A New Generation of Photo Editing Software

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Photoshop is the reigning king of photo editing software. It is eminently capable, flexible, high quality, dependable, reliable. All these are good things to say about a computer software and Adobe is rightly proud of the position they hold among professionals. However, Photoshop comes with a rather steep learning curve, in part due to its tremendous flexibility and attention to uncompromised quality. Photographers who do not need the sophistication and the great tool chest it offers have been using other software that do similar things with varying degree of ease. In the last couple of years, a new generation of photo editing software seems to be emerging. They all offer nondestructive editing, implicit or explicit layers, ease of administering the selected adjustments, and a few unique capabilities of their own. Aperture, Adobe Lightroom, DxO Optix Pro, LightZone, and Nikon Capture NX are in this class of software. Now, some of these software companies may take issue with this rather loose categorization, but if you take a look at them all, you will see the similarities in their paradigm.

I have tried them all, and use two more persistently than others for no other reason than the trial period on some passing too quickly. Adobe Lightroom and Light Crafts LightZone have not yet expired, thanks to the generosity of their makers. In this short review, I would like to give you a taste of one of them, LightZone.

LightZone comes in two flavors, LightZone Classic Edition (for Windows or Mac, $149.95) or LightZone Retouch Edition (for Mac or Windows, $99.95) The visible difference between the two is the availability of a built in photo browser and viewer. Also, LightZone-RT has additional file handling capabilities that LightZone Classic lacks. Most of the additional file handling capabilities of RT are in the software to ensure better integration with workflow applications used in conjunction with it, like Lightroom, Aperture, etc. In addition, RT embeds LightZone tool stack and editing data within TIFF files and can read Classic's LZN files, but RT cannot write these files. In terms of their image editing capability, the two versions are identical and they both can handle variety of popular image formats from RAW to PSD. Functionally, it offers the following in a nondestructive style:

- Zone System based tonal adjustments (thus the name)
- A RAW image converter
- Layered, nondestructive editing
- Masking
- Color correction, white balance
- Channel mixer
- Noise reduction
- Sharpening
- Cloning (works more like the healing patch tool in Photoshop)
- Various blending modes for each layer

This set is a functional simplification, and the actual tool set is a little longer, but not by much. This is where the appeal of the software may be for users who want a simplified interface and all the tools that are not directly relevant to photography removed from the

software. For instance, there is no text tool or a brush tool as photographers do not really make use of them in editing images.

