

Lightroom and Me

Rarely have I looked forward more to the release of a new imaging software product than I did to Lightroom. Not only did I have my hopes up based on what I saw in the various beta releases, but I also knew I had to adjust my own workflow anyway since Adobe had bought Pixmantec and thus RawShooter Premium became an unsupported product. While not in the short term, at the latest a purchase of a new DSLR would force me to switch to a different raw converter. And since we all hate revisiting our tried and tried workflows, Lightroom will certainly have the staying power, so I'd expect that it would become my main workflow management tool. Thus the heightened anticipation.

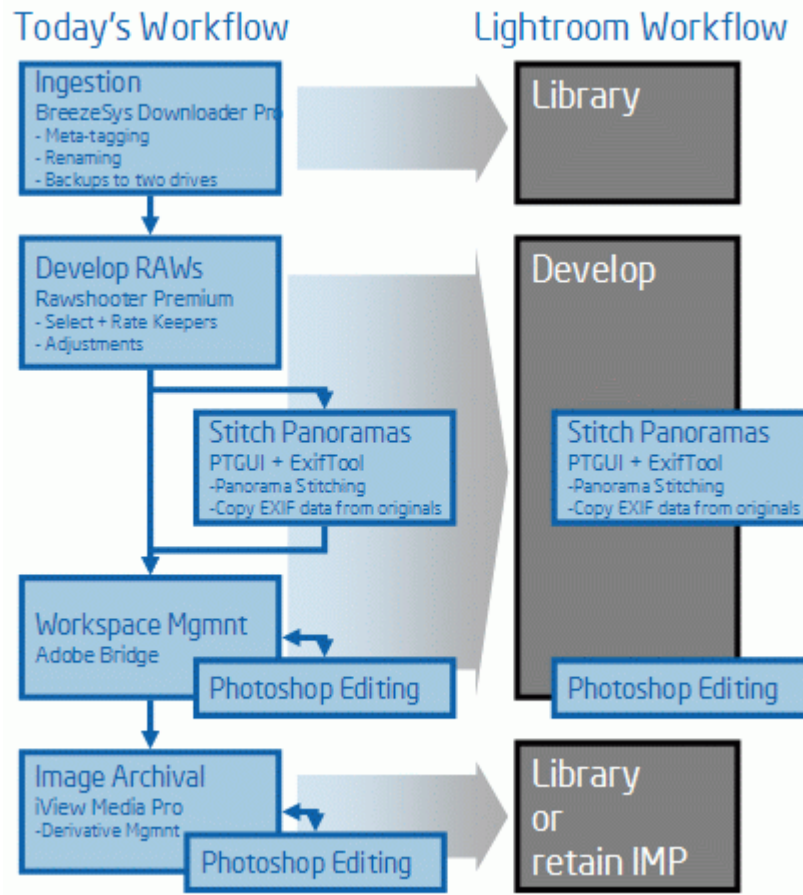
The following article series tries to provide some insights into certain aspects of my workflow and how they will be impacted by my switch to Lightroom. This series is not intended as a review of Lightroom or as a step-by-step tutorial on how to use Lightroom and its myriad of different functions. Instead, it examines the challenges that I face in my different workflows and outlines possible solutions to my workflow problems, with the focus on the following four workflow challenges:

- Part 1: Lightroom and me, stitching panoramas
- Part 2: Lightroom and me, traveling the world
- Part 3: Lightroom and me, photo-blogging
- Part 4: Lightroom and me, publishing on the web

Before starting with the first challenge, let's look at my basic workflow first:

Basic workflow

While it took me quite a while to tweak my workflow to where it is today, it is not that special or different from what many other photographers are doing. Therefore, I expected Lightroom to cover all of my basics and so far, it is living up to my lofty expectations. The following diagram outlines how easy and straight-forward it was to move my existing workflow to Lightroom.

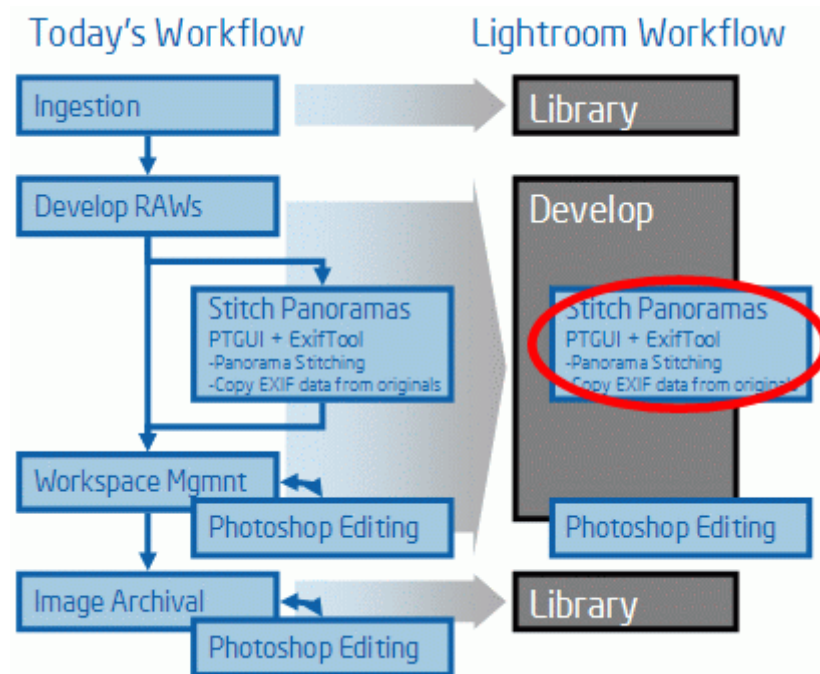


My basic workflow matches Lightroom's quite nicely!

But as we all know, the devil is always in the details. Thus, let's examine some of the peculiarities of my workflow and how Lightroom is coping with them.

