

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 26, 2006

Toy fatigue

Filed under: [photo tech](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:56 pm

Before leaving for Thanksgiving vacation with family in Colorado I made a trip to the computer store. I wanted extra storage space for my digital pictures. On a whim I decided to spend a bit more money and buy an iPod. This decision went against my recent 'less pocket crap' philosophy. Over the years I've owned a Minidisk player, a Palm Pilot and a half dozen pocket sized digital cameras. In each case I became exasperated with all of the cords, charges and docking stations. I succumbed to the iPod because of its elegance. Four buttons. One cord.

Before leaving for the Rocky Mountains (dial-up country), I downloaded a bunch of music and podcasts. I gave myself over to the new toy. Here are my reactions. First, I can hear the collective 'duh' when I say the iPod is great for music. More specifically, it is great for sound. I'm a big fan of audiobooks. I downloaded all seven CD's of the current book I'm listening to – Larry Watson's [Orchard](#). It is a treat to have the whole thing in one small place.

My feelings about the podcasts are a bit more mixed. First let me say what I like. Unlike a web browser, the iPod is good at 'containing' information. When I look at podcasts on a browser, I never feel like I'm fully present. A momentary curiosity will have me checking email, news, and so on. Because everything on the web is linked, I feel like nothing is contained. By downloading it on my iPod, I'm a little less distracted.

With the iPod I was able to watch every [Magnum in Motion](#) podcast. I'd seen a handful before but always became web-distracted. But seeing these programs on the iPod brought up some other problems. First, the image is ridiculously small. Most of the Magnum images were too rich and complex for the tiny screen (The exception was Thomas Dworzak's '7/7 *The Longest Week*' which seemed to have been shot for the iPod). My second problem was with the brevity of the programs. On the web all you want is a little teaser. It is all you have time for. But with the containment of the iPod I wanted a fuller experience. The Magnum programs were too short. I searched the web looking for video and slideshow podcasts that would give me a more complete artistic experience; I looked for programs that could immerse me in their small-screen world. My search was unsuccessful.

Of course the era of the podcast is still quite young. So perhaps great artistry will emerge. But this is where I really get frustrated. I don't think it has time to emerge. Next year the iPod will have a bigger screen. The year after that it will have a web browser. And the year after that it will be obsolete as some new unforeseen technology takes over. The medium only has time to be a toy. It never has time to mature into a tool.

This is the same problem I have with digital photography. The potential is always remarkable. But the medium never settles. Each year there is a better camera to buy and [new software to download](#). The user never has time to become comfortable with the tool. Consequently too much of the work is merely about the technology. The [HDR](#) and [QTVR](#) fads are good examples. Instead of focusing on the subject, users obsess over RAW conversion, Photoshop plug-ins, and on and on. For good work to develop the technology needs to become as stable and functional as a typewriter.

After hours spent playing with my new iPod, I set it aside to read a book. While I thought the iPod was elegant, nothing beats the book. No downloading. No batteries. No cords. No ads. No links. No distractions. The format is so elegant that it becomes transparent. It is the perfect container for art.

27 Comments

1. I concur, fine sir. I've made a brief addition [here](#).

Comment by [Ryan](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [1:30 am](#)

2. "After hours spent playing with my new iPod, I set it aside to read a book. While I thought the iPod was elegant, nothing beats the book. No downloading. No batteries. No cords. No ads. No links. No distractions. The format is so elegant that it becomes transparent. It is the perfect container for art."

Well put. It's a pity though, producing books costs a fortune where producing PDFs is almost free. (See also a podcast on this issue on lenswork publishing). I recently saw two books of Rinko Kawauchi that I liked a lot. Seems you can never have enough photography framed within a blank, white page.

Comment by [B. S. Ilktac](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [5:49 am](#)

3. [...] [alec soth - blog](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Toy fatigue \(tags: photography blogs iPod podcasting toys\)](#) [...]