The interface

The editing interface is divided into the menu bar, a tool bar, a multifunctional area on the top left, a tool stack area under this, and the remaining area on the right is left for the image preview. See the image below. In this view, the multifunction area is set to show the useful "ZoneFinder" view. It can be swapped to show a histogram or an info palette showing the color values under the cursor.
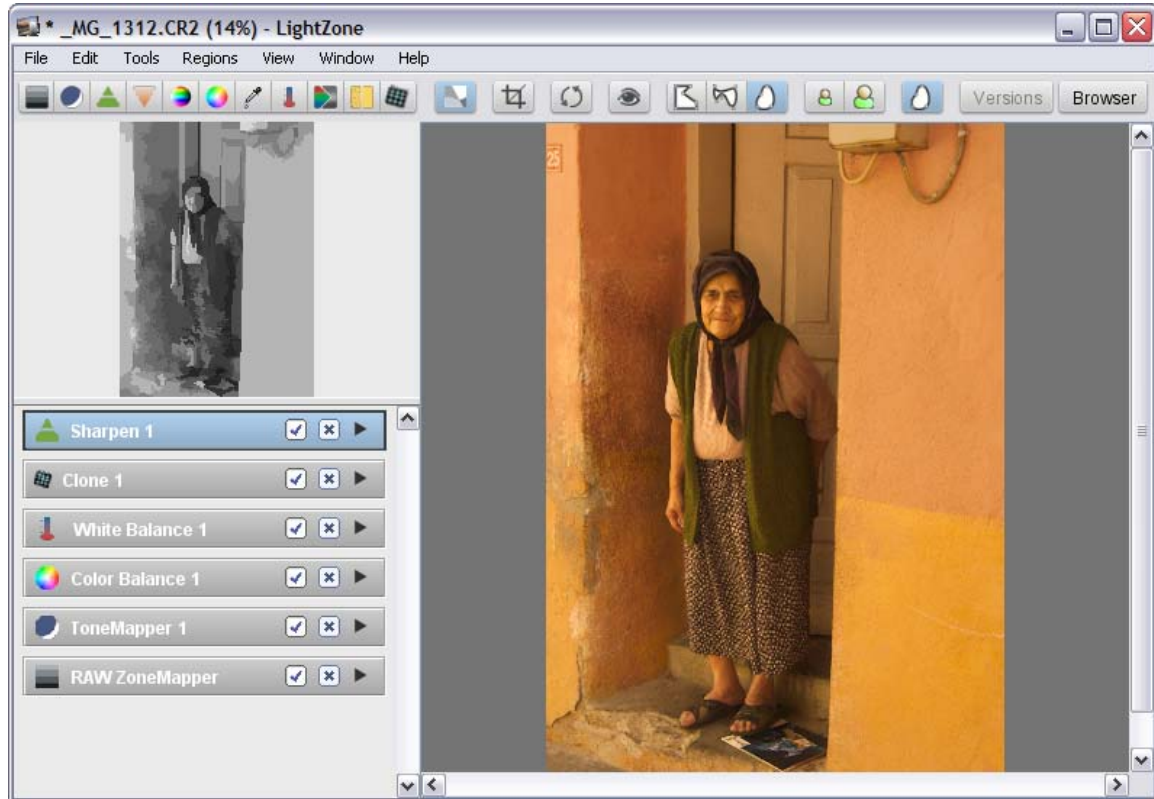

The first 11 icons on the toolbar activate the editing tools, ZoneMapper, ToneMapper, Sharpen, Blur, Hue/Saturation, Color Balance, Color cast, White balance, Cannel mixer, Noise reduction, and Clone as seen on the left.
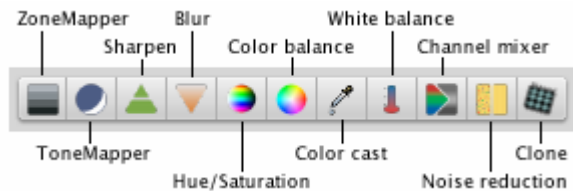
The icons after these tools are other controls, ZoneFinder, Crop, Rotate, Compare, Regions, Zoom, Show/Hide regions, and Versions of the image as the image below illustrates.
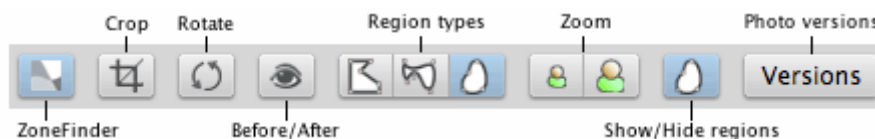
The stack of tools that are under the ZoneFinder can be turned on or off, their individual blending mode or opacity changed, a mask is added or its mask inverted, renamed, reordered, and deleted. All the tools work with sliders with immediate feedback on the image.

