

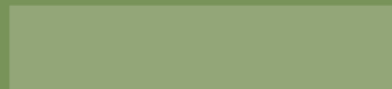
The Digital Gurus

Ian van der Wolde

These articles profile some of the experts in digital imaging technology working in Australia. This month Barrie Smith talks to Victorian professional photographer Ian van der Wolde who now advises fellow photographers on their digital imaging set-ups.



Operating in Dandenong, 30 kilometres from Melbourne, Ian van der Wolde has managed to carve a niche for himself in what he calls "middle of the road, medium level commercial photography."



About 30 kilometres out of Melbourne, Dandenong is a scenic area that is also a surprisingly active region for light manufacturing. Digital photographer Ian van der Wolde has managed to carve a niche for himself in what he describes as "middle of the road, medium level commercial photography". His studio operates under the banner of Altered Images. In the process of making digital capture work for him, Ian has picked up considerable expertise and is now also consulting and advising other photographers (and designers) about how to shuffle the pixels around successfully.

Ian comes from the photographic school of hard knocks, some of which, he confesses, have been self-inflicted in the process of getting up to commercial speed with digital technology, but he believes this experience has stood him in good stead. It's also helped him compile a lot of very practical advice to pass on to photographers now just getting started in digital capture.

The first steps are important, Ian stresses, so he usually begins by helping photographers set up the basics such as colour spaces, calibrating monitors and printers correctly, and configuring Photoshop for the intended applications. He also explains the importance of establishing a digital workflow.

"I've helped people other than photographers," he comments. "I've even helped my graphic design clients set up their colour management. It's amazing

how many graphic designers and people in that part of the imaging industry have no understanding whatsoever of colour spaces and workflows — particularly CMYK conversion.

"On many occasions I'll ask, 'How did you convert that file to CMYK?', and the reply will be something along the lines of, 'Oh, I just went into Photoshop and clicked CMYK'. They have no idea about what is actually happening to the file."

Balancing Act

Ian contends that graphic designers are perhaps the worst offenders in this area.

"Photographers are going to great lengths to ensure that the photographs they take have the correct colour balance right through. In my case, when I'm shooting in the studio, I use a Gretag Macbeth reference chart for white balancing. It's important that the image then be viewed on a colour-corrected monitor in Photoshop. But the system then falls down when the image is written to a CD and sent to the graphic design client who views it on an uncalibrated monitor! Then he or she makes corrections to the image because it doesn't look right! And this happens from the smallest one-man show through to major ad agencies!"

Even if a photographer or designer is using a specific colour space, there are still traps in terms of how the images are viewed further down the line.

"I've helped wedding portrait photographers set up, so they're in tune with the lighting situations



that they're using, and so what they're seeing on the screen is actually correct.

"There seems to be a bit of misunderstanding about colour spaces. For example, some labs will scan in sRGB, but then they'll view it all in Adobe RGB, and their Photoshop is set up in such a manner that it's not alerting them that they have a profile

"A lot of photographers feel that every image they get out of their digital camera should be a custom image, whereas in the past they would shoot, have a set of proofs and they'd only scan the best one."

mismatch. If the client makes changes to a file without them realising it, then they're not achieving optimum results."

Colour Control

Not every professional photographer is using digital capture yet, but of these many are obviously considering making the change. What sort of problems are they likely to encounter in the current climate?

"It varies, but I've found that the biggest problem is colour itself... to be specific, getting the right colours out of the camera. A lot of photographers will, initially at least, buy a lower end digital camera, stick it on JPEG capture and expect it to work straight out of the box. They don't realise that there is a little bit of work involved with set-up and operation... different to film cameras."

Ian contends that the amount of misinformation flying around is partly to blame.

"Many photographers, who previously shot transparency film, have been told it's no different when they shoot with a digital camera — you just take the shot, expose it as if you're shooting transparency film and everything will be fine! Colour spaces, work spaces and profiles are never discussed. What also used to happen in the film days, of course, was that the lab would do all the remedial work behind the scenes and hand

back an image that was acceptable. But in this brave new world, the person behind the digital camera suddenly found that he or she had to do all of this themselves. Ian van der Wolde says he has noticed that many photographers suddenly realise "they didn't really have an eye for colour".

However, he contends this is slowly changing and points to his own experience. "I was getting great colour from my lab, then went to digital capture and, all of a sudden, saw that I needed to concentrate a little more on how I handled the colour."

Ian has chosen to operate a RAW file workflow which enables him to "play around" with white balance in order to achieve the most accurate colours.

