

Going Digital

10+ Things I Wish I Knew Before Going Digital

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Let me first start by saying that I've been shooting "film" for over 20 years and only in the last year did I convert (not fully) over to digital. Currently I'm shooting both film & digital and will be till my supply(have a beer fridge full) of film runs out or I can afford a backup digital camera. The following are things that I've learned in the past year while converting over to digital from film. These are either lessons learned or suggestions to make your digital picture taking easier.

1) It Will Cost More Than You Think

Anyone thinking of converting from film to digital realizes that there will be money needed to buy the camera maybe a lense & a few(ya right) memory cards. What you don't realize is how much money will be spent in areas you wouldn't think of (or at least I didn't). It is the small & not so small things that begin to add up. The following is a list of things that I had to purchase to convert to digital & continue to purchase to stay digital

- 1) if you bought a memory card you will need 2 if you bought 2 you will need 4..get the idea. Originally started with two 512MB cards and now have four 512MB plus two 1GB cards and looking to buy more since believe it or not I have ran out and had to borrow cards to keep shooting. Revised Jan 3, 2007 – now have 4-512MB, 4-1GB & 1-2GB memory cards
- 2) memory card holders – can't have a naked memory card can you so will have to buy holders that can hold anywhere from a single card to the 4, 6 & 8 versions
- 3) card reader & possibly a PCMCIA card reader if you own a laptop (don't own a laptop see # 4)
- 4) laptop – I haven't bought one yet but see the need to have one since it would cut down on the need for so many memory cards. Thinking of buying a storage device instead? My thought on this is that a storage device should have the ability to burn CDs & view the pictures. This will cost anywhere from ½ to 1/3 as much as a laptop & still wouldn't have the flexibility a laptop would bring.
- 5) new printer – the printer you have just will not be good enough – but doesn't have to be the top of the line either – I've seen some very good looking prints from printers that cost under \$300(Can) – it depends on what you are printing & more importantly what you expect the output to be – if use to department store output than the printer you have might be ok
- 6) more photo paper(8x11 & 4x6) & printer ink cartridges(which can add up to costing more than you paid for the printer) – this will slow down once the printing "everything" novelty has worn off
- 7) Photoshop to "fix" the pictures you take - Photoshop Elements v4 is a good start but you will need to go to Photoshop CS/CS2 if you want to get serious about digital
- 8) more RAM for the computer you have (1GB+ if using CS2)
- 9) another hard drive so you can have two copies of your pictures – the odds of two hard drives failing has to be rare (please say right!!!)
- 10) blank CDs to backup the pictures that are backed up on two separate hard drives
- 11) software that renames a bunch of your digital files at a time – yes included in Photoshop but don't like the way that it works (eg. Better File Rename)

12) software to sync the colour of your monitor to your printer so what you see on the monitor is what is printed

2) You Will Shoot More Pictures

Since shooting digital is basic free once you have the camera, lense & a memory card (& paid off the loan to pay for previously listed items) you will shoot a lot more and shoot things you wouldn't have shot in the past. I keep my camera on continuous drive all the time now. I can count on one hand the number of times I did this with any of my film cameras. It is not to say that your pictures will be better just that there will be more of them which the professionals complain about since it lowers their overall quality of stock images. I will say that since I'm not worried about wasting "film" that some "grab" shots I have taken in the last year have been very good & wouldn't have been even taken in the past. On the other hand my office contains multiple CDs of "grab" shots that I'll never use or even look at again.

3) Going Digital Will Make You STUPID & LAZY

This is not in the IQ sense but in the composition, exposure, checking of backgrounds sense. You know all the basics things that were learned when you first started taking pictures. I find that everyone including me just start shooting now where personally in the past I would at the very least light metered(light meter now sits in camera bag) to check the exposure. The thing heard the most "I can fix that in Photoshop don't worry about it". Yes you can go onto the computer and take that candy wrapper out of the foreground of the picture very easily but wouldn't it be easier to go pick it up now instead of having to take it out of the next 100 shots you are going to take. Don't get me wrong for the amateur photographer going digital can take years off the learning curve if they want to learn by their mistakes. What I see more often than not is that they just keep shooting till one is good.

