So you think you're a professional photographer?

One of this magazine's primary aims is to bring you comment and analysis at a professional level, and representative of the real world of work we inhabit. IT plays a significant part in everything we do, and there's no one better placed to help photographers see the wood for the trees than **Paul Ellis**, otherwise known as **The Digital Plumber**. We've cajoled him into giving a little insight every now and again

I am a professional photographer, or rather I was: nowadays, along with just about everyone else in an industrialised country whose work does not solely consist of manual labour, I'm now primarily a professional computer operator. *Let me explain.*

In the beginning

When I went to Art School in the mid-1970s, there was no such thing as a microprocessor. There were transistors, found in transistor radios (and the worst kinds of electric guitar amplifiers), but my family's Bush telly was still stuffed with valves, as was the radiogram. Transistors were then still 'discrete' components; they hadn't yet been rendered onto sheets of silicon. It was an analogue world in every shape and form.

When I left Art School and started work on an 18-month job creating a slide library of all the listed buildings in County Durham I had a Nikon F2, a Weston and a 28mm Shift Nikkor. I was very proud of my F2 because, lacking a metering prism, it didn't need batteries to work. I liked that idea a lot. I was a photographer, and I was happy.

My first direct encounter with a microprocessor in any form was when a friend, lecturing at Durham University, brought home an Apple II computer that had a primitive game on it. I found the Apple II a curiosity: the game was quite fun, but so what? I reckoned the same of the Space Invaders game at the pub. 'Nah,' I thought, and went back to my F2 and my Fender Rhodes electric piano, with which I played a lot of local gigs. Not a microprocessor in sight in my world. It wasn't until 1980 and I was working as a session musician that I acquired my first microprocessor-equipped piece of kit: a programmable synthesizer called a Prophet 5. From that point onwards, microprocessors and digital gadgets of all kinds have inexorably taken over my life. Sound familiar?

In the present

I was given leave to ponder this Arcadian pre-microprocessor lost world last summer when, in my role as a Macintosh consultant, I fetched up in South London to attend to a recalcitrant PowerMac G4. In through the front door, up the stairs, along the landing through the darkroom and overwhelming smell of fixer and into the box-bedroom office, to be confronted by a small table covered in 35mm film cameras and lenses, including a battered black Nikon FM2 emblazoned with black tape to hide its branding, as was *de rigueur* for photojournalists in the '70s! Talk about nostalgia…

This photographer was shooting mostly with a pair of Nikon D200s but continued to yearn for the days of HP5. He was a nice enough chap, clearly fairly busy, but had that slight air of unworldliness exuded by the distractedly arty. His world was concerned with *imagery*, dear boy. These blasted computers are all very well but have feet of clay, y'know. *Imagery* is where it's at.

The Digital Plumber

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And yet, he was stuck. His computer didn't work. He could neither send nor receive email. All of his clients were sending him emails and expecting him to respond to them, and he couldn't. Eventually some would phone him, asking him why he hadn't replied to their emails. Those working in companies with on-site IT support staff to keep their computers and network running and problem-free clearly could barely grasp the concept that his email was broken: how could he possibly function?

And that's the nub of it. He couldn't. Twenty years ago he'd have had a phone call, followed by letters in the post, commissioning him for work. He'd have delivered his trannies by hand, registered mail or courier. He'd eventually have received a cheque in the post. Now he must email JPEGs and get paid by BACS. What is he, primarily? A photographer? No.

As I said earlier, along with everyone else in the industrialised world carrying out work that is not exclusively manual labour, *he is now primarily a computer operator*. He happens to use his computer for imaging because he works with images, but principally he uses it for electronic communication and business administration. He was in the process of learning the hard way that in the 21st century, drowning as we now are in microprocessors, *no functioning computer means no functioning business*. If your computer is broken you might as well stay in bed.