Pingback by [Heraclitean Fire](#) » [Links](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [6:25 am](#)

4. "This is the same problem I have with digital photography. The potential is always remarkable. But the medium never settles. Each year there is a better camera to buy and new software to download. The user never has time to become comfortable with the tool. Consequently too much of the work is merely about the technology."

Sigh. Looking back on the history of photography, when exactly did it ever "settle?" Was it "settled" when the wet plate was replaced with a dry one? When film came along? When 35mm came along? When exactly was the time one could simply get some toys knowing that from there on toy time would forever stand still?

As with everything toy related, it is completely up to the user. As I've told you before, I've been using a first generation PDA digital since it came out in 2001. Plan to use it until it, as well as all my backups of it die, or computers are no longer able to communicate with it.

Doesn't beat a book, but still...

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [7:41 am](#)

5. I couldn't agree more with what you said about digital photography. I think the basic problem is that the whole digital photography business is largely driven by the effort to make money and ***not*** to improve photography (the exceptions, as always, proving the rule). There are lots of obvious examples.

You mentioned the fuss about HDR. Another perfect example is the whole RAW thing, where each camera maker appears to have its own. And formats always change so you have to upgrade (lest you want to end up with something that doesn't work any longer in a few years). So pro's and hobbyists (who are tempted with ridiculously minute "improvements" of camera models) are caught in the industry's desire to milk their customers as much as they can. And they do. Examples are overabundant.

Another example I heard in Germany is that financial analysts wanted to dictate camera maker Pentax what lines to pursue and what to produce. I forgot the details, but as far as I remember Pentax budged. And in principle you can't blame the companies for what they do because that's the name of the game – it's business, where you have to make money. But, I think, the disadvantages for everybody are pretty obvious, and it's not that clear that the advantages are always so much better than the disadvantages.

Fortunately, if you still want to read a book you can – I have the feeling the equivalent option in photography will get quite a bit harder not too far in the future.

Comment by [Joerg Colberg](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [8:12 am](#)

6. I've read the "woe is us, change never stops, we're doomed because what was best is no more and the new stuff isn't ass good," all my photo life. I've heard every possible variation of "the camera, film. paper and digital manufacturers care only about profits, not about users." Even if this were all true, so what? Fact is, most every pro will tell you their top of the line present day toys are the best they ever had. I've lovingly kissed my fantastic 1DmII bodies hundreds of times over the years I've had them — each and every time I was done working with them, in fact.

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [8:45 am](#)

7. Michal, I agree that this has always been the case with photography. Fifteen years ago all of the talk was about new developers, densitometers, and so on. I'd argue that was a distraction too. It is just that the rate of the change has moved from decades to months. The distraction of the 'new n' improved' is omnipresent.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [9:00 am](#)

8. Until human beings are fitted with a USB socket behind the left ear, books will remain the supreme single vehicle and manifestation of human culture.

I've mentioned this before on this blog, but it will bear repeating: anyone with an interest in both books and photography needs to look at <http://www.blurb.com> ASAP. The free software alone is fun and an instructive tool to play with.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [9:12 am](#)

9. Is it painful to upgrade the USB ear to Firewire?

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [9:14 am](#)

10. Michal,

I think the important thing to look at here in terms of the history of consumer photography products is the fundamentals, film which has been around for ages vs. digital. Picture quality more or less has been the result of lenses, camera and film, whereas now digital photography relies on the ever changing megapixel formula. I've seen some amazing digital shot stuff ([Bill Sullivan](#)). It's clear that digital cameras have great advantages and are here to stay.

The bigger issue is the idea of creating a product that is obsolete before it's brought home. That the never ending gamut of digital gizmos is meant to have a short term shelf life. We're miraculously trying to improve on things which in most cases already exist as tried and true simplicity. As Alec says at the end of the day, the book overrules the streaming-giga-cast-pod thingy... Photography has jumped into the mix of this and whether a pocket-sized cam or a P25 back there is always next year's model.

