

EASY MEDIA CREATOR[®] 10 SUITE

EDITOR RATING



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By David English

If you haven't checked out Roxio's Easy Media Creator 10 Suite (EMC 10), you may be in for a surprise. It's grown from a hodgepodge of media-creation, format-conversion, and disc-burning tools into a highly polished and often indispensable package. This disc-authoring tool handles all aspects of creating CDs and DVDs, as well as managing music, video, and photos for portable media devices. Roxio hasn't just beefed up the component programs in this latest iteration of the app; just about everything has been rewritten with an eye toward Vista integration. In the process, the company has—perhaps for the first time—actually earned the right to use Easy as part of its suite's name. And, if you're looking to capture and burn for your use (i.e., steal) some Internet radio tracks, this is the app for you.

Figuring out where to go to complete a task could get confusing because of the wealth of features and specialized components, so like competitor Nero 8 Ultra Edition, EMC 10 provides a front end that directs you to the appropriate destination. Also like Nero 8, EMC 10 brings the most popular functions up front so you can quickly perform basic tasks. Roxio takes this further by incorporating a larger number of functions into the part of the interface you see first, categorizing the components more logically, and providing more meaningful descriptions. It also doesn't hurt that the interface looks great. By contrast, the initial interface for Nero 8 provides fewer up-front functions and has shorter, less useful descriptions of the components. Both applications rely on an improved initial interface to counteract the lack of integration among the components, but Roxio is further ahead in making its opening screen a final destination rather than a regional hub.

By design, many of the software's new features enhance current consumer technologies. So, for example, you can create attractive user menus and backgrounds for DVD music discs that can now hold up to 50 hours of tunes (and are compatible with standard players)—and EMC 10 even converts those tunes to Dolby Digital format before writing them to the media.

Likewise, there are features that let you transfer audio and video between your iPod and PC, create and transfer ringtones, and resize photos for the small screen on your mobile phone. The Media Manager component can sync photos, as well as music and video files, with a compatible

phone. The capability works much like Windows Media Player 11 does when it syncs music and video files with a portable player.

One of the coolest Media Manager features is the small green arrow that attaches to each audio or video file icon. It lets you preview your PC's or mobile device's media files in place from inside the Media Manager. You can also specify a photo, audio, and video file format for each mobile device and have Media Manager automatically transcode incompatible media to those formats. It worked well, though you're limited to the most popular resolutions, bit rates, and file formats. Unfortunately, on my tests, it slowed to a crawl when transcoding large video files, turning what would otherwise have been a simple file transfer into a time-consuming procedure. You only have to convert them once, but don't wait until you're in a hurry to try out this sometimes slow but otherwise convenient feature.

Want to send a video file to YouTube? While in Media Manager, right-click the file's icon, choose Upload to YouTube, provide your log-in

and password (if you haven't already), and off it goes. Interestingly, Nero 8 places the YouTube upload feature in its video-editing component, since it lacks a comprehensive media manager. EMC more logically treats YouTube as just another media-playback device.

For years now, Easy Media Creator and its competitors have offered the option to burn photos and home videos to DVD, but have you ever tried to attach a music track? Making it sound professional isn't easy. With EMC 10, Roxio lets you add fully orchestrated music to your visual content using a scaled-down version of SmartSound's music generator. The application edits the music automatically to match the flow of the slides or mood of the video scenes. When I tried it, the end result was seamless and quite remarkable.

Editing Video

EMC 10's video-editing capabilities are somewhat hampered by being split into two distinct components: CineMagic and VideoWave. CineMagic is geared more toward novices who



want to load in a sequence of video clips and instantly create a slick production with swirling graphics and professional effects. You simply choose a theme (birthday or party, for example), and CineMagic generates your production. This feature performed impressively for me. Burning the project to a DVD (via the MyDVD Express component) is as simple as clicking another button. VideoWave, on the hand, is a full-featured video editor, but don't be put off by that description: You can perform most of its functions (such as transitions, overlays, video effects, and text effects) by dragging elements and dropping them onto a timeline. The two video components can read each other's saved files, so it's easy to swap your project between them—useful if you want get at a more advanced feature but are otherwise happy with an auto-generated video.

HD video fans will be disappointed in EMC 10 when compared with Nero 8. There's no built-in playback for Blu-ray or HD DVD. There's also no conversion of HD video files into the DVD-compatible AVCHD format. You can burn and retrieve data backups with Blu-ray and HD DVD discs, but you can't create media discs that are compatible with standalone Blu-ray and HD DVD players.

The product's new look and feel aims to complement that of Vista, but the compatibility is more than skin deep—EMC 10 can also share metadata with the OS. When you alter a photo's tag, rating, keyword, or orientation in the software's Media Manager, for example, Vista's Windows Explorer will recognize the change automatically and vice versa. XP users will benefit from the Vista-inspired icons and open design, but users of the newer OS will have the added advantage of two Sidebar gadgets (Nero 8 offers only one).

The Easy Audio Capture Gadget lets you associate any audio input, such as a webcam microphone or the auxiliary input from a sound card, with a predefined audio level and file format. This gadget can split out the audio from a video file, but the more likely use for it is to capture streaming music. With the ongoing (and seemingly endless) legal battles surrounding Internet radio, DRM-protected music, and file sharing, this is a big deal, and a possibly controversial feature for Roxio to highlight in this iteration of its suite. Still, given the addition of streaming video capture to RealPlayer 11, Roxio doesn't



look particularly out of step with the rest of the industry. It will be interesting to see if and how this affects the latest push for DRM-free music.

You can run multiple instances of the gadget for different configurations, though I couldn't find a way to label each one so I could tell them apart. The Audio/Video Converter Gadget is more specialized. You configure it to automatically convert and save your media files. Drop a video or audio file onto it, and the gadget can automatically save the content to a specific directory, convert it for use with a cell phone, or route it to a portable media player.

Overall, EMC 10 does a good job explaining the capabilities of the component programs—often with illustrations and detailed instructions—but you'll hit conspicuous gaps. Want to transfer your newly created ringtone to your cell phone? Good luck finding a piece of essential information: Carriers often restrict the capability. Some components, including the Roxio LP and Tape Assistant, have a clearly labeled, step-by-step structure that makes it easy to perform a complex task—digitizing audio from an analog source, for example. But others, such as Roxio Media Import, rely on a bare-bones Windows help file that assumes a

familiarity with the associated technical terms. This is the best integrated and easiest to use product of its kind out there, but there's still room for improvement.

EMC 10 is reasonably fast when performing standard tasks, though the performance will vary greatly depending on your system's speed. On a six-month-old, quad-core 2.66-GHz HP xw8400 workstation, it took 2 minutes 15 seconds to rip the CD of Miles Davis's Kind of Blue to CD-quality WAV files. Going in the other direction (WAV to CD-R) took 1:51. On a three-year-old, single-core 3.4-GHz Dell Dimension 8400, those numbers slowed to 4:50 and 3:21. Burning a 4.15GB video project to a DVD-R took 17:18 on the quad-core and 19:47 on the single-core.

The competition between Roxio and Nero is stiff. Nero has made substantial improvements in its own ease of use, and still holds the edge when it comes to support for newer formats, such as Blu-ray, HD DVD, and AVCHD. EMC 10, however, is a better choice for Vista users because of its metadata sharing and impressive mobile device support. Most important, however, it's just better integrated and, above all, easier to use. On that basis, Roxio Easy Media Creator 10 wins our Editors' Choice.

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