There's a lesson here, for this revolution has crept up on us almost imperceptibly. I hope that the following doesn't come across as hectoring, because it certainly isn't intended as such, but no matter what we might think we primarily are, we are all now actually, first and foremost, computer drivers. *Professional* computer drivers, at that. Whereas there might still be a case made for delegating digital chores or tricky retouching to savvy assistants and specialists, there are no longer any reasonable grounds for not being in control of your own computer. The era of the analogue photographer, man-as-an-island, is dead. *[That's not to say film is dead, mind. It's not the same question at all – Ed.]*

So it's probably time for us all to explicitly recognise that fact, adopt our professional attitude, and proceed to gain firm control over our computers in the same way we established control over our photographic equipment and methodology. It's like learning to drive a car, and equally important: one has to study and have practical lessons, after which the operation becomes fluent, second-nature, and with experience we gain a feel for how well the car is performing, if it has a problem, and how serious that problem might be.

How best to start?

For the Macintosh user, Apple offers a year's worth of weekly one-hour one-to-one personal training sessions at an Apple Store with an Apple 'Genius' for £79 (www.apple.com/uk/retail/onetoone/). That's hard to beat. Think of it as a course of driving lessons. At the end of it you'll have a decent understanding of your Mac and how it works in the same way that a competent driver understands a car. You don't have to know programming to drive a Mac, ➔

in the same way that it isn't strictly necessary to understand the physics of reciprocating engines to drive a car. Anyone capable of the technical competence necessary to become a real professional photographer can master the general operation of a computer. So, if you feel you're not fully in control of the day-to-day working of your Mac, now's the time to change that.

Windows PC users can avail themselves of courses leading to a European Computer Driving License (ECDL), a Europe-wide qualification in basic computer skills. If you have passed ECDL, employers know you have the skills to carry out the main tasks on a computer, it says here (http://tinyurl.com/9mj92l). More to the point, you will know that you are now in charge of the beastly PC rather than vice versa.

Training courses and testing are offered at centres accredited by the British Computer Society and can be further education colleges, private training providers, adult/community education centres and learndirect centres. You can search at (http://tinyurl.com/7p3cap) for a centre near you. You'll get a logbook listing all the modules. As you pass each module, the accredited testing body will sign your logbook. You can take the modules in any order or even all at once.

ECDL consists of seven units, each of which has a 45-minute test. The modules are:

- Basic concepts of IT;
- Using the Computer and Managing Files;
- Word Processing;
- Spreadsheets;
- Databases;
- Presentation; and
- Information and Communication.

Centres may offer ECDL as a taught course, a flexible course or a distance-learning course. There is also an ECDL Advanced qualification, which 'aims to take your computer skills to the next level'. Handy, that. Again, you'll get a certificate for passing each module. In the UK you can study the following ECDL Advanced modules:

- Spreadsheets;
- Databases;
- Presentation drawing; and
- Word processing.

What about us?

Ah, yes. We're photographers after all, and there's no mention in the ECDL of photographic workflow, RAW development, Photoshop, retouching, creating web galleries, delivering work to clients or even of running basic accounting and tax software. ECDL seems to be primarily concerned with training up corporate office fodder, whereas Apple will at least teach you how to operate iPhoto and Aperture. Never mind: the point of doing One to One or ECDL is to formally learn the basics of the computer's user interface, operation, file storage and retrieval so that you no longer find yourself in the position of a client of mine whose desktop was overflowing with folders, simply because she had no idea how to store files.

Decent, relevant training in photographic software, workflow and methodology can be pretty hard to come by. Questions such as 'where can I get training in Photoshop?' crop up repeatedly on professional mailing lists such as EPUK (http://www.epuk.org/) and The Association of Photographers' email forum (http://hub.the-aop.org/).

The BIPP runs a pretty comprehensive training programme and is an obvious first stop for training and instruction in the use of your computers and software in all aspects of your work and business as a professional photographer. Look at (http://tinyurl.com/c4e7ev). The full list appears in the front section of this magazine, if you haven't yet noticed.