Comment by [Brian](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [10:57 am](#)

11. Hi Alec. Cool that you bring up this discussion. I think it is important to remember that the iPod is also a media "container" that can be plugged into different devices to enrich the playback experience. This is part of the reason I see Podcasts as an interesting channel for Magnum In Motion (for those of you who don't know I am part of Magnum In Motion). Apple has recently launched partnerships with most of the big airlines so soon you will be able to plug in your iPod to your seat and watch the content on the screen in front of you. New TV's are coming out with iPod docks, and various plugin screens are also on the market. So it is no longer just about watching small photos on your iPod screen. Having said that we are still producing the podcasts in 320 x 240 at Magnum In Motion, but this will probably change soon. Secondly I see the podcasts as a teaser for the "real" photography. We experience huge boosts in traffic to our online essays (with large images) whenever we launch a new podcast. Often times the people that are driven to magnuminmotion.com by the podcasts is an audience that would not normally get interested in the Magnum style documentary photography.

Comment by [Bjarke Myrthu](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [11:07 am](#)

12. I second Brian. To make it sound as if someone who doesn't like the way digital technologies are marketed as some sort of technophobe who's happy with yesterday's world is outright ridiculous. It's very obvious that digital technologies have their advantages. However, it's equally obvious that companies are adjusting their product lines according to profit margins and not to what would be best for the photo world. With few exceptions, makers tend to offer "improved" models every few months, with the differences between the "new" and the "old" models so minute that it's just laughable.

Comment by [Joerg Colberg](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [11:18 am](#)

13. I refuse to jump into the anti-capitalism argument that usually spreads like wildfire. It is and will remain true that companies will create products and marketing tactics for bigger sales. We must live with that.

The advancement of photo technology—both analog and digital—hinders many users because of the feeling that one must have the most up to date technology. Tons of new cameras, printers, inks, scanners, lenses, film, developers, faster fixes, better colored safelights, and many other pieces of the photographic toolkit come out every year. If you're always switching to the most up to date versions, you're likely to waste a lot of energy figuring out the new piece of equipment. It is likened to my previously mentioned blog post [here](#).

Today, as compared to the pre-digital capture "era," advancements were not nearly as frequent. New cameras came out fairly frequently, but Nikon and Canon didn't release multiple new "top of the line" cameras every year. How long did the Nikon F3 reign in the Nikon line?

The need to have the newest gadget does not apply to everyone. But it is the main marketing tactic that technology manufacturers use; it is highly successful.

I have no qualms with digital technology, except that I still prefer to shoot 35mm. I will, one day, happily switch over to digital capture, just not yet.

Comment by [Ryan](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [11:57 am](#)

14. ipods are very good for syncing with Aperture so you can show clients, friends, family, strangers, security and subjects what it is you do, just did, or are about to do, or where you've been or must go. Though I realise you could do the same with a few prints the size of a pack of cards/ipod.

Comment by [rob](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [5:36 pm](#)

15. Do you wish to slow down the product cycles for your own sake or for the sake of consumers? And who gets to decide what is "best for the photo world"? And isn't it just possible that companies would be unable to produce the few things they get right from the perspective of the accomplished photographer (to which species I flatly do not belong) if they did not care about profit margins? Maybe, maybe not.

I have certainly acquired more gear than is good for me, and I am also given to bouts of pain about just too many chargers, chords etc. But at the same time, I know that with digital photography my own photography has risen way above what it was in film days when I delivered my rolls of film to the drugstore and got back my paper prints. The improvements are nothing to write home about compared to somebody like Alec. But to me those improvements are palpable. And I enjoy that very much!

Comment by [Karsten](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [6:34 pm](#)

16. I agree with Karsten that the ignorant wisdom of the free market is as good an agent as any to produce great tools. Further, in the pre-digital age, the motives of companies were no different, just their means. My own photography has benefited enormously from digital equipment. (And how much of the film that's shot today gets digitized before it reaches the eyes of the majority of its viewers? A lot, I'd venture.)

