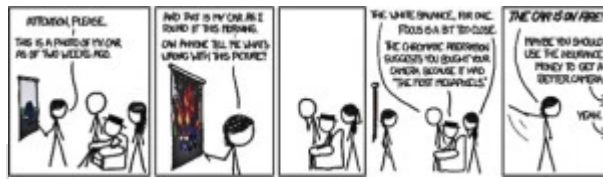


The Mouth of The Kenai

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Plugged In: Know your stuff, let enough be enough

By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter



Cartoon via XKCD

Sometimes, enough is more than enough. Cliches to that effect abound, such as “not seeing the forest for the trees,” “want what you need rather than need what you want,” and “perfection is the enemy of the good enough.” It’s easy to become so bogged down in constant hardware and software “upgrades” that your productivity and creativity takes a dive.

As the cliché overload suggests, we’re not exactly in undiscovered country here.

Computer technology and digital photography enthusiasts are particularly vulnerable to searching for that next great piece of (usually expensive) technology that seemingly will fix everything. Trouble is, each year’s models typically are mere incremental improvements. You’ll do far better by learning how to effectively use quality equipment that you already own.

Recent digital gear, both computer and photographic, is already mature technology that, when used intelligently, is more than good enough for almost any reasonable purpose. What’s needed now is a different user mindset, emphasizing the substance and creativity of your photographs and a deeper knowledge of photography.

The XKCD photography cartoon illustrating this week’s column self-evidently illustrates why computer and photography enthusiasts sometimes become so focused on hardware minutia that they don’t see the forest for the trees. (No, we didn’t pirate the cartoon. XKCD is a free, science-oriented public domain cartoon series that <http://www.xkcd.com> claims to be “hazardous to liberal arts majors.”) As the cartoon points out, proper exposure and high optical performance are important aspects of making good photographs, but substantive content is far more important.

Much of our current technology and photo “wants” are driven by guileful advertising and by every manufacturer’s need to constantly sell new equipment to stay solvent. There’s nothing wrong with that, of course. But, that’s not a rational reason to toss out “good-enough” technology, rather than taking the time to learn how to use your existing technology to best advantage.

Here are a few personal examples. I upgraded two law office computers to Adobe Acrobat 10 from version 9. I can’t see any practical difference except that I spent \$400 only to find that Acrobat 10’s user interface seems less user-friendly and doesn’t include any significant new features that I would use daily. MS Word, PowerPoint and Excel 2010 are not so superior to the 2007 versions that upgrading is imperative for any reason other than Microsoft’s new default file formats, which can’t be read by earlier program versions. On the other hand, Adobe’s newest Photoshop and Lightroom products are welcome improvements that retain existing file format standards, always important for long-term data compatibility.

I was also surprised to find that my 2011 Pentax K-5 and Olympus E-P3 cameras already include features currently being touted as great new technology in 2012 cameras. I simply failed to take the time earlier to carefully read the manuals and learn about those capabilities. Similarly, I considered buying Olympus’ new 12-mm, ultrawide-angle lens until I checked some lens tests and found that Olympus’ virtually free 14- to 42-mm II kit lens was almost as sharp at nearly the same wide-angle view.

In the same vein, faster computer hardware now makes only a minimal performance improvement when running current programs. That’s because current Windows and Mac operating systems and application programs do not efficiently use the multicore and multithreaded capabilities found in even basic CPU processing chips. Newer desktop computer operating systems may even run slower because they demand more hardware resources to run those pretty interfaces.

What’s really needed are system boards and DDR memory chips that have much higher data throughput and also commercial application programs that support efficient multithreading among multiple CPU cores. Until then, buying “faster” computing hardware will not result in a noticeable difference to anything except the bottom line of your credit card statement.

Scanners and office printers are other good examples of mature digital technology where there’s little rational need to upgrade hardware that’s still efficiently doing its job. The speed and output of 2007 scanners and laser printers is comparable to currently advertised models.

Solid-state hard disks (SSD), though, are a welcome exception to this rule of thumb. When used with Windows 7, they’re noticeably faster at booting your operating system and loading programs.

All this is even more true for photographers. Prograde cameras are usually on the market for three to four years before being replaced by a new model. Canon’s renowned L grade lenses are designs that often date back a decade or even two. Many current prograde, wide-format photo printers are virtually unchanged from the same models offered four to eight years ago. Pros understand that constant upgrading, the quality of their work and their bottom line don’t always correlate.

Let’s close this week’s rant with some photographic examples. About 50 percent of my recent photographs accepted into juried fine-art photography shows have been made with a Sony R1 camera, a bulky 2006 model that’s hopelessly “outdated.” Its lens is a fixed Zeiss zoom lens.

The large, APS-C sensor is a “mere” 10 megapixels that shows noticeable noise above ISO 400. The LCD viewfinder is slow and only 1.8 inches. Yet I continue to use that Sony R1 and many images made with it continue to do well in juried photo shows. Why?

After I got my first Pentax dSLR in September 2007, I put the Sony R1 in a drawer for over a year. Occasionally, I’d open the drawer and wonder what to do with that apparently retired camera. Finally, I started carrying it along in my car. After all, it was my oldest serious digital camera.

Because the best camera is the one that you have with you when needed, I found myself using the R1 rather more than expected. Gradually, I realized that photos taken with that R1 had some unusual and lovely qualities. The fixed Zeiss zoom lens is very sharp edge to edge from ultrawide angle through medium telephoto. Images taken with it often appear virtually 3-D. The sensor and image-processing chip produce very smooth tonal transitions with beautiful color quality. There are a few issues with smooth gray backgrounds, like foggy skies, but nothing that’s not easy to fix with RAW image files and Adobe Lightroom.

Even though ancient in digital doggy years, the Sony R1 remains a most useful camera for fine-art photos. I don’t use it when dim light or fast action requires good high-ISO performance, but I have a Pentax K-5 that’s excellent in those situations. Similarly, the R1 is big, bulky and slow, which isn’t a problem for slow, carefully considered fine-art photography, but it’s not exactly an unobtrusive and easily portable device. Again, though, my Olympus E-PL2 and E-P3 Micro Four-Thirds cameras fill those needs well.

In my upgrade haste, I nearly retired what’s become my favorite fine-art photo camera. Yet, because I routinely carried it in my car and was forced to use it to its maximum potential, an apparently obsolete digital camera again became my mainstay for certain demanding uses.

Reading back over this week’s article, I guess that we’ve already said more than enough about this topic! Look before you leap. Understand the technology that you already have and what you truly need. Sometimes, older technology like Acrobat 9 and the Sony R1 may be as good or better for your needs.

Before upgrading photo gear, carefully check professional photo reviews and buy the best equipment that you can afford and that meets your likely future needs. Then, learn its strengths and weaknesses, and how to work with them effectively, rather than succumbing to the latest marketing.

Juried show: The Kenai Fine Arts Center encourages Alaska photographers to submit up to three entries for its 2012 biennial juried show. This year’s juror is well-known Anchorage artist and educator Shala Dobson. Entries are due at the Kenai Fine Arts Center, 816 Cook Ave., in Old Town Kenai, no later than 4 p.m. Feb. 25. The entry fee is \$20 for members and \$25 for nonmembers. This is a statewide show open to all media, including painting, photography, sculpture, etc.

Local attorney Joe Kashi received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from MIT and his law degree from Georgetown University. He has published many articles about computer technology, law practice and digital photography in national media since 1990. Many of his technology and photography articles can be accessed through his website, <http://www.kashilaw.com>.