

HandBrake, easily one of the best and most popular open-source apps available for the Mac, is finally getting an update after nearly a year of dormancy thanks to some new blood on the development team.

The no-nonsense DVD-to-MP4 ripper and encoder was originally developed by Eric Petit, also known as “titer.” After getting off to a great start, HandBrake’s production halted when Petit all but disappeared around May of last year. During his absence some contributors to the project decided to take matters into their own hands by creating a development fork of HandBrake, appropriately named MediaFork.

After months of development, the new team released the first public build of MediaFork, version 0.8.0b1, early last week. Now, the “unofficial” MediaFork team and HandBrake’s original developer Petit are joining forces to continue development of the app under the classic HandBrake moniker.

In an exclusive interview with one of the MediaFork team members, I learned that Petit approached the team only a day after the initial release to give his approval of the new project. “[Petit]’s effectively given us carte blanche. He says he’s glad we’re taking over, and he’s offering us the keys to the kingdom. His response has been more positive than we ever imagined.”

The MediaFork team holds great respect for Petit, insisting that they released MediaFork as a separate branch because they “didn’t want to step on [his] toes.” Petit has agreed to join forces completely with the new developers, offering to help answer any questions they may have, though he will mostly stay out of the development process.

The team indicates that the 0.8.0b1 build of MediaFork had almost 28,000 downloads in less than a week, but they’ve made it clear that they’re not done yet. The next version, 0.8.0b2, will have improvements to anamorphic video in QuickTime and 5.1 AAC audio, and major planned features for future versions of HandBrake include x264 encoder options, user presets, and AppleTV support.

Mac software blogs have been abuzz since the release of the MediaFork build, and this merger will certainly come as great news to the Mac application world and open-source in general. The development team has been very happy with the response. "It appears that HandBrake remains the weapon of choice," another developer adds. "Yes, [Petit]'s really here, yes, he supports us, and yes, we're going back home. That's the short version."

So now you know the history, but how does this new version of HandBrake compare to the 0.7.1 build that we know and love? I decided to compare the two versions to see how it stacks up.

The test process was relatively simple. I ripped a DVD with both versions using all the same encoding options on my Core 2 Duo (2 GHz) MacBook. The disc, coming in at 01:47:09, was ripped in 81 minutes using the older version and 78 and a half minutes using the newest build. The new build's encoded file was also slightly smaller on the disk and had a slightly sharper image quality in some areas of the film, but I had to really focus on certain aspects of the image, like cigarette smoke, for example, to tell the difference.

These marginal improvements come due to the use of new encoding libraries, which were vastly outdated in the older version. The improvements don't stop there, though. In addition to the additional fixes I mentioned above, the new version of the app adds a host of user-definable preferences, including encoding iPod-friendly video, with many more to come.

HandBrake is still known as MediaFork until the next beta rolls around, but the transition in both the application and its Internet presence is already underway and will be completed shortly. For the time being you can download MediaFork 0.8.0b1 [here](#).