Are Photos Finished?

Digital makes memories easier to capture and share—but harder to hold on to

BY DAVID LAGESSE

Snapshooters tend to become evangelists once they've gone digital. Renee Reid, for example, abandoned film a couple of years ago for a digital camera and started printing all her pictures at home. She so loved the new ease of capturing her young Mississippi family's visual history that she bought a camera last Christmas for her mother. Her brother, smitten with his own digicam, also bought one for Mom. Reid's father, watching the two kids happily shoot without film, was getting ready to buy a third. In the end—after some awkward scenes and gift returns—digital had made another convert. “Mom got her digital camera and has had a ball,” says Reid.

Digital cameras are no longer an exotic toy for early adopters and computer buffs. Already, 1 in every 5 American homes has a digital camera, and the number could approach 1 in 3 by year's end as sales accelerate—digital models, though more expensive than film cameras, are now outselling them.

The digital revolution goes far beyond capturing images on electronic sensors instead of a film's chemical emulsion. Digital means entirely new ways of keeping and sharing photos, and that is changing the business of photography and the role of photos in
family ties and friendships. By freeing users from having to buy and process Kodak or Fujifilm rolls, digital means consumers take more pictures but print fewer of them, threatening the bread-and-butter income of the nation’s film manufacturers and myriad corner drugstores and one-hour photo labs. Instead of passing around prints and pasting them into albums, digital converts send their pictures by e-mail or even cell phone and display them onscreen, adding throw-away frivolity to the once elevated role of photos in our personal histories.

But this revolution, like most of its kind, has its costs. It has left all too many Americans with hard drives stuffed with family memories in digital form. They may have sent the files to a Web site or to relatives, but there the images remain, locked in the thermonuclear fires and ones of computer code. It’s “digital constipation,” says Doug Rea, who teaches photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Maybe 14 percent of digital pics get printed, compared with virtually all film frames. Says the Photo Marketing Association. Those that make it to paper mostly do so at home, and almost entirely by way of inkjet printers. They produce vivid colors that thrill consumers, but the delight often proves short lived as tones begin fading or dis- color in a few years, or even months.

And there’s the biggest downside of the digital revolution: It threatens the longevity of photos. Taking and sharing digital images can be a snap, but keeping them requires some know-how. Unless digital’s new devotees learn how to organize, preserve, and print their images, photography experts worry, a generation’s worth of memories could be lost.

Faded to black. For a full century, since Eastman Kodak popularized photography in the early 1900s with its $1 Brownie camera, it was film that captured family stories, filling albums with glimpses of cherished moments that were passed lap to lap at reunions and parties. Now there’s a headlong rush to entrust memories to a technology whose purveyors are often new to photography. Sure, photo stalls like Kodak and Nikon offer digital cameras, but computers and computer printers shoulder the job of turning the electronic impressions into images. The result is new control and at-home convenience, but at the cost of some old certainties. “We’re squeezing what is a generations change into three or four years,” says Kevin Gilbert, a professional photographer who teaches digital photography. “It’s no wonder people are feeling a little anxious.”

Rightly so—just ask Phil Consor, who developed a sick pit in his stomach when his computer’s hardware started wheezing a few weeks ago. The amateur photographer scrambled to make repairs, but he lost almost half his shots from the past three years. “All I know is that I’d never lost a photo that I’d taken with a film camera,” the Ontario, Canada, resident says with obvious dismay. It’s a reaction familiar to emergency workers, who say that after loved ones or pets, disaster victims usually mourn the loss of their irreplaceable photos most.

Reality bytes. Few people think about preserving their photos when they buy a digital camera—the immediacy of snapping and sharing is so appealing. Mickie Jobe had two kids and a newborn that day because of inclement weather in North Texas. The grandparents all got shots of 6-year-old Isaac sliding down a neighbor’s driveway in a laundry basket. “He was still outside sliding when I was already inside E-mailing the photos,” Jobe says.

