

Digital Photography: A Blessing or A Curse?



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Digital Photography: A Blessing of A Curse

Digital photography, as with other technical advances, offers a great deal to contemporary professional photographers and the clients we serve. However, as with most technical advances, it can be a mix of positives and negatives.

Digital Photography: A Blessing

Don't get me wrong. I love digital photography for the most part. As a professional photographer with over 35 years of experience, I appreciate what the digital revolution has done for the industry and for photographers.

- No more scans.
- No more airbrushing.
- No more having to wait for chemical processing to see if an image is viable.
- No more worrying about chemicals' shelf life, purity, and disposal.

Digital photography has increased the controls a photographer has in capturing images and improving them. Now a photographer can review an image pixel-by-pixel, if need be. And with the software available to manipulate an image, a whole world of effects and improvements is available. And all of this can be done with a speed not previously known. Digital photography can be a medium of immediacy. These are the blessings of digital photography.

Digital Photography: A Curse

Maybe this is a bit harsh but there is a "Dark Side" -- a curse, if you will -- to digital photography. To put it bluntly, the digital camera has made too many think they too are professional photographers. In the days before digital cameras, very few amateurs were going to go out and buy a large or medium format camera or even a high end 35mm SLR for their "happy snaps" or company product shots.

However, with costs on all electronic devices having dropped dramatically, many amateurs can now afford a consumer/professional hybrid digital camera. And with this camera in hand, many amateurs now believe that they can produce the same quality of image as a professional photographer. Owning a good digital camera does not make someone a professional photographer any more than owning an expensive Cross pen makes him a writer. Cameras are tools -- the means photographers use to capture an image. The creativity, the art, of shooting an image is in the knowledge and talent of the person behind the camera. The professional photographer has trained and studied to learn to perfect the capture of light and shadow that photography is. My schooling in photography did much more than show me which end of the camera to point at the subject. We were taught the intricacies and nuances of lighting, composition, color and so much more. Let me give you a visual example of what can happen if an amateur chooses to "shoot it himself."

Digital Photography: A Case Study

Following are three photos of the same product shot at approximately the same angle and taken with the same camera. The differences between the shots occur because of the specific determinations and actions taken by the photographer – not the camera.



*Image One:
The Pro Shot*

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In Image One, The Professional Shot, the product was photographed on seamless white background paper (designed for professional photography) and was lit with a grouping of professional studio lights to even illumination (how light is distributed and reflected back to the camera from the subject). The exposure time used was measured to allow detail in both the shadow areas and highlights to be optimally captured.

Specifically, notice the detail visible in the speaker grill and the legibility of the logo on the handle in front. Set up time: half an hour. Retouching time, 0.

Now, examine Image Two – what most amateur shots look like.



Image Two: The Amateur Shot

Like the first image, this second image was shot with the same camera from close to the same angle. Instead of studio lights, however, the shot was taken with direct on-camera flash, and instead of white background paper, the subject is sitting on a white card. (The card only looks grey because the flash is hitting the card and bouncing away. Additionally, the first shot was set up to be backlit to better illuminate the paper as well as the top of the radio.)

Actually, in these digital times, images like this from outside can be worked with, depending on their ultimate use and how much someone is willing to pay for retouching. After all, the image is in focus – an important factor. No extraneous stuff is going on in the background.

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This is also good. It even is fairly evenly lit although in a dull and unappetizing way. Now it is time to start up the Photoshop and get rolling with the retouching.

A professional photographer is resplendent even in mediocrity – with enough time. Set up time: 0 Retouching Time: 0

Image Three: After Some Retouching

Now look at Image Three.



*Image Three:
After Some Retouching*

This is what Image Two looks like after stripping out the background, playing with the density levels so the image wouldn't appear so flat (straight frontal light always flattens everything out) and a Photoshop shadow tossed in to create some depth. Yet more work is needed before this image is ready for use in a professional piece. The logo isn't very readable. The control knobs look pasted on. This retouched image with the changes made as detailed took only an hour of retouching. But it is not ready for use in a professional piece. More time needs to be taken to doctor this image, including artificially adding the logo to the front and much more, but it would have taken a couple of extra hours. Hours improving a bad image means more cost. And it still wouldn't have looked as good as the First Image: The Professional Shot.

Retouching Time to Improve Image Two: One hour with more needed

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Digital Photography: A Blessing or A Curse?

As a professional photographer, I see all the blessings digital photography offers and will offer in the future. However, as with many things digital, just because it is easy does not mean it is good. The quality difference between a professional and an amateur shot only becomes more observable when it is used in printed pieces and online. But that's my opinion. Your mileage may vary.

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