The F-Spot image manager
PHOTO ORGANIZER

Chaos is inevitable when your hard disk fills up with digital photos. The F-Spot image management program helps you manage your photo archives effectively and without time-consuming sorting.

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With the recent popularity of digital photography, hard disks tend to get swamped with photos. The problem with storing images on a computer is finding the photo you need in a reasonably short time. The traditional approach of saving files in a directory tree is useless if you need to apply sorting criteria. Although the directory tree can support sorting by date and time, you can't sort the images by desecriptive categories such as "work," "leisure," "people," or "buildings."

F-Spot [1] can handle this chore and bring order to your personal photo collection. The project was launched back in 2003 by GNOME developer Ettore Perazzoli, who unfortunately passed away in December of that same year. Now,

Larry Ewing (the guy who designed Tux the penguin) has taken over.

Installation and First Steps
Package-based installation support is available for F-Spot, with native packages for distributions such as Debian, Fedora, and Suse. Suse 9.3 even includes F-Spot on the installation media.

Because F-Spot was written in C#, it needs the Mono environment [2] and the matching program interpreter, *mono*, along with a few Gnome packages, various databases, and some graphics libraries. Building F-Spot from the source is not an easy task.

When first launched, F-Spot displays a completely empty image catalog, but the program does pop up a dialog where you can import new photos to help you get started. You can then select a drive, an attached storage medium, or any folder as your import source. You can also define categories for the imported
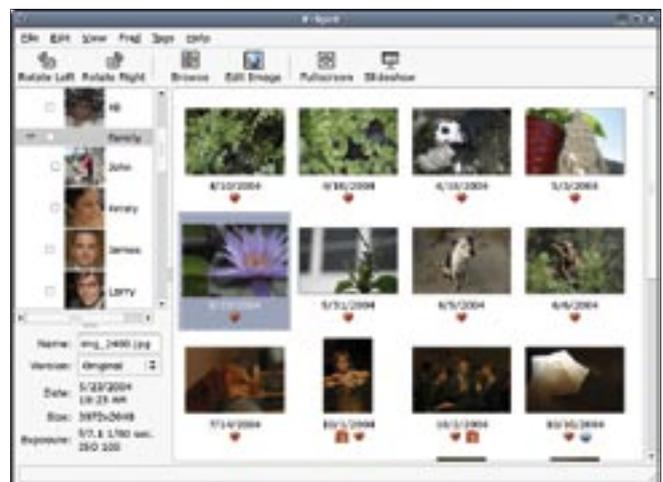

Figure 1: F-Spot gives you an overview of the stored images.

images at the same time. Click *OK*, and F-Spot will search the specified folder and catalog the image files it contains. You can open the import window at any time later using the *File* menu.

Search and Find

After importing a few images, F-Spot should be slightly more colorful, as you can see in Figure 1. When you click an image, details such as the name, size, or date are displayed. The name field allows you to rename the images, although the developers have not actually added this function yet.

F-Spot retrieves data such as the exposure time or orientation from the image files, using EXIF – a standard for transferring image-specific metadata between files. The EXIF fields are displayed in a dialog box.

There are two ways of organizing the jumble of images: for one, you can use the tags in the list shown at the top left of the F-Spot window. Besides the special tags, *Favorites* and *Hidden*, there are four predefined categories: *People*, *Places*, *Events*, and *Other*. You can use either the context menu or the *Tags* entry to specify a new category or add new tags. Dragging a tag or category to the thumbnail assigns the image to the tag. You can also use the context menu for tag management by selecting either *Add tag* or *Remove tag*.

When you enable a check box in the category list, F-Spot displays the images from that category in the index. Enabling multiple check boxes tells F-Spot to display images with *one* of these tags, but not the intersection of the selections – of course, one may question whether this feature is useful. Selecting *Edit tag* in the context menu (or *Tags | Edit selected tag...*) pops up a window where you can change the category assignment of a tag.

A slide control above the index gives users quicker access to images without requiring the user to categorize the images first (Figure 2). This tool, which is quite puzzling at first sight, shows a time index with markings for years and months. You can use the arrows to scroll the visible segment. A bar above the segment for a specific month tells you that images from that month exist in the current catalog, and the number of images is reflected by the size of

the bar. If you then push the slider to a specific point in time, the index jumps to the image closest to that point in time. You can use the handles to move the lower and upper date thresholds to restrict the index to a specific period.

If you select the *Folder* view, F-Spot changes the timescale into a directory scale. This option can be very useful if you sorted your images in folders before importing them. If not, the benefits of flattening a directory tree to give you a linear scale are debatable.

Getting There...

After finding the image you were looking for, double click the image to display it in a scrollable zoomed view, as shown in Figure 3. The buttons for typical features, such as rotate left or right or flip portrait images to landscape, are available in the index view. In zoom mode, you can additionally use the frame tool to select a detail or remove red eye from portraits. There is also a list of aspect ratios that allows you to crop images to fit a specific page format. The palette is rounded off by a color histogram and a soft-focus tool.

When a user chooses to edit an image, F-Spot always creates a new version of the image to prevent damage to the original. If things go wrong, users can select *Original* in the Version menu to restore the original image.

The program also has tools for selecting the current image as wallpaper, a full-screen view mode, and a slideshow feature. A printing function that uses Gnome print to create hard copies allows users to print their images if needed.

The *Export* menu provides more functions for sorted and edited images. Besides copying images to a different directory, it also supports the Flickr [3] sharing service and allows users to create and upload HTML galleries. Users can burn their image collections onto
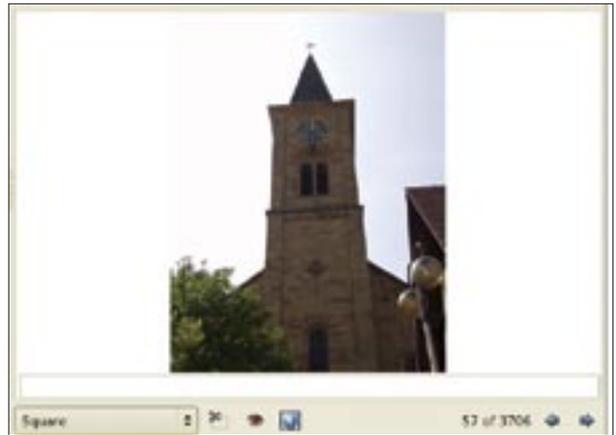

Figure 3: Zoomed view.

CDs or DVDs using the GNOME burning interface.

Conclusions

F-Spot is at an early stage of development and still has a few rough edges. This said, the idea of GNOME integrated image management bodes well for the future. The controls are simple and well thought out, which is good because the project currently lacks documentation.

If your photo collection has grown over the years, you will like the timescale feature. The CVS version of F-Spot has a number of enhancements. For example, the program shows results while parsing directory trees. You'll also find a new list that tells which tag search the current index reflects.

If you are keen on digital photography and currently having difficulty managing your image collection, F-Spot may be just what you need. The tool is quite powerful, and it has a lot of potential for future development. ■

INFO

[1] F-Spot homepage: *http://www. gnome.org/projects/f-spot/*

[2] Mono downloads: *http://www. mono-project.com/Downloads*

[3] Flickr: *http://www.flickr.com/*

THE AUTHOR

After working as a translator on various projects, Matthias Warkus found a niche for himself in Gnome public relations. Matthias also wrote the offical Gnome 2 developer manual. For the past two years, he has been exploring the personality-changing effects of studying philosophy.

Figure 2: Time sliding.