4) Don't Have to Shoot RAW

I'll be the first to admit I might be missing something on this one...then again maybe not. I have never shot a RAW picture using my digital camera yet. The setting on my camera is on LARGE FINE(closest setting without being RAW) which gives me anywhere from a 2MB to 6MB JPG file size depending on what is being shot. From this file anything from a 4x6 to 8x11 picture has been printed. In some cases I have "extremely" cropped the picture & then blow it up to a very fine (if I do say so myself) 8x11. I can't speak for anything bigger than a 8x11 & maybe this is where the RAW format comes in or I've heard has to do with the ability to more "fine tune" your picture in Photoshop no data has been lost due to compressing to a JPG file.

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In the last few months have finally figured out when to use RAW & when not to. If the lighting conditions are tricky (eg. backlit, sun going in & out of clouds) or shooting a "subject" that I really like than I use RAW otherwise I still use LARGE JPEG. I'm sure other photographers use RAW all the time but still can't see a need for it.

5) Going Digital Will NOT Save You Time

I heard this from many people that going digital will save time. I really didn't believe them

& still don't. In some areas ways yes it does. For example, if I wanted a picture shot on film originally on my WWW site the negative had to be scanned then "Photoshop'd". Now the scan part is saved at least. But on the other hand if you get lazy when shooting there will be a lot of computer work (fixing exposure) that before was done in most part by the lab when they developed my film. It was also easier to edit my film pictures since I got a copy of every picture I took & could quickly edit the good from the bad. Now have to bring up each photo individually on the computer then manipulate the picture just see if it is even a "keeper" or not. This doesn't even include the file naming & storing of the image (see # 8).

6) Digital is NOT Better Than Film and Visa Versa

This section could start a very heated discussion. What I want to get at is in my opinion digital to me is at the same level as film in output quality. If you have a mid range digital camera & a mid range printer I would challenge someone by just looking at the output to tell the difference between film & digital. Difference is on the digital side BEFORE you start "playing" with the image on the computer. In my experience the digital picture is a little flatter than and not as sharp as a print so therefore #5 above comes into effect.

7) Exposure is Still Important

I was told that exposure latitude of digital is about the same slide film but didn't believe it until I started shooting. In the slide film world your exposure had to be "bang on" or the slide ended up in the garbage. This is why photographers would bracket exposures (even a 1/2 stop both under & under) trying to get the exposure just right. In the digital world it is not as bad as a 1/2 stop but it is close. The advantage is that on the digital side you can fix the exposure on the computer if you are close. It is also best the error on the side of underexposing since once you overexpose too much the detail in the file is lost & can't be recovered. You must also remember that the exposure range of digital is not the same as film. If I remember correctly we see 8 stops (ie. tonal range) of light, film can capture about 5 stops of light & digital is less than 5 stops. With Photoshop magic however you can actually capture more tone range than film by merging two pictures (1 exposed for highlights & 1 for shadows) together.

8) Got to Have a Method to Store/Name Your Photos

Naming

It took me about 6 months to come up with a method to store & name my photos and still find when shooting some particular subject/event my method has to be "tweaked" just a bit to work. Personally I'm either shooting a subject/topic (eg. autumn colours, Tundra Swan, grab shots etc) or shooting an event (eg. fair, model shoot) and I treat these differently in how the pictures are named. The following should help give you an idea how you might go about naming your photos so they can be found easily.

- 1) let my camera number each picture it takes (left it at default) – rename them later
- 2) for each days' shoot I assign a number (eg. D051101) – the letter "D" tells me it is a digital picture since I have a numbering system for my film pictures as well – the "05" represents the year shot – the "11" is the month – "01" represents the shoot number & multiple #s in the same day could be used
- 3) the next part is just to add a sequential number to the end of the number below (eg. D051101 099) – the "099" just represents the 99th picture taken/kept
- 4) the actual name of the picture could either be "subject – location/description" (eg.