So I'm pro-new. But here's a pro-analog anecdote. I went to see the Robert Polidori show of Katrina photos at the Met in NY with my uncle, who's been in professional portrait photography for 35 years, first as an equipment dealer and now behind the camera. We spent a lot of time looking very closely and

discussing the techniques and decisions made by Polidori to get his shots. The visual and technical skill there is legion, and all made before the shutter clicks. My uncle remarked that with the advanced technology in today's cameras—even in cheap point-n-shoots—students today don't have to think closely about how to get a nice looking shot *most of the time*. The camera can put lipstick on the pig. The thought process that incorporates the mechanical realities of photography (realities still present in the digitals!) isn't a part of the learning curve the way it was. That's a loss, if it comes to pass.

Comment by [Nick](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [7:22 pm](#)

17. Talented photographer Traey Amescua once told me that no matter how good a print looks, it doesn't make up for a poor photograph. I think a great print emphasizes a good photograph.

Comment by [Ryan](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [8:13 pm](#)

18. [...] under Uncategorized by Luke | 0 comments "After hours spent playing with my new iPod, [...]"

Pingback by [perfection in design | Touching Harms the Art](#) — November 27, 2006 @ [11:03 pm](#)

19. I vote Midi over MP3.

Comment by [Brian](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [1:23 am](#)

20. I have a similar problem, but with film photography. Although I trained using film, I never really liked the peripherals and all the hassle. I only ever found my stride once I discovered digital photography. Recently, all sorts of people have been passing on old unwanted film equipment to me (35mms, rangefinders...) and I decided I really ought to stretch my photographic muscles. But I find it so much harder to immerse myself in photography when I'm having to worry about loading and unloading, checking exposure and focusing. Part of this is my unfamiliarity with the equipment (I'm perfectly happy dealing with exposure and focus on my 20D, which has become an extension of my own body), but part of it is that there seems to be so much more clutter to deal with when using film.

Comment by [Dan Sumption](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [4:49 am](#)

21. It's kind of obvious that if companies decide what to produce based on profit margins and on when to release a product (Christmas is coming up so expect lots of "new" products) then there might be improvements in technology, but those are based entirely on what the company's financial analysts think is best. It's no "anti-capitalist" statement to say that, that's how the so-called free market works.

So sure, we do get a lot of useful stuff from companies, but we also get milked – for example, there are more than 50 different cameras on <http://www.dpreview.com> in the "Canon" category, covering the years 2002 until now. Even allowing for the different types of cameras there, it's pretty much obvious that that large number is completely unneeded (just count the number of different "Powershot A" or "SD" models). Same for the other producers, would be unfair to only single out Canon. I yet have to see someone telling me how such a large number of models, with their microscopic "improvements" over the older models, benefits the consumer. The newest gadget idea is only useful for companies (and their profit margins), but not for consumers, especially if they are being told that they really need the newest and latest models because it's so much better than the one just issued two months ago.

I myself shoot mainly film (that then gets digitized), simply because the digital cameras that I can afford are unable to handle the light situations I am usually working with. I find film to be less of a hassle – I won't have to worry whether I will be able to read my film in ten years. As Alec noted, he can't even read Pedro Meyer's original digital medium any longer. And there we have another one of those problems with digital – which you can either embrace as progress ("Hey, isn't that great that new formats are so much better than the old ones? Hooray for the free market!") or treat as a problem ("If I can't read data written ten years ago, how can I make sure that I can use my current data ten years from now?"). Making things downward-compatible (as the lingo goes) is straightforward, if that decision is not made, it's quit hard to argue that there's a benefit for anyone other than the company which gets to sell more of the new stuff that people have to buy so they can use their own old stuff.

PS: mp3 was developed by a government-funded lab in Germany.