The AOP is running a season of digital seminars at its London headquarters in Leonard St this Spring. Full details will be announced in due course on The AOP's website (http://hub.the-aop.org/) but the seminars currently planned include masterclasses on Workflow and Storage, Web Galleries and Client Delivery,

'We're now so utterly dependent upon computers and Internet access for our businesses to function at all that our first priority is to ensure that computer failure doesn't stop us in our tracks.'

Advanced Photoshop, RAW Conversion, Apple Aperture and Adobe Lightroom. Presenters should include me, Nick Wilcox-Brown and Martin Evening, no less, so book early.

Adobe run their Adobe Certified Expert (ACE) scheme, which certifies knowledge and expertise to specific levels on their software. You can search for a local ACE at http://tinyurl.com/aphpzl.

Books

Along with the obvious illustrated volumes of our heroes' work, our bookshelves really ought to sport copies of the following:

- *Mac OS X Leopard: The Missing Manual* by David Pogue (http://tinyurl.com/dfgw5y). As good, straightforward and approachable a reference to OS X 10.5 Leopard as you're likely to find.

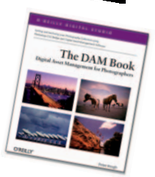
- *Windows Vista: The Missing Manual* by David Pogue (http://tinyurl.com/dmgalx). The same again, for Windows Vista.

- *Windows XP for Starters: The Missing Manual* by David Pogue (http://tinyurl.com/cvrx93). Anything written by David Pogue is worth reading.

- *The Adobe Photoshop Lightroom 2 Book: The Complete Guide for Photographers* by Martin Evening (http://tinyurl.com/5npepn). Lightroom is coming on by leaps and bounds, to the extent that it's becoming many snappers' primary computer working tool. You'll have a thorough understanding of it after reading this.

- *Adobe Photoshop CS4 for Photographers* by Martin Evening (http://tinyurl.com/6cark8). Martin's books are generally acknowledged to be both exhaustive and approachable. This is the one to get if you really want to know Photoshop.

- *The Adobe Photoshop CS4 Book for Digital Photographers* by Scott Kelby (http://tinyurl.com/df2m3r). The best collection of instant Photoshop tricks for sorting out specific image problems.



- *Mac OS X for Photographers* by Rod Wynne-Powell (http://tinyurl.com/56vy7y). Properly understand the workings of Mac OS X when used for photographic purposes.

- *The DAM Book* by Peter Krogh (http://tinyurl.com/acn6vx). The essential manual for organising and managing your picture archive.

What about when it breaks?

Notice not 'if', but 'when'. Like cars, computers require maintenance, break down and cost you money when you least need them to, and leave you stranded until you can organise a fix or replacement. Unlike cars, when they break they can also take your entire business with them. We're now so utterly dependent upon computers and Internet access for our businesses to function at all that our first priority is to ensure that computer failure doesn't stop us in our tracks. To that end, next time I'll be talking about digital lifeboats and blunderbusses. See you then.

The Digital Plumber, a.k.a. Paul Ellis, is an AOP member who spends an increasing amount of his time carrying out Macintosh consultancy and troubleshooting work, mostly for other AOP members and professional photographers. He can be contacted at www.thedigitalplumber.co.uk.

LINKS

Apple One-to-One Training (www.apple.com/uk/retail/onetoone/)

The European Computer Driving License (http://tinyurl.com/9mj92l)

BIPP Training Courses (http://tinyurl.com/7p3cap)

EPUK (http://www.epuk.org/)

The Association of Photographers (http://hub.the-aop.org/)

Mac OS X Leopard: The Missing Manual by David Pogue (http://tinyurl.com/dfgw5y)

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The Adobe Photoshop Lightroom 2 Book by Martin Evening (http://tinyurl.com/5npepn)

Adobe Photoshop CS4 for Photographers by Martin Evening (http://tinyurl.com/6cark8)

The Adobe Photoshop CS4 Book for Digital Photographers by Scott Kelby (http://tinyurl.com/df2m3r)

Mac OS X for Photographers by Rod Wynne-Powell (http://tinyurl.com/56vy7y)

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