

Metadata maketh the man

BY MOSHE ROSENZVEIG

I started using digital equipment in my work as a professional photographer three years ago. The level of control and the immediacy of the medium totally hooked me and I never turned back to shooting film.

I did not realise what a monster I had allowed into my life until it was quite some time later and my second computer hard drive had filled up. The task of backing up rapidly got out of hand, not to mention the task of finding specific images in a sea of folders.

I started developing methods to tame the digital beast which have helped me from that time onwards. However I am still struggling to catalogue older material which I hope to get under control when work eases off.

Establishing a robust method to dealing with digital images is crucial to saving time and maximising the use of material shot.

Anyone who uses digital photography needs to start dealing with digital asset management. My solution is based on Adobe Bridge but most of the suggestions I make can be achieved with other programs as well.

WHAT IS DAM?

DAM (Digital Asset Management) is part of the digital workflow which includes:

- > Downloading the files from the camera/card;
- > Renaming files;
- > Backing up;
- > Rating and selecting/thinning images;
- > Grouping images in categories;
- > Archiving;
- > Optimising;
- > Maintaining the collection; and
- > Exporting images to relevant software and libraries.

Managing images is essential to building and maintaining a photographic archive. Moving to digital photography encourages shooting a lot more material but it also gives us the means to find specific images instantly.

It is essential to establish a consistent and comprehensive approach to Digital Asset Management where all the steps above are followed.

At the heart of your solution is the metadata you create about your images. Metadata means literally data about data. The information is stored as part of the image as text that can be read with the appropriate software.

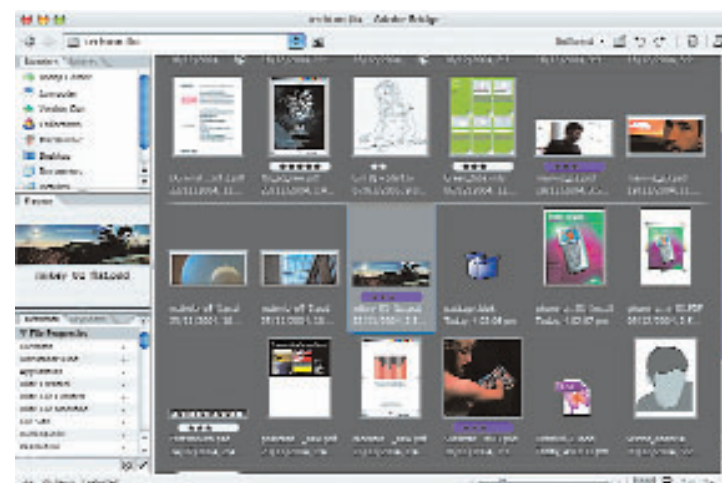
There are three different stores of information:

- > **Exif- Exchangeable Image File Format:** This set of fields of information was developed by the camera manufacturers and contains information about the camera and the image settings such as the ISO speed, shutter speed and aperture. Some of the fields are 'open,' meaning that they can be read (and some also to be written); others are coded and can only be used by the manufacturer;
- > **IPTC:** International Press Telecommunications Council. This set of fields of information was developed in order to enable insertion of information describing the image and its creator such as the subject matter, name of the photographer and copyright information; and
- > **XMP:** Extensive Metadata Platform developed by Adobe. Adobe RAW converter does not change RAW files; it writes any additional information into an XMP sidecar which travels with the original unchanged RAW file.

DAM SOFTWARE?

There are two kinds of programs to manage images and both are designed to enable looking at images, sorting and rating them. Most of them will also enable applying some basic bulk metadata entry and image corrections however there is a major difference in the way they work.

- > **Browsers** - the search facility in these programs is slow since the information is read from the file itself. Adobe Bridge is a good example although it is a solid browser which enables viewing and sorting images, renaming and applying bulk metadata.
- > **Cataloguing programs** - these programs keep a separate catalogue file in a database format and 'virtual sets' which all point to the same original file. As a result, searching and backing up are a lot faster and work can be done 'off line' while images can be stored on DVD or an external hard drive.



iView MediaPro is one example of a very versatile cataloguing program.