"I find that the manufacturers now include reasonably good algorithms in their digital cameras for producing colour, so colour balance is often not the main issue — the problems are more related to white balance."

Taking the subject of RAW capture further, Ian comments, "If you shoot with JPEG capture, you are throwing away valuable information that could really be assisting you later on when you're trying to make an accurate decision on where that colour temperature should sit."

He also notes that, although a photographer may have moved from using film to digital capture, he or she hasn't not changed their workflow practices to any degree.

"There are pros and cons to digital capture, and one of the latter is that all of a sudden the buck stops with you... so you have to set up the workflow to do to do what's best for you."

Knowledge Base

Ian observes that many photographers who have been shooting on high-end film cameras expect their digital camera set-ups to work perfectly the minute they start using the equipment.

"They don't want to do any preliminary work on it at all, but then they wonder why they aren't getting the results that they expected."

He also believes that the absence of a workflow that enables the editing of images on-the-fly, leaving the computer to do a lot of the work, is poor practice.

"A lot of photographers feel that every image they get out of their digital camera should be a custom image, whereas in the past they would shoot, have a set of proofs and they'd only scan the best one. Now, I think because they have instant access to all their images, they want them all to be perfect... and a lot of photographers can't get their head around the fact that it doesn't work this way."

Asked whether many of the people he advises have much prior knowledge of digital imaging, Ian answers, "It varies. When people started asking me for advice I was a little bit overwhelmed and I thought 'What can I teach these people?' Over time, though, I've spoken to people who are quite knowledgeable in that field and they teach me things, but then I find that I'm able to teach them things as well. So someone who might be really good with digital workflow may not necessarily be very good with colour management and vice versa. I think that the more we talk about it and the more we discuss it and have articles like this in the magazines the more everyone will understand."

Developing Skills

While saying that photography and the making of images is his "first love", Ian van der Wolde has ambitions to help people develop their digital skills, and is increasingly involved in setting up profiles for clients' equipment and helping with workflow issues.

Ian can profile a client's inkjet printer, regardless of location in Australia. This service is performed remotely via email and by post, and is an extremely cost effective way of obtaining accurate colour from a printer. [For more details contact Ian at info@alteredimages.com.au or telephone (03) 9794 9870.]

In his consulting work Ian says he also tries to educate his clients to work the way he works.

"I explain to them why I don't like to set up a CMYK workflow, and that the RGB file should be what they archive, because if the image is going to a press ad today or a full colour brochure tomorrow they need to revert back to that RGB file.

"They've got six million colours in an RGB file, but you cut it back to about 70,000 when you convert to CMYK. But if you've converted to 70,000 colours that aren't necessarily suited to the CMYK process it's much easier to go back to the source RGB file that has all the colour information, and then do another conversion specific to the device that you're going to."

On this subject Ian states he always supplies his clients with RGB images rather CMYK files. Aware that CMYK conversions are device dependant, he says that unless he knows exactly where that file is going, and how it needs to be treated, he will not convert it to CMYK.

"If I client does ask me to convert to CMYK I explain to them that I've converted it, for argument sake, to Euroscale



Photographs by Ian van der Wolde, copyright 2004.

version 2 (paper setting) in Photoshop. But I will also send the RGB files for reference. The only way I would convert to CMYK is if the client could give me specific CMYK conversions for Photoshop or an IPT profile."

In The RAW

ProPhoto asked Ian whether he thought technical education, or specific digital imaging courses, are worthwhile in helping a new operator get up to speed?

"Absolutely. The industry is moving so quickly that you need to have a good understanding of what's happening in order to keep up with it, otherwise it will move away from you fairly quickly. I don't pretend to know much about the prepress side of it, but I'm always listening and I'm always trying to learn more, because that has an effect on the way I do business."

So, is there a 'right' way to approach the changeover to digital capture?

"I think it really depends on your budget. I think the same principles could be applied to a consumer level camera as would a professional camera in terms of colour management and the like. However, the things I would be looking for in a camera is its ability to work in high bit data — like 48-bits of colour — and whether it offers a RAW capture mode. I would use the full colour gamut of the device and certainly explore shooting in RAW, getting as much data as you can for the file.

"That's my advice and when I'm asked, even by someone who is considering a prosumer-type digital camera, I suggest that the one thing they want to look for is the ability for it to capture in RAW mode. That to me would probably be the most important capability that you need."

In the second part of this profile, Ian van der Wolde's outlines the way he works in the digital domain and explains the reasons behind his approach. 