This rapid proliferation of images may be changing the very role of snapshots. Before digital, some researchers argue that the carefully chosen, often posed photos in albums told, casting a utopian vision of life as nothing but vacations, parties, and smiles. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who studied French families in the 1980s, found that older cameras were the “festive technology.” Anthropologist Richard Challen of Tulane University found it played the same role for Americans in the 1980s.

Maybe reality is now creeping in. Some surveys say the typical family shoots

---

**Customize Software to make digital photos look their best and create real or virtual albums**

Digital photos are nothing but “computer files. That can be a weakness, but it’s also a great advantage. It means you can crop and touch your photos and organize them into an album—to be displayed onscreen or printed out—all on your PC.

A first software tip: The XP version of Windows is best for working with digital cameras and images. Most cameras come with basic software that does an acceptable job of cropping or removing red eye. Kodak’s program, EasyShare, is easier to use than most, gives you more control, and now is free for anyone to download. It is fine-moded for printing on Kodak paper, but it works well enough with other brands. Another free program, FiraView (www.firaview.com), has a surprising array of editing and organizing tools. Mac users lack out with their freebie: iPhoto seems to balance power and simplicity better than any Windows program.

Picture perfect. For more involved editing, a standout is Adobe Photoshop Elements 1.0 ($100), which lets you re-touch an image in layers, making it easy to try with changes and blend them gradually for the desired effect. The program’s menus can be daunting, though; other, simpler programs with powerful tools include JASC’s Paint Shop Pro 7.0 ($100), Ulead’s PhotoImpact 8.0 ($90), and Microsoft’s Picture It Digital Image Pro 7.0 ($110). You can test Paint Shop or PhotoImpact at no cost for several weeks.

As unsorted image files build up on your hard drive, other software can help you group and label them or add searchable keywords. Again, a good choice comes from Adobe: Photoshop Album 1.0 ($60), ImageWorks Solution’s Picasa 1.5 ($30 or free trial), in fact has fewer features. Others with free trials include JASC’s Paint Shop Album ($85) and PhotoZoom ($85). Unlike other organizing programs, PhotoZoom applies text to the image itself. The tags, which can be displayed or hidden, are searchable and travel with the image over E-mail. That way, relatives can identify Aunt Rosemary in old family photos that get passed around—although everyone will need to tag to select the text.

Many of the editing and organizing programs also make it easier to email. Some offer web sites where you can have them printed in albums that are heavier and better organized than anything in Grandpa’s attic. —D.L.

---

**Shoot Two pricey new cameras sharpen the case for digital**

Traditional photography may still have an edge in permanence, but it is no longer the dead man’s winner in clarity. Two new digital cameras have roughly twice the pixels of the next-closest models—11 million in the Canon EOS-1DS ($9,000) and 14 million in Kodak’s DCS Pro 14n ($8,500). Instead of the charged-couple-device (CCD) chips in digital cameras, these models capture light on cheaper, disposable, 17-millimeter-film metallic-coil semiconductor chips, a technology widely used in computers. The challenge was getting the same image quality from CMOS, which results in “noise”

Canon EOS-1DS

Kodak DCS Pro 14n

---

Copyright ©2003 by U.S. News & World Report, Inc. (March 24, 2003 Issue)
three times as many frames with digital as it did with film. That means relatively fewer poses and more candid moments (although delete buttons can keep the least flattering moments from ever leaving the camera). Says Chaffin: “We’ve never seen so much of each other—never been able to hold on to so much visually.”

So how can you keep all those memories from evaporating? One safeguard is to back up your hard drive by burning the images onto a CD. Experts suggest using brand-name, write-once CDs, which last for a decade or a century—but in any case probably longer than the less-hardy rewritable discs. Yet doubts nag even those who routinely store their digital pictures on disk. Geoff Jackson, a consultant in Florida, wants his grandchildren 30 years hence to have CDs of his photo collection. But no one knows for sure how the disks will hold up—and whether players in 2033 will be able to read them. “I do worry that CDs will go the way of the big floppy disk,” Jackson says. Even if CDs are still around, today’s file formats may not be. Computer and electronics companies aren’t known for ensuring backward compatibility. There’s no guarantee how long they’ll support today’s JPEG, the compression format in which most consumer cameras save images. Industry execs say they feel a personal responsibility to keep current formats alive. “We’re talking people’s memories now,” says Jim Malcolm, a manager of Sony’s photo products. “I’ve got five or six years of my kids’ life in JPEG files, and a strong vested interest in making sure they can be used decades from now.”