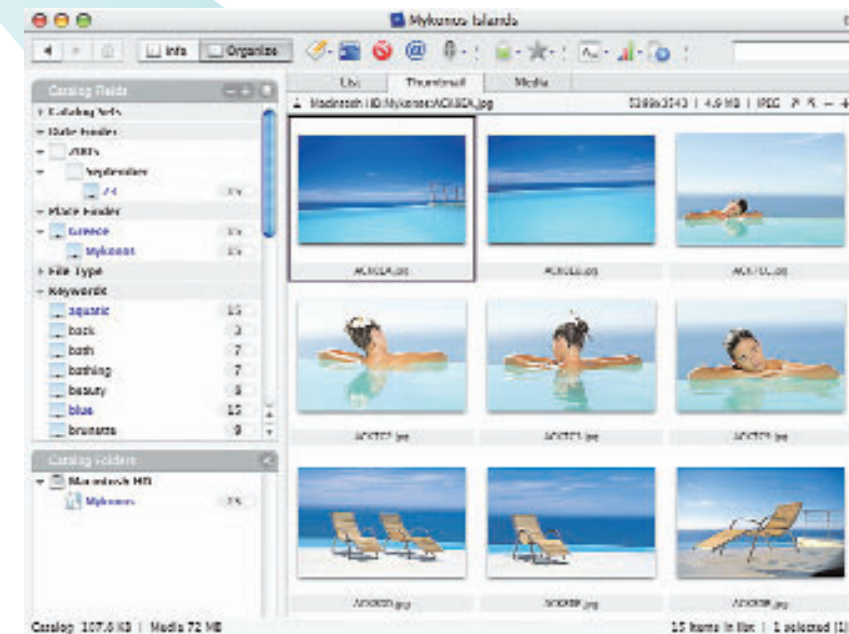
HOW TO NAME AND RENAME?

Naming images is done by the camera automatically. It consists of a unique 4 character camera code set by the manufacturer followed by a file number.

There are usually three options to choose from: automatic reset, continuous numbering or manual reset.

Choosing the 'continuous numbering' rather than any of the other methods ensures that image numbers will repeat themselves once every 9999 images. This makes the images easier to identify than having a lot of images with the 0001 number (which would be the case if you used the 'auto reset' option).

Once images have been downloaded into the computer I rename them using 'Batch rename' in Adobe Bridge. The format I use consists of client name, date and a unique number produced by the camera (without the camera prefix). A photograph for Digital Media World will be named as 'DMW20051207_1234.jpg'.



In Bridge you can create a template for batch renaming which includes 'text', 'Date' and 'Image Unique ID'. Remember to tick 'Preserve current filename in XMP Metadata' in case you need to revert back to it.

HOW TO BUILD CACHE?

Once images have been downloaded, Bridge will start building thumbnails for them if the folder is opened. If you have a large number of folders already on the computer you should:

- > Point to the top folder that contains the images (for example 'My Pictures');
 - > Go to 'Tools' menu and choose 'Build Cache for Subfolders';
 - > Leave the computer alone for a while to create the thumbnails.
- The easiest way to select images is to use Bridge in Thumbnail View.
- > Select all images (ctrl A);
 - > Assign 2 stars to all images by clicking on the second 'diamond' below the image
 - > Change from 'Unfiltered' to 'Show 2 or More Stars'

> Click on the left star for images you'd like to drop. This reduces the image rating and since the view is filtered the image will disappear.

Adding Metadata is the key to the cataloguing, searching and rights management.

- > Right click on one of the images and go to 'File Info';
- > Insert the information relevant to your image (Image description, copyright info, contact info, meaningful Keywords, etc);
- > 'Save as Metadata Template' (top right arrow) with a relevant name for the job;
- > Press 'OK' to close;
- > Choose all images;
- > Go to 'Tools' 'Append Metadata'; and
- > Choose the one you just saved to apply for all images.


It's a good idea to create a 'Copyright' template which has your personal info and copyright notice which can be applied to all of your images. This can then be appended to suit a specific job.

HOW TO SAVE?

Saving information for the future poses a number of questions regarding the best file format and the physical medium to hold it. The best option at the moment is on a hard drive as CD or DVD may deteriorate in a number of years. The best file format to use for archival purposes needs to be of the highest possible quality and in a standard format that will be supported in the future. I keep my raw files as DNG rather than RAW (which is a propriety format unlikely to be supported in the future) and

the processed files as PSD.

It is a challenge choosing the right DAM software to suit your particular workflow. Some of the important factors will include price, colour management, file handling (shooting RAW) and Metadata manipulation.

The suggestions I made are based on my experiences however as with all software the best tutorial is to try it out for yourself. Once you have figured out the best method for your needs, stick to it and do not keep changing it. 

Moshe Rosenzveig is a photojournalist, commercial photographer, educator and an award winning television producer/director, whose career in the visual arts and the media spans 25 years. He specialises in location work using high-end digital equipment or film and a portable studio. Moshe is currently teaching at the School of Communication, Design & Media, University of Western Sydney. www.4dphotography.com.au

