To Go Digital or Not to Go Digital

by John Demar

One often-discussed topic that we hear from our customers is the notion that digital scrapbooking is time-consuming and maybe even a little overwhelming. As a cutting-edge presentation medium that can either compliment or replace a traditional paper scrapbook, it may be difficult to understand and use this technology in your own scrapbooking endeavors. If you're new to this digital realm, read on for my perspective and opinions on getting started and maintaining your interest.

Let's first talk about fundamental computer skills that are required. As an IT guy for two decades now, I work with new technology every day, with each new capability and feature quickly becoming a part of my everyday routine. Like anyone who devotes the time and energy to life-long learning and practice in a particular study, I've mastered a number of skills that are ubiquitous across all different types of software and hardware.

I recently took a four day training course on the use of my wife Jennifer's new embroidery machine. I'll admit, threading those needles, setting the pressure foot correctly, recognizing various fabric qualities and figuring out why my thread kept breaking on that darned needle #12 aren't exactly my forte. Why? Well, in my 37 years on this earth, I've practiced sewing enough to darn a sock and sew a button back on a dress shirt. The other students in the class were polite enough to exercise restraint and not burst out in laughter when I tried to start sewing without loading my material onto the machine.

But that was just the first two days. The last two days involved training on the stitching design software. Having watched about 30 minutes of training videos the weekend before, I sat down at my computer on that Wednesday morning and just click-click-click-click-clicked away like I was writing the Great American Novel. Around 10 AM, another student peered around his computer and asked, "What in the world are you doing back there?" with amazement and my computer deftness. Even with less than 90 minutes of total introduction to the package, I could confidently explore, learn, and create things in this software that made the other students struggle and curse! Like sewing and embroidery, automotive repair, culinary arts or any other area of study, your success with digital scrapbooking will depend upon mastering certain fundamental skills and concepts. With software, this usually centers on keyboarding and mouse skills, using menus and toolbars, and understanding what you can safely "do" and "undo". Unless you can learn new skills and language by placing a book under your pillow and absorbing its content while you sleep, there's no replacement for practicing computer skills on various software in numerous settings. If you've acquired a good working knowledge of menu-driven applications, using color and pictures in a word processing document, saving and retrieving files, and playing a few games, you'll find the mechanics of digital scrapbooking easy to digest.

One way you can get your feet wet in digital scrapbooking is to start working with an image editing package. One of the most popular packages, Adobe Photoshop Elements, is available as a free 30-day trial at http://www.adobe.com/products/photoshopelwin/tryout.html. If you don't have access to another similar package, I strongly recommend installing this application and taking it for a test drive. It contains hundreds of the most commonly-used features working with images and creating digital page layouts. During that 30-day period, plan on practicing with its included tutorials (or pick up a tutorial book at your local book store) for at least 10-15 hours. I

know that this sounds like a lot of time, but I'll bet you have so much fun exploring and experimenting that you'll be ready to create your first scrapbook pages in no time at all!
At its core, digital scrapbook kits are intended to provide a framework for rapidly assembling and producing pages in your image editing software without a whole lot of fussing around. Just place a background page on your design surface, place any images or photos, add journaling in the font, size, and color of your choice, sprinkle on a few coordinating embellishment images, and *Très Magnifique!* You have your first page done! Not much harder that creating a business letter in Microsoft Word.

What if you want the images sized differently, or you want to add your own photos, or you'd like to change that one background page to be yellow instead of pink? Herein lies the rub. Digital images **can** be re-colored, fused together, made translucent, cropped, resized, stretched, or have any of a million other things done to them, but how do you do it? As with any new computer concept, I suggest that you ask yourself the following questions:

- How interested am I in learning this?

- How likely is it that I'll I use this feature in the future?

- How good does the result of my learning have to be **today** to satisfy my goal?

- How much fun am I having learning this?

- How much time do I have right now to devote to learning the concept?

- If I can't learn it all today or I'm having a rough time with getting the hang of it, can I come back to it another day and take another stab at it?

As a software developer, I often ask these questions in my work because sometimes my learning curves are weeks and months long instead of hours. The last thing I need is to have all my free time sucked up trying to learn something that I may never use again or for which there's a workaround that I can use to keep my productivity up.

Just like playing the piano for the first time, you'll enjoy some quick successes when first starting with digital imaging. Many digital kits are meant to quickly get a novice user up to speed and make pages that are meaningful and beautiful. As you gain experience, you'll discover that there are countless techniques and styles for arranging and presenting your pages. By all means, don't let this frustrate you. If your first tutorial book didn't help, buy a different one. Hang out in an on-line digital scrapbooking forum for a while. Ask us your questions – who knows, maybe we can help!