Still, the U.S. Library of Congress is spending $100 million on a search for ways to archive, convert, and otherwise safeguard its prized digital data against technolog-
For one photographer, a powerful digital camera and its clarity are the key to capturing landscapes as art.

Johnson, his camera, and a view from Mount St. Helens (right)

his computer that night changed his career.

The pursuit of actual resolution, the ability to hold highlights and shadows, the extraordinary accuracy of the color—the elements were just astounding," he recalls. Johnson abandoned film that day and began immersing himself in the浑身

equities of digital scanning back photography. In the process he became a rarity—an exceptionally fine color artist. With his heavy camera and sweeping landscapes, "his work loops back to the mid-20th-century photography," says David Adamson, a leading digital printmaker. "You can sense that tradition by... making the leap into the digital world."

**Color lines.** Digital scanning backs, which can cost tens of thousands of dollars, are distant kin to ordinary digital cameras. While consumer models record an image all at once and register red, green, and blue light in alternate pixels, scanning-back devices scan across the image line by line, capturing the colors separately and then merging all three into each pitch. The result is extremely fine resolution and true-to-life color saturation. Collette's prototype required four minutes to make a single image. The current version of the digital camera back, the BetterLight, takes just over a minute. While this rules out using the device for action shots, the line-by-line scanning can produce captivating effects, particularly when there's water in the scene. The slicing of time lifts waves into brushstroke-like pinacles decked by miniscule raindrops. Wind-whipped mist whips off waterfalls, panning fingers across the surrounding rocks. And because of the enormous size of the image files, even taking a magnifying glass to one of Johnson's 40- by 60-inch prints won't reveal a iota of graininess. Nine years after he first saw what digital scanning backs could do, Johnson is putting the finishing touches on "With a New Eye," a digital survey of more than 60 of America's national parks (you can see glimpses at www.mp-photo.com). He hopes that his work, combined with increasingly powful consumer digital cameras, will convince others that digital is the future of art photography as well as of snapshots. "Digital photography has the promise of being dramatically better than film-based photography," he says. "On the high and when I'm working, it's ready in."—Jared Barn-Degreec

---

months, and the longevity scientists took aim. Their results prodded the manufacturers into action. Wilhelm says Hewlett-Packard and Epson have notably improved how long their prints can last. His tests show that their printers can generate images that actually outlast a traditional print. Unfortunately, he also found that such quick results require pap

ers and inks recommended by the printer rather than cheap knockoffs. Third-party supplies often are designed to work with any printer, forcing compromises. Makers of third-party papers also struggle to keep pace with changing ink formulas. "It's tough enough to keep up, and we have armies of chemists," says Nils Miller, a chemist who helps de

dsign supplies for the company.

For archival prints, consider getting one of the newer six-ink printers, which are best at reproducing subtle tones, and print at the highest resolution. Then display the results under glass or store them in acid-free albums at moderate temperatures—"where you sleep," says one conservator, and certainly not in a hot attic or moist basement. Other tips can be found at Wilhelm's site, www.wilhelm-research.com, where he promises to display longevity data on dozens of printer/ink/paper combinations in the coming months.

Alas, even the best advice is no guar

dantee of a lasting print, because both inkjet technology and the science of ac

celerated tests are young. "We can't be sure there won't be a surprising new mechanism of failure," says James Reil

ly, director of the Image Permanence Institute. Wilhelm, for example, was blind

sided after Epson, backed by his tests, first touted new "archival" inkjet systems in 2000. Within weeks, buyers complained of an unsightly orange tone emerging in prints. The culprit turned out to be atmospheric ozone, a problem in some places like Los Angeles, which attacked prints left exposed to the air. "It caught the entire industry off guard," Wilhelm says. Epson adjusted paper formu

las to lessen the problem but still re

mends that any prints made with dye

based inks, typical for consumer printers, be displayed under glass.