Tundra Swan – McGeachy Pond, Tundra Swan – Backlit) or “event – description” (eg. Brigden Fair – Barrel Racing, Mary Model Shoot – in jeans)

Final file names would look like this “Tundra Swan – McGeachy Pond D051101 044.jpg”. Again this can be a lot of work but the using Better File Rename software saves a lot of the work & can rename 100’s of files at a time if needed.

Storing

The first thing that I do is COPY the files from my camera to current month I’m shooting in. If the pics are real important (in my mind) then I back them up onto a CD & maybe copy them to the 2nd hard drive. I usually never delete the files off my card till I’m sure I have at least 2 copies. Once the files have been renamed they are then placed into the correct subdirectories.

I store my files in directories based on months breaking down based on subjects. The following would be “snapshot” view for a particular month. Please note that I would have the exact view on the 2nd hard drive as well.

2005

January

February

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October

Animals

Cat

Horse

Birds

Swan

Insects

Butterfly

Dragonfly

Model Shoots

Mary

Susan

Nature

Trees

Sunrise-Sunset

Some photographers depending on volume just put all the pictures for one month in a directory. Again a lot depends on the volume you shoot & the range of subjects you shoot. I shoot many different subjects & can shoot 1,000+ shots in a day. Having everything in one big directory would not work for me.

At the end of each month I make 2 copies onto CD & keep one at home & the other in another location.

9) Don’t Print 4x6 Prints at Home

Although I say this it is still hard for me not to print out a 4x6 now & then. It is still cheaper to take your digital file to a photo lab & have them printout the 4x6 when you take paper & ink costs into account. Anything prints bigger than 4x6 is cheaper to print at home. This is of course assuming that you have your printer and monitor synchronized so that the colours match. If you don’t do this a lot of time will be wasted printing the same picture over and over till you are happy.

10) Digital Photography is NOT More Creative Than Film

Some techniques are still more easily accomplished with film such as multiple exposures and sandwiched slides. Digital is great for instant feedback on exposure and lighting effects. Digital also can extend the tonal range of a picture by simply merging two separate exposures of the same image. I still think there is room for both film and digital. The medium you use all depends what you like to shoot & under what conditions.

11) Autofocus Does NOT Always Work

Ok so I said 10 things and this is #11. This point only is for any Canon camera film user out there that has eye focus (eg. Canon 7E). This made me crazy for about 2 months. What I was finding is that my digital pictures were coming back soft (ie. not quite as sharp as I would have liked and especially noticeable when photographing models). After asking a few questions, experimenting, looking on the Internet what I found is that my digital camera doesn't focus the same way as my eye focus camera. In my film camera what I looked at was in focus but on the digital camera this isn't always the case and you have to be more aware of what the camera is telling you to what is in focus. In my digital camera at least it tries to figure out what you want in focus then highlights in the viewfinder what is in focus which may or may not be correct (eg. photographing a model and wanting the eye(s) in focus). To get around this I set my camera to centre focus so I always know the centre of picture is in focus & then just recompose the picture if needed.

12) Check the Small Details (added November 28, 2005)

I currently use a Canon 8500 printer which has eight ink cartridges. What I just found out is that two of the cartridges (red & green) are not carried as "standard" items at my local Staples which means they have to be special ordered them in. Not only do they cost more than the "other" six cartridges it also takes about 10-14 days to get them which is not a good thing when you want to print some photos but can't because the ink cartridge is out. If I would have checked this out beforehand I could have had a supply on hand.

13) Be Careful on What You Delete (added January 3, 2007)

I'm very good at deleting images if fact sometimes too good. I use EOS Viewer (came with my camera) to view images once they are loaded onto my computer. Real bad pictures (eg. closed eyes, somebody walked in front of your camera etc) are easy to delete the problem comes with having X number of pictures that "look" exactly the same. It has happened more than once where I choose a picture & then delete the "look alike" only to find out that the picture chosen is just slightly out of focus....too late once the image is deleted off the PC and your card. This where burning a copy of all the images once they are loaded onto the PC would help.