

Color Mechanic (<http://www.colormechnic.com>)

Color Mechanic (Figure 3-12), from Digital Light & Color is derived from the incredibly useful Color Correction Transformation in Picture Window. That's good news for Mac users, since Color Mechanic plays happily with Mac versions of programs like Photoshop.

Color Mechanic comes in a regular (\$30) and a pro (\$50) version; the pro version supports 16-bit files and has some additional controls I find valuable. Digital Light & Color also allows one to upgrade from the regular to professional version for an additional \$30, so you won't lose much money if you decide to get the regular version and later decide you need the professional.

Color Mechanic takes advantage of the way we naturally think about color correction. We can look at a photo and immediately identify the colors and tones that are off, but Photoshop lacks an intuitive way to correct them. We can't simply tell Photoshop, "That skin tone is too pink and that gray too blue; fix it." Color Mechanic comes close to doing just that with a remarkably simple way to correct color. It presents you with a view of your file and a color-space hexagon. Click on a point in the image, and the corresponding color is selected within the color hexagon. You can drag that color into any other place in the color space. The color space warps smoothly around that change, as if it were a rubber sheet change, so related colors adjust to fit; greatly different colors aren't affected at all (Figure 3-13). Changes are immediately reflected in the "after" image and the color hexagon. There are also sliders to control the brightness and (in the pro version) the strength of the color changes.

You can do this to as many color points as you like, custom-tuning the color palette to fit the photo. You can lock down colors so that they don't change by adding a correction point and not dragging it to a new location. That pins the color at its original value, no matter what other warps you make to the color space.

Restoring the color in a badly faded photograph is often a process of approximations. Some fine adjustment is usually needed to get the colors to look exactly right. Color Mechanic's great for that, especially for correcting slight color casts in neutrals and skin tones without introducing unwanted side effects. That can be extremely difficult with Photoshop's standard tools, even with plug-ins like DIGITAL ROC.

Fig. 3-12 Color Mechanic is a most remarkable and unique Photoshop plug-in for manipulating colors in a photograph. Clicking the eyedropper on the “before” photograph (left) sets control points in the color-space hexagon at the lower left. Dragging those points to new locations changes the original colors to new ones. Nearby colors warp smoothly, so there are no abrupt and unnatural-looking color changes. The resulting photograph and color-space hexagon are shown on the right. Figure 3-13 shows an expanded view of the color space for this adjustment.

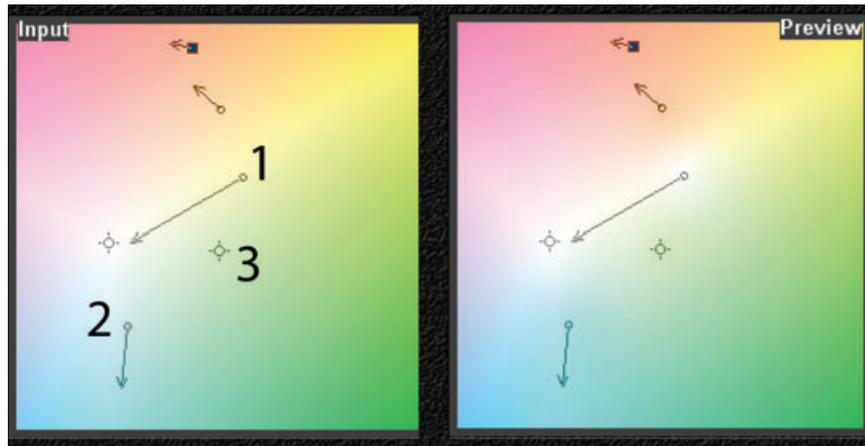


Fig. 3-13 These are enlarged views of the color-space adjustments I made in Figure 3-12. The numbered points demonstrate the different kinds of changes that Color Mechanic can make. I dragged Point 1 toward the neutral center point to desaturate the background of the photograph. The Preview color space shows that white has “bled” from the head of the arrow back to the control point. Point 2 was dragged away from the center and from the green hues. That increased the saturation in the dress and shifted the hue slightly to the blue. I used Point 3 as a lock-down point; since I didn’t draw an arrow from it, the input and preview colors will be the same. It preserves those yellow-green hues in the color space unchanged.