

This is a review of focal point, a program that will assist you in focusing by focusing on or de-focusing of your desired objects areas.

The programme opens up in a separate window, and you will start off with the sweet (sharp) spot automatically centred in your image. You position the sweet spot in the area where you want it, and with the tools provided like “antennae” sticking out of the sweet spot you can adjust the various aspects of your focus, you can feather it, adjust the effect of the blur, you can go from soft blur to motion blur by just changing the angle of one of the antennas of the sweet spot. It doesn't take long before you get the hang of it, they all work very intuitively, and the problem is not to go overboard with your effects, you have to keep in mind how realistic you want it to look.

Photographers know intuitively how much sharpness and unsharpness they can expect when they work with lenses, a wide-angle lens has inherently a lot more depth of field than a long lens. Therefore you cannot Defocus too much when the effect of the wide-angle lens is very obvious, unless you want to purposely distort your image.

For me, this plug in will enhance my photography when it is not possible in reality to focus or defocus in the way that I wanted it to look. Especially on a bright and sunny day I may not be able to open up my aperture as much as I like to have it, and this program allows me to get my focus closer to what I intended it to be.

The only problem is that we are working with a two-dimensional image in computers, and the photograph is taken in a three-dimensional space. It is therefore extremely difficult to accurately mimic the effect of focus, because the focus plane normally starts in one plane/position throughout the image and extends to the back (distance away) or comes forward towards the lens.

This program does a wonderful job in creating the focus on a certain area, but unfortunately the way it displays on your photograph is either in a circle or an oval shape. This at times is very undesirable, because when our lens looks at things the sharpness is not always in that shape, sometimes objects are intruding in that circle or shape. Perhaps I am speaking too much as a photographer here, not too many people will notice how accurately the focus or de-focusing is portrayed in an image. For me the big bonus point in this program is the possibility of creating the plane of focus by using the alt key and moving your cursor inside the sweet spot to change the angle and plane of focus. This is the closest I can get to accurately position the plane of focus. It is possible to almost create a very narrow elliptical shape almost in a line of sharpness, but this still does not solve the problem of imitating an extreme narrow depth of field like in real life.

Additionally there are other little extras available, the program also offers a vignette, film grain and the possibility of presets. You may have created a special

effect that may be suitable for many other images, a preset allows to apply it to many images. The big bonus is actually to have the effect of the focusing created on an additional layer mask. At least you are not destroying the original pixels.

I have been looking out for this program for a long time as I thought it would be an ideal plug-in to get the focus or defocus exactly where I wanted it. I feel slightly disappointed as it is not able to create sharpness on a single plane in a shape that I can actually construct myself, it would have been a lot better if we could alter the shape of the grid in order to suit the shape of the focus. I do not know if this is possible, but in most situations this program will do an excellent job to highlight your focal point, or better still, to create your focal point.

In summary, the installation of the program is a breeze, the advantages are to create a very natural looking soft focus effect, the interface is very intuitive and easy to work with.

Unfortunately I do find the oval or a circular shape of the sweet point of focus a decidedly objectionable shape, I would have preferred to create my own shape. I believe I can possibly create a similar effect if I select or mask a specific area before I apply these tools. I have not yet tried that approach. However I feel a program like this should address this problem and not depend on other programs to be able to make it easier to work with.

Many have taken a comparison to an other program by Alien Skin called bokeh. However that program is offering us a total different concept, it is intended to be working with the highlights in an image and creating a soft focus shape of the out of focus highlights in a certain manner to illustrate a total different soft focus feel. For me that program gives me a control over the highlights that are out of focus to recreate the effects of certain lenses that are making bokeh so special. Bokeh is not to be confused with out of focus. The power of alien skins program Bokeh lies in the effect of the visibility of the out of focus region, you can select the various lenses that produced the best highlight areas that are out of focus. If you have got no specific specular highlights in your image that you want to make out of focus, alien skins program will just work like a de-focusing program then you are missing the point. Its strength lies in the alteration of the highlights. Of course you can apply this program to create out of focus areas willy-nilly, but you are not getting the best out of it this way. There are many other programs that offer you an area that goes out of focus. Again I'm not impressed with the inability of the Bokeh to only offer me a sweet spot in the shape of a circle or ellipse. But if you have excellent highlights in your image, and I mean highlights like dew drops on a leaf backlit from the sun, these can be created in wonderfully soft focus highlights in various different shapes. The gimmick of heart shapes, diamonds shapes and the like do not do much for me, but for some people it may offer some playtime.

Each programme has a definite application, and there are crossover fields, but use each programme for what it is intended to be used for. Each programme has

its own strengths that I want to use on an individual basis to get the maximum effect of what each programme can offer my image . I am really pleased to have On One software's focal point in my arsenal of tools to create in 90% of the time a perfect focused area which I otherwise may not have been able to create in reality.