Comment by [Joerg M. Colberg](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [9:27 am](#)

22. The financial analysts may be the ones who sign off on a large company's new products, but consumers influence those decisions with their wallets. I'm as guilty as anybody of gear-envy, and I'm always watching the classifieds for equipment I know I can't buy even if it shows up (I don't, however, know why I torture myself this way). But I have a setup that works for me, and the majority of the myriad, manifold, multitudinous new options don't even blip on my mental radar. Other people like them though, and that's cool. So who cares how many different updates there are? The onus is on the consumer to decide his needs and whether he wants to stay in the race. I still have rabbit ears on my TV (much to the chagrin of the wife, sadly).

I agree with the concern about downward-compatibility. It's amusing (as a Mac user) to watch Microsoft buckle and squirm under the weight of their own commitment to legacy compatibility. All those rinky-dink third party apps of 15 years ago still being taken into account while designing Vista. Ha! But I'm sympathetic, really. Are all my old CD's of photos deteriorating at this very moment? And really, by "old" I mean "six years". Hmm. That ain't long.

I think Alec's original point about digital photography's resistance to the degree of transparency assumed by film equipment is most persuasive to me with the typewriter analogy. But it's the stability of a single technological object that frightens me, rather than the stability of the species, family, or genera. If I can't count on the camera I have now to last, because the sensor burns out or the chip croaks, then I'm probably forced to jump ship to a new technology. So far, has any 20th C. technology proven its ability to last? (I don't mean this rhetorically). Anyway, I hope the motherboard on my life preserver works when we hit the iceberg.

Comment by [Nick](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [2:54 pm](#)

23. I really enjoyed reading your post Alec. What really got me was your idea of the book as the perfect container for art. And that just won't change.

But how we create that book is changing. Aesthetically, I appreciate the difference. And practically, I also appreciate the difference.

To put it another way, should we still use the typewriter because aesthetically it's better? Or, should we use the word processor because we can publish more quickly? And can anyone tell the difference when they read the finished piece? Presumably that book you were enjoying so much?

Thanks again.

Comment by [Sean Cayton](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [7:54 pm](#)

24. Joerg hit it right on the head, and Alec alluded to it — the problem isn't one of technology but one of epistemology. We can store the data — hell, we have carved stone tablets from Sumeria in museums — but we can't read it.

Therein lies the main (and some might say only) advantage of film; given a fairly primitive piece of equipment and some chemistry from the 1800's, we can produce a print from a negative. 200 years from now, CF cards will still be around and might even possibly have data on them. But who will have a way to read standard .jpg files, let alone everyone's pet RAW file formats?

Until digital settles on a format they're willing to stick with, we're all living in a house of cards.

Comment by [Clint Weathers](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [11:29 pm](#)

25. We debate at work the meaning of these new tools blogs, podcasts, cameras in every appliance — day after day. I see much of this as we may look back at the brownie camera- ways of putting complex

technology into the hands of the public. In fact that camera may have made photography the first "long tail" medium.

I have begun to experiment with the video slideshow format and would have to give myself a grade of incomplete as I try to grasp the mixing multiple inputs to get what I am seeing and hearing.

Comment by [Ron Diorio](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [5:25 am](#)

26. There have always been much-discussed changes in photo technology (metering, AF, TTL flash, multigrade etc.) and camera nuts have always been around too. But now we have the web, which is a tech tool and technology attracts technology people, not artists. It is prominent in the digi arena, but in itself nothing new. I have been bothered by it too and just concluded that I have been paying too much attention to the wrong kind of photo people.

Comment by [Dirk](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [1:21 am](#)

27. It's a bit late to be replying to this post but here goes anyway.
I was watching a documentary on Bernd and Hilla Becher last week on German television, and I learned that as an art student Bernd Becher used to draw, yes draw, industrial landscapes. It was his wife, Hilla, a photographer by training, who introduced him to photography, which he quickly realised was a better medium for capturing his subject (in part because these industrial landscapes were disappearing ever faster).
This made me think about your remark that photographers should concentrate less on technology (Photoshop, RAW, etc.) and more on the subject. Becher had his subject and it was this that determined all aspects of his photography (black and white, medium format, telephoto), not the other way around.

Comment by [Paul Christensen](#) — December 6, 2006 @ [2:27 pm](#)