The safest option by far is the oldest, says Reilly and others: Entrust your fa

vorite digital photos to standard silver-
cal glitches and obsolescence. For mere consumers, there's one sure answer, and it's a familiar one, says Mark Roosa, the lab's photography curator. Make a durable print, and protect it as you would any prized photograph.

With film, that advice is easy to follow—just have your photos preserved on good-

quity paper. With digital, it takes some expertise, especially if you print at home. It was around 1997 that affordable home printers were first developed and split out small ink drops for realistic photos. Problem was, their inks and papers were meant for corporate graphs or children's book reports. These days, prints from just about any late-model printer can look as good as a traditional print. But their durability is less certain. Inkjet prints "were never designed for display, much less for the years that we display our pho

tos," says Henry Wilhelm, a folklorist researcher who has spearheaded efforts in "image permanence." Wilhelm accelerates the slow ravages of time to test photo durability. With racks of intense lamps and hot ovens, he concocts a harsh version of a photo's life pinned to a re

grigerator door or stored in an attic.

**Paper trail.** A one-tone photo chronicle of civil rights and Vietnam War demon

trations, Wilhelm first gained notoriety in the 1970s at least among professional photogra

phers, for taking on giant Kodak over what he said were shockingly poor used in 1960s and 1970s color prints. Any family with photos from that era has sad examples of the fading problem. Kodak responded with improved papers and chemicals, and the issue itself faded away. Kodak also helped fund an alternative to Wilhelm's outfall, the Image Permanence Institute in Rochester, N.Y., another independent lab.

Inkjet print quality has become a new target for Wilhelm and the permanence in

tstitute. Traditional prints last well partly because their fragile color dyes are imbed

d in gelatin layers that are plastered to good-quality paper, which protects the dye from sunlight and air. Also, the prints are processed with chemicals that are matched to the paper type. With inkjets, Wilhelm says, "The problem is that some manufacturers are trying to save money, putting cheaper ink formulations in to keep costs down. They're going to be more expensive to buy, but that makes the cost of failure much higher. Without the inks, the prints might look good on the shelf, but the chemicals in the inks will also break down over time."

---

February 24, 2003

Copyright ©2003 by U.S. News & World Report, Inc. (March 24, 2003 Issue)
Some inkjet printers can now produce images that last longer than traditional photo prints. The table indicates how long prints can resist noticeable fading when exposed to indoor lighting and framed under glass. Glass keeps out ozone, which is particularly important for papers with tiny pores designed to absorb ink quickly, often sold as "instant drying." Most of the listed printers are six-color models, and Epson's 2200 is a pigment ink printer, a pricey alternative that yields more durable prints than dye inks can.

**Printer** | **Paper** | **Display Years**
--- | --- | ---
Epson 2200 | Epson Watercolor Paper, Hammermill Jet Print | 90
HP 2160, 2210, 5550, 7110, 7310, 7000 | HP Premium Plus Glossy | 73
Kodak K Rapid Glossy | 17
Canon 8950i, 8500, 8900 | Canon Pro PP-101 | 38
Canon Pro S Super High Gloss | 9
Epson 720, 925, 927, 940, 1930 | Epson ColorLife SemiGloss | 27
Consolidated High Gloss | 9
Lexmark Z55, Z65 | Iridium Prints Premium Glossy | 6
Staples Premium Glossy | 1
Traditional photo processing | FujiColor Crystal Archive | 80
Kodak DyeSublimation Edge | 22

This inkjet print faded in two years, but high-quality prints can last longer.

halide printing. So far, that hasn't been so easy. The labs that produce traditional silver-based prints were set up only to handle film, and techs often look blankly at the memory cards that hold digital photos. But that is starting to change.

