

SECRETS OF THE PHOTO RETOUCHERS

We've gone straight to the professionals- the people who spend their whole working day coming up with the quickest and most effective ways to get the best colour balance or smoothest cutout

Photo retouching is a task that can arise in almost any creative project, and many Mac-based designers are happy to attempt it. Getting it right, however, is another matter, especially when time is tight. Unlike the more creative end of Photoshop work, where experimentation is an important part of the process, retouching demands a focused approach that can produce technically satisfactory results – good colour balance and contrast, realistic flesh tones, invisible edits – as efficiently and consistently as possible. Whether you've struggled to apply your own Photoshop skills to the problem, or paid through the nose to farm the work out to a specialist, you might well wonder if you're missing a few tricks.

The best person to answer that question has to be someone who does the job full-time. *MacUser* spent a day with the retouch team working on several of our glossy sister magazines, and quizzed manager Mark Smedley on his secrets for success. While he confirmed our suspicion that there's no substitute for talent, experience and practice, his insights into the attitudes, processes and tools behind professional photo editing provide an invaluable primer, both for hands-on Photoshop users and for designers or studio managers planning in-house or out-of-house retouch.



**THE STUDIO
MANAGER**

Mark Smedley started his career in print production operating analogue prepress systems for titles including *NME* and *Melody Maker*, before returning to college to polish his skills in digital scanning, retouch and prepress. In 2001 he moved to IFG (I Feel Good), the publishing company founded by James Brown, creator of *Loaded* magazine. IFG was taken over by Dennis Publishing Ltd in 2003 and Mark is now studio manager of the company's in-house photo retouch operation, working on titles including *Jack*, *Fortean Times* and *Bizarre*.

MU What are the main issues you're dealing with in photos?

MS There can be all sorts, but the same issues do come up over and over again. Jpeg, for example. You say 'lossy compression' to some people and they just look at you blankly. They don't think about what they're doing to the image, they just think, 'Oh, I can email it now.' Aside from that kind of quality problem, the most common things are sharpening, smoothing, and sorting out colour castes.

MU Do you get a lot of photos digitally?

MS Yes, the majority now comes in digital, whether it be from a picture library or a photographer. I always say we'd prefer to work from a medium-format tranny, especially for covers. When you look at the shots in the magazine you can always tell the difference, even after we've worked on it. I don't really like 35mm, it's too small, or negs, because you get colour balance issues. But often they like to send prints, or it's a digital camera. The worst is when they're using medium and 35mm on the same shoot, and you get prints, trannies, negs, and somehow you've got to balance it all out.

MU How do you find the quality of digital shots?

MS They're often soft and there's always a caste, usually yellow.

MU Is that because of the hardware itself, or because photographers aren't used to it? Are they not white-balancing properly, for example?

MS I don't think they are, and we tell them to make sure the focus is spot-on, but they don't seem to manage it. Or sometimes you don't get the resolution you need. So it's a combination of both. I just don't think some of the technology is quite up to it yet. ▶

❑ However, we have our own in-house photography studio, which is completely digital. They manage the whole process very carefully and as a result require very little, if any, work.

MU Do you have a particular way of working in Photoshop?

MS We start by renaming files according to our in-house conventions, so we know where we are. Often we'll have to rasterise the whole XPress layout into Photoshop, because the image has to be put together with headlines or other page elements. We set everything to 120 dots per centimetre to keep all the sizes exact. Then we'll try to do as much as possible in layers, and always name the layers, because it's one thing when you've got a few layers going, but when there's 20 and you come back to it, even if you've done it yourself, you have no idea what they are. And keep the layers editable – it has to be like that because [the designer] can come back tomorrow and say, 'Can you just...?' You get so many changes, so many tweaks.

MU So you'd always make colour corrections in an Adjustment Layer?

MS Exactly. If only part of the image needs adjusting, like maybe the flesh tones, we'll do a layer mask. Sometimes you can go around it with the [Bézier] pen, and then convert to selection with some feathering. It's the same when we do cutouts; on these magazines they always like to see a soft edge, so you don't get that sharp line around it. That's one reason we'd bring the linework in from XPress, instead of taking the image out with a clipping path. Sometimes I might paint the mask on with a brush – it depends on the

shape. We also use the History Brush. You can make the correction, then you either paint it in or out, so you can affect exactly the area you want. With tools like that you can't always leave the changes editable, but you do what you can, like leaving a raw copy in. We save everything as a Tiff – you can include layers in the Tiff file now. We don't use any compression – LZW is lossless but it doesn't really save that much space, so it's not worth waiting longer for the images to load.

MU With Photoshop there are always half a dozen ways you could do the same thing. Are there specific tools you prefer to use?

MS I don't think you can make any hard-and-fast rules. You have to do what works for each image, and you can't always get it with one operation. There are certain commands you tend to use more. With scanned images, we'd most often use Curves and put an S-curve on it, so you're boosting the shadows and highlights but the midtones stay the same. For a colour caste, we might adjust the individual channel curves, or sometimes I'll get it with Color Balance. I used to use Levels a lot as well, but not so much now, as often you can't get any improvement.

MU Is that because of the auto-correction that's being applied by digital cameras, or in software, before the images come to you?

MS It could well be, yes. Now I'm more likely to use Hue/Saturation. You can shift the colour and I've also been boosting saturation – often you'll just bump it up by 10% and suddenly you know you've got it.

It's all about having the eye, in the end. I was trained in colour in photography, so I know how colour works, what makes up a particular colour and what you can

do to change it. When I started working digitally I had to learn a lot of new things, but it all made sense.

MU Presumably you're pretty hot on colour calibration?

