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Digital Slide Shows The AV World Has Changed...Drastically

by Jack and Sue Drafahl

We've been in the field of photography for a very long time and we've seen many technological changes during that time. Time has taught us to be willing, but cautious of change. We are always on guard for any red flags that alert us of pending industry changes. Red flags mean different things to different people, but in our business, we see them when a part of traditional photography starts migrating over to the digital side.

In the early months of 1999, a red flag went up on our digital evolution scale.

Over the past 25 years we have prepared a variety of 1-12 projector slide shows for lectures and film festival presentations worldwide. In talking to one of the companies that helps us put on some of the shows, they informed us they would no longer be using slide projectors in any configuration for the film festival. Everything was to be converted to one of the many video formats and projected via a video projector. Wow!

A month later we visited a convention, and the red flag became more visible as we saw that slide projectors were no longer part of the game plan. While walking the convention floor we noted that we never saw a single slide projector in any booth. Everything was video in one shape or another. We now knew that a change was definitely on the horizon and it was coming in fast.

When we returned to our office, we talked to a equipment dealer who was one of the largest project dealers on the west coast. He said he no longer sold many slide projectors for multi-projector presentations and that many of the large companies he had sold to in the past were selling their equipment for pennies on the dollar. He still sold a few single projectors for lectures, but nothing on a large scale. A quick glance in the Yellow Pages told us that those companies that had produced multi-projectors in the past were either gone or had converted to video production. Whoa!

We pride ourselves in staying on the leading edge, so we figured we had better get busy and see where this new technology was leading us. We researched digital slide show software and hardware to learn just how we could make our next presentation. In looking for answers to our questions all we found were even more questions. The technology was changing faster than we could research it. When the pixel dust finally cleared, we finally had a basic concept of what was happening.

To confuse the public even more, digital slide presentations has split into two very different directions. The multi-media computer presentation uses special multi-media software programs such as Microsoft Powerpoint, that are then output to a video projector. You can mix still, motion, and video, but it requires a computer to run the presentation.

The second type of digital slide presentation is designed to create a video file that can eventually be transferred to a video device and doesn't require computers to be shown. The reliability of this design is much higher, and it offers versatility galore.

The bad news is that both methods provide a lessor image quality than with the traditional method of projecting slides.

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As professional photographers we had trouble with this concept, but we are not going to stick our heads in the sand. It's unfortunate, but the accepted world of visual communication today is 720x480 pixels. We don't necessarily like it, but if we want to stay in the communication mainstream, we have to set our quality values to the side and reserve them for our printed presentations.

The good news is that to produce digital slide shows, we can still use much of the knowledge we gained putting together traditional slide shows. We still edit sound tracks, design dissolves from one image to the next, create special effects titles, and vary the presentation format. The difference is that it is all done with computer software controls and a presentation can be put together in a fraction of the time.

Digital slide presentations require three things: software, hardware, and input data. Our search first led us to TrueVision, a hardware manufacturer that has been around for years. Recently purchased by Pinnacle Micro Systems, TrueVision has a reputation for making some of the best video capture boards in the industry. We looked on their web page and found an entry level board for under \$600. This board would enable us to capture and output still and motion video at the broadcast resolution of 720x480. They even included Video Studio Pro software from Ulead Systems with the board.

When we got the system put together and running we were really excited. It was easy to use because you simply scan all the images you want in your presentation, and then drop the music and narration tracks in a directory. We like to work from the sound track first, so we inserted them first. Then it was just a matter of importing images from the scan directory and dropping them in the timeline one image after another. If we wanted to dissolve images, we merely dropped the first image onto video A and the second onto video B. We then overlapped the images a little and then selected one of the many special effect transitions, such as a dissolve, and continued on to the next image.

As we put the presentation together, we previewed the results on the screen to see if the soundtrack and visuals lined up. When they did not, we grabbed the image and move it a little and previewed it again. When the previewed show is satisfactory, you can then output the data to your hard disk, video tape, CD, VCD, or DVD-RAM. Although each output media has a different look, all can be displayed on your TV or video projector.

If you work more in video and like to add still images into your presentation, then Ulead Systems also has a program called Video Studio. This program is less expensive than the Pro version and has a simpler interface for creating presentations, but still allows output at very high resolutions. With this program you can drag and drop images, sound, and effects. The visual timeline along the bottom looks like a strip of film that lets you know how the presentation is coming along. At anytime you can preview what you have done in the preview window. This program is also designed to take DV (digital video) camera data directly into the program, and combine it with scanned still images.

After completing our first digital slide show, we continued our research and found that Adobe Systems had an excellent program for creating digital slides shows called Premier. This program works much like Ulead's products except that it supports a more diverse and advanced level of video image-processing boards. When you look at most of these high-end image-processing boards, Adobe Premier software will be included as the operating system.

MGI Software's VideoWave III software is designed to import data from DV video cameras without losing quality in the image translation. The working screen is setup so that the filmstrip timeline is at the top of the screen, image library on the left and the preview screen dead center. Once the still and motion images are loaded into the library, you can drag them onto the filmstrip timeline in the order you prefer, add a soundtrack, transition effects, and output them to many of the video formats available today. The program allows for a lot of tweaking of dissolves, effects and the soundtrack to assure that the final version is exactly what you want. Processing times to generate the final output file are very fast because it takes advantage of the newest MMX features of the Pentium computer.

Since our first venture into digital slide shows, we have seen an influx of video- processing boards built right into graphics adapters. Not only can these graphics cards display standard computer images on your monitor, but capture and output broadcast video that has been edited with a digital slide show program.

In our research, we found ATI Technologies to be one of the leaders in this field, offering a variety of display and capture boards under \$200. Don't confuse these boards with the high-end capture boards that cost thousands of dollars. Although the quality of these boards is improving, they can't compete with their high-priced brother, but they are a great way to break into video-capture boards. Most of these new boards have MPEG-2 processors on-board for high quality video, and process MPEG-2 files from your computer's hard disk or a DVD ROM drive. Log onto the Internet and check out their web page.

Final Thoughts

While in the final stages of completing this article we discovered that a new technology called DVD-RAM will shortly expand to include DVD players that will play a DVD-RAM disk directly on your TV. This may not sound all that important, but don't sell this idea short. Digital slide show output to VHS tape loses considerable image quality, and playing slide shows from your computer is not always an option. Later this year it will be possible to create a digital slide show, burn it to DVD-RAM and then play it on one of these new players and maintain high resolution. We can't wait, how about you?

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