What Exactly is Digital Image Workflow?

Paul Crompton, MA, MIMI

Over the past ten years photography has not only undergone a huge technological change but also something of a cultural change, with many of the established methods of production that had been developed and refined over the last century becoming mostly obsolete. The digital revolution has brought with it a relatively new concept: the digital image workflow. Amid the proliferation of software programs aimed at managing digital images, is there such a thing as “the right digital image workflow”? And if there is, how do you go about finding it?

Digital Image Databases

When digital cameras first began to make a serious impression in professional photography there was much talk about digital image databases. This was only natural; suddenly we were able to create vast numbers of images that needed filing in a way that also made them easily retrievable. The filing systems of the past were very obviously obsolete. You can't exactly hold a disc of image files up to a light box to find the one you were interested in. New methods of filing, cataloguing, searching and retrieving were needed and the image database suppliers were not slow to recognize the opportunity.

Digital image databases had established themselves with the library community long before the digital camera became the professional's instrument of choice. The development of the personal computer and the advent of the World Wide Web provided the curators of image collections with the opportunity to profit, financially or academically, from their assets. It was natural that when photographers began to generate large numbers of digital photographs, image database manufacturers would move into this market and sell directly to the image makers as well as the libraries.

However, since that initial focus on cataloguing, digital cameras and the programs supporting image handling have blossomed, leading to the development of a new concept: the digital image workflow. Both cameras and software programs have played their part in the birth of this concept; cameras through the development of file formats, including raw, and software through the blurring of traditional roles within the world of photography, print and publishing.

‘Camera Raw’

Photographers have always liked the idea of extending the basic 'given' ingredients of photography. But when high-end digital cameras first made their appearance there was little the photographer could do at the camera end other than work with what they were provided by the manufacturer. So advances made with the ‘camera raw’ format were bound to find favour with some photographers. It is analogous to the concept of the Zone System in traditional film.

Originally the idea of American photographer Ansel Adams, the Zone System dispensed with the film speed and processing times provided by the manufacturer, instead, through a series of experiments, the photographer developed their own ‘normal’ settings for a given camera and lens combination. This was then enhanced through further testing to be adaptable in different lighting conditions, thus allowing the photographer full control of their image making process. Camera exposures were calculated on capturing shadow detail, while control of highlight detail lay in selecting an appropriate processing time recording the highlight at a particular tonal point in the print. The result, in the hands of an expert like Ansel Adams, was beautifully detailed black and white prints with spectacular tonal range. While Adams’ scientific approach might not have suited the jobbing photographer on the local paper, most professionals working with black and white manipulated the processes to some extent, rarely following the manufacturer’s printed guidelines to the letter.

For those of us working with colour transparency material, pulling and pushing the E6 process was not routine practice (although it did go on) but we did have a wide range of film types from different manufacturers, with varying film speed, colour saturation and tonal range to choose from. In my day job, as a medical photographer, I chose Kodak Ektachrome EPN 100D for its subtle skin tone reproduction, while in my art practice as a landscape photographer, 50-ISO Fujichrome Velvia was...
preferred for its vibrant colour reproduction, particularly in the
greens. Tried and tested film selection was also supplemented
with careful exposure calculations, tight lighting ratios and
subtle colour correction filters. Exposures and lighting ratios
were often checked with Polaroid before committing to film,
all in search of the perfect transparency that would reproduce
accurately in the final printed publication.

Initially it was difficult to take this level of professional
adaptation into digital photography. The early cameras may
have had the capacity to capture in raw format but in-camera file
handling was slow (15 seconds to write one image to the card in the
original Nikon D1) and dedicated post-production software was
limited. However, as the technology has advanced, the demand
from professionals has increased to a level where manufacturers
have had to develop their products to meet this increasing
technical expectation. The current range of professional Nikon
cameras includes options to capture as, TIFF, JPEG (at various
compressions) and Nikon's own raw format, NEF (Nikon
Electronic Format), or even a simultaneous combination of these
formats. This has encouraged photographers to engage with the
technology in the way they had previously with black and white
film and the Zone System.