MS Yes. The whole office was calibrated by a colour consultant, so we had a solid base. We now recalibrate the monitors every couple of weeks, because the CRTs do tend to drift.

MU Your screen looks quite yellowish. That's a traditional print bureau setup, isn't it, compared with the bluer settings you tend to see now?

MS Yes, but this particular one is looking a bit dim as well. I'd say it's coming towards the end of its useful life as far as we're concerned. We do push them hard because you've got to keep them turned up to get the contrast, so it's inevitable. We like these LaCie screens, they're a very good monitor for colour work.

MU Some people will be surprised to see you using a flatbed scanner.

MS It's a nice one, the Creo iQsmart. People think about flatbeds being basic, but it's nothing like the normal flatbeds you might get – it was quite pricey, around £17 or 18K. You can get really good results even off 35mm, and the software's excellent. It comes with tranny mounts that are on pins, so you can pick up a whole sheet of them and go backwards and forwards to the viewing booth, and batch-scan them all at once.

MU What about proofing?

MS The proofer I calibrate every day. Some people say I must be mad, but otherwise it drifts, and it's

KIT LIST

Here's a brief rundown of the key equipment used by Mark's team. A characteristic common to many successful bureau operations is that the Macs themselves aren't the highest-specced items in the room. Budget is better spent on top-end peripherals and accessories that contribute to a colour-critical environment.

Workstations

6x Power Mac G4
URL www.apple.com/uk/

Monitors

6x LaCie electron22blue with blue eye calibrator
URL www.lacie.com/uk/

Scanner

Creo iQsmart 3 scanner
URL www.creo.com

Proofer

Epson 7600 powered by Cyclone Colorbus RIP running on Windows 2000
URL www.colorbus.com

Reflective spectrophotometer

X-Rite Auto Tracking Spectrophotometer
URL www.x-rite.com

Viewing booth

VeriVide Desktop Publishing Viewer with D50 lamps
URL www.verivide.com

critical. We run the Epson at 720dpi – it can go up to 1440, but you can't really see the difference, so it's not worth the extra time. It uses CMYK plus pale cyan and pale magenta, so you get a good colour range. With the colour management, you can put the printout against the monitor and see a match – obviously, there's always going to be variation, RGB versus CMYK, but it's pretty close.

For the press end, we had colour swatches printed on press and read back in using a spectrophotometer, so we're profiled all the way through. Having said that, if something has to be printed elsewhere, it's generally OK, because everyone works to the Euroscale 2 web offset profile.

We have the viewing booth here where we can look at proofs under colour-corrected light and we have colour-neutral tubes [fluorescent D50] for the main office lighting as well. At the moment we've got a scan we've just done for a fashion spread and when they're putting it up against the original [photographic] print it's looking a fraction yellow, so that's going to be fixed. There's always a subjective element – it's making sure the designer's happy with it.

MU You've got a black-and-white shot there as well.

MS Yes, some of our biggest problems are with black-and-white. You might have half a dozen shots across a spread, and they're all mono, but they're from different sources. And nobody wants to do greyscale on the black plate now – it might look fine by itself, but when you put it in a colour magazine, it looks weak. So it's all four-colour greys, and you've got to colour-balance them. One way is to knock the images back to greyscale, then convert to CMYK. ❑

Q MU What sort of things do you get asked for beyond correcting and optimising?

MS The designers want all sorts. *Jack* is mostly square-ups [rectangular images], but *Bizarre* has these really busy layouts and it's all cutouts, adding soft shadows. Cover models normally take the most work. They'll remove veins from hands, sometimes collarbones or neck tendons, Adam's apples if they're slightly protruding. For some reason they have a thing about belly buttons. They'll make them smaller or bigger, and often they like to move them up a bit.

MU Isn't that cheating?

MS [laughs] It's all cheating, isn't it? We don't tend to go as far as some magazines, though. You can start changing the body shape, and taking so much detail out that it looks like plastic. We usually want a more natural look, so if we smooth out a dodgy area we'll often add some noise back in. If we're smoothing skin tones we'll use a brush with maybe only 10% opacity.

MU How easy is it to interpret what the designer wants?


MS You can get a mark-up, and some people will express very clearly what they want, and some won't. I always prefer to get them down here to look over your shoulder, then you can say what about this? You do get some designers who don't understand what's

possible, or what you can do reasonably, and you have to say no, it doesn't work like that. We'll always get a result, but often it would really have helped if they'd talked to us before doing the shoot.

MU Designers and editors are often suspicious of the idea of an in-house operation because there isn't the same client-supplier relationship. If you're too busy, that's it – they can't threaten to fire you or go somewhere else.

MS Yes, it means more planning ahead on their part, and it's a different working relationship. Some people had a problem adjusting to it, but it can work absolutely fine, it's just different. After a while they do appreciate the pressures on us and the fact that we're on their side. We still use an external bureau for an occasional job and they're always there for a backup.

MU There must be a lot of cost savings compared with using an outside bureau.

MS Of course, they charge a fortune for retouch, and there's a massive saving on proofing as well. We get through a roll of paper in a couple of days, so that's a lot of pages. It does mean people can do endless proofs, which they might not have done before, but you're not waiting around for things coming back and paying for bikes. Then there's no film because we use an Apogee system to create PDFs for press, which automates the entire process. 

FURTHER READING

Adobe Photoshop CS for Photographers, by Martin Evening, published by Focal Press. Price: £29.99, ISBN: 0240519426. (www.photoshopforphotographers.com)

The Adobe Photoshop CS Book for Digital Photographers, by Scott Kelby, published by New Riders. Price: \$39.99, ISBN: 0735714118

Photoshop CS Bible, Professional Edition, by Deke McClelland, published by Wiley. Price: \$59.99, ISBN: 0-7645-4179-X