone through a round of software upgrades tied to the new features in the OS-X "Tiger" operating system update released this year. Word to the wise to Windows users: The same thing looms ahead with the planned release of Windows Vista in 2006. As the year goes on, you are going to want to hold off on changing your software until Vista compatibility issues are sorted out.

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