Masking

LightZone offers a tool called "Regions" which mark an area as a mask. The selection is done with broad brushstrokes rather than a fine point pen, which appears to be comfortable and intentional.
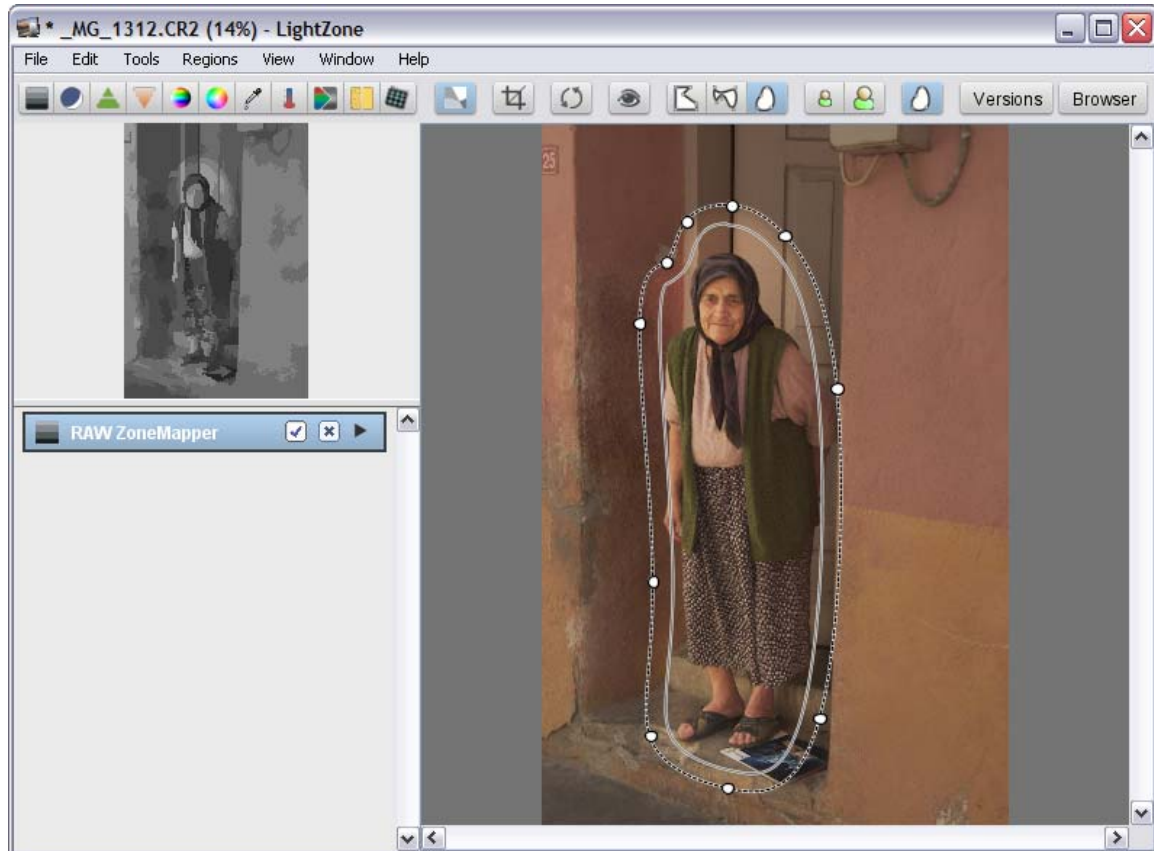
The behavior of the curve that defines the region can be a polygon or a Bezier curve, depending on your need. When a region is defined, it is bordered by an outer line that defines the region, and an inner line that defines the blending. The distance between the two determine the amount of "feathering." Although it is automatically applied, by simply dragging the inner region inward or outward, the feathering of the adjustment applied can easily be changed.. The method is simple and quite effective. But, don't expect precision selections that you might have gotten used to by using the Pen tool in Photoshop. That is not the purpose here. I feel that this tool is mimicking the behavior of a dodging or burning cutout on a black piece of cardboard and moving it up and down as we used to do in the wet darkroom. In the image below, the mask is the line with the round control points and the feathering is controlled by the light gray line inside the selection.

Depending on the need, these regions can be copied and applied to other adjustment layers. The method is easy and effective.

Ease of use

LigtZone offers a different user interface paradigm than Photoshop, which is my main tool of editing and I have come to be rather comfortable in that environment. Despite that, I have found the interface refreshingly simply and quite effective. Of course, not everything works the way I expect or am used to, but none of the tools are too complex in their use and with a little extra attention, I realized that the anchors are swapped on the color spectra of Cyan-Red, Magenta-Green on the Color Balance tool. What threw me off is that Yellow-Blue spectrum works the same way. Not a very important point if you do not have Photoshop biases as I do.

LightZone deserves a close look to explore the capabilities of the software, especially of you are familiar with the Zone System. A trial version is available for downloading, see the product page: http://www.lightcrafts.com/products/lightzone/ for downloading instructions.

A new version, LightZone 2.0 has been released recently. Check the Web site for upgrade paths as they are announced.