Earlier this month, a photo industry show in Las Vegas was packed with equipment designed to draw digital camera users into photo labs to make traditional prints. Store owners are inspecting the displays closely. "Digital is scary," says Dan Novis, owner of Gaslamp Photo in San Diego. Digital is cutting into processing volumes, and rebuilding them requires new minilabs—those big contraptions behind drugstore counters that process film; digital versions start at around $100,000, several times the cost of a conventional setup.

Novis has bought two digital minilabs, but nationwide, fewer than 20 percent of shops are ready for electronic images. Still, the single largest film processor, Wal-Mart, is rushing digital minilabs to its stores. Prices for printing from computer files tend to be competitive with film—in the range of 25 to 50 cents for a 4-by-6 inch print. And unlike film processing, digital printing services let a user choose which frames to print and edit out flaws like red eye. Often the digital-ready photo labs have a front-end kiosk that lets consumers download their photos and do basic editing themselves.

If the Las Vegas floor was any indication, those kiosks could soon be popping up on cruise ships and at amusement parks and malls—just about anywhere an ATM might go. One outfit, in fact, calls its version the APM, for automated photo machines. Some would spit out photos on the spot; others would send the files over the Internet to a central lab, for prints that would be mailed later.

That kind of online service is already available from your home computer. Sites including www.snapfish.com, www.snapfish.com, and www.snapfish.com make it easy to upload images and order prints, which are delivered to your door—but the process typically takes a week or so.

**Photos by wire.** Worried that the market for their paper and chemicals is drying up, photo companies are offering still other options. Nobody has more at stake than Kodak, where company execs concede that digital could cut sales by 5 percent this year. The firm is pushing a system that would let consumers send images over the Internet—from a kiosk or a home computer—to be printed at a photo shop anywhere in the country. A family visiting, say, Disney World could upload photos to be output at a store near their Tennessee house, or at the drugstore near Grandma's in Arizona. Fuji is setting up its own Internet system.

So far, only a tiny fraction of digital camera users—4 percent or so—have tapped stores or the Internet for prints. But getting consumers back to the labs may prove easier as digital cameras go more mainstream and women get more involved in what's been a gadget-driven, male-dominated activity. "A busy mom doesn't have time to edit and print at home," says Michelle Slaghter, a market analyst with InfoTrends. "They just want a decent print and aren't of the mindset to do it themselves."

That applies to Alisha Pitchford. Although she has gone completely digital—photographing her Tucson family, she still wants prints to paste in scrapbooks, and she is relying on photo labs to make them. Her last order was for 500 prints at the local Sam's Club, a warehouse store owned by Wal-Mart. "That's a lot, I know, but if I don't get them printed now, I may never get it done.

"And I'd hate to lose any of them....

Copyright ©2003 by U.S. News & World Report, Inc. (March 24, 2003 Issue)
Matching paper and printer for images that resist fading

Some inkjet printers can now produce images that last longer than traditional photo prints. The table indicates how long prints can resist noticeable fading when exposed to indoor lighting and framed under glass. Glass keeps out ozone, which is particularly important for papers with tiny pores designed to absorb ink quickly, often sold as “instant drying.” Most of the listed printers are six-color models, and Epson’s 2200 is a pigment ink printer, a pricey alternative that yields more durable prints than dye inks can.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINTER</th>
<th>PAPER</th>
<th>DISPLAY YEARS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPSON 2200</td>
<td>Epson Watercolor Paper</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hammermill Jet Print</td>
<td>about 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HP 2110, 2210, 5550, 7150, 7350, 7550</td>
<td>HP Premium Plus Glossy</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kodak Ultima-Glossy</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canon S900, i950, S9000</td>
<td>Canon Pro PR-101</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CompUSA Super High Gloss</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epson 820, 825, 925, 960, 1280</td>
<td>Epson ColorLife SemiGloss</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CompUSA High Gloss</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexmark Z55, Z65 (4-color inks)</td>
<td>Ilford Printasia Glossy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional photo processing</td>
<td>Staples Premium Glossy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fujicolor Crystal Archive</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kodak Ektacolor Edge 8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Wilhelm Imaging Research Inc.

This inkjet print faded in two years, but high-quality prints can last longer.