‘Digital Image Workflow’

This enthusiasm for raw formats has been picked up on by
software manufacturers. While Adobe Photoshop™ remains
the pre-eminent creative digital imaging software package,
new programs have been launched, directed specifically at the
digital photographer, providing effectively a 'digital darkroom'.
These programs, Adobe’s Photoshop Lightroom™ and
Apple’s Aperture™, bring together all the essential elements
a photographer needs to manage their images, i.e. developing,
processing, printing and cataloguing, thus creating all-in-one
digital image workflow solutions.

However, digital image workflow, in professional terms, can
be more complex than simply deciding between raw format
or JPEG, Photoshop or Aperture. Digital photography and the
development of programs like Adobe Photoshop are changing
the way images are handled in the world of printing and
publishing. In the good-old-days of film, the photographer’s job
finished when they handed the print or transparency over to the
editor, art director or client. From there it might go to a pre-
press processing house or directly to the offset printers to be
made into plates for printing. The advent of digital imaging has
made it possible for this traditional workflow to be replaced and
for the photographer themselves to be, in effect, preparing their
images for print. Yet how many of us understand the mysterious
world of CMYK, dot-gain, and the other subtleties of the offset
printing process.

Added to this, those simple days of output as print or
transparency are also a distant memory. Output in the 21st
century can be as print, CD, DVD, via email or FTP, via the
web in HTML pages, in flash players or direct to the client
desktop through browsers on the internet or intranet, with all
the associated issues of resolution, colour space, file size and
format.

What Is The Right Digital Workflow?

Should I always be working with raw camera formats? Is
in-camera-JPEG still an acceptable route? How should I be
archiving my images? And should I be outputting in CMYK
at 400dpi?

There is no one right digital image workflow. Choosing the
right combination for all the options currently available depends
on your individual situation, who you are working for and what
their requirements are. The right digital workflow is the one that
provides your clients with the most effective image in the most
efficient way. It is perfectly possible to create a workflow that
may be effective in producing quality images but is inefficient as
far as meeting the client’s requirements. It is also quite possible
to create one which meets efficiency targets but at the expense
of quality. Balancing effectiveness with efficiency, from the
client’s perspective, is the key to locking down the right digital
workflow.

If the client’s need is for high volume with a fast turn-round,
a raw workflow may be a luxury you cannot afford. A carefully
configured, in-camera-JPEG workflow may be the right solution
here. However, if the emphasis is on high quality, without
pressing deadlines, and where longevity and future sales from
stock could be important, a raw workflow would seem the most
appropriate. Whichever solution fits, the workflow has to go all
the way through from capture to client. It has to consider the set-
up of the cameras, the image handling, processing, storage and
retrieval, and it has to consider output, including colour profiling
and monitor calibration all the way through to the client end.

Conclusion

All the technological developments that have taken place
over the past ten to fifteen years have created challenges and
opportunities for professional photographers. It might be useful
to see a period of stabilization over the next few years, during
which time we would have the opportunity to explore the medium
without constantly looking over our shoulders to see what might
be coming to alter our work practices. But in our competitive,
ever-changing world, driven to a large extent by sales through
product development, that may be wishful thinking.

However, what is important in all this technological and
cultural change, is keeping sight of what photography really is.
We are communicators. It doesn’t matter whether it is on film or
digital, print or screen, we capture light on a sensitive material,
creating an image that communicates the visual essence of the
subject to another individual or individual; without that, digital
image workflow means nothing.
Further Reading

Universal Photographic Digital Imaging Guidelines: www.updig.com

Author

Paul Crompton is Head of Medical Photography at the University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff, UK. He is a Member of the Institute of Medical Illustrators, MIMI, (UK); and a Registered Medical Illustration Practitioner, RMIP, (UK). He is also a member of the UK’s Ophthalmic Imaging Association and has recently joined the BioCommunications Association.

He has won a number of awards for medical photography in the UK, has presented regularly at IMI conferences and has published a number of papers in the Journal of Visual Communications in Medicine. He has also given short presentations at the 2006 and 2007 HeSCA conferences.

Paul.Crompton@CardiffandVale.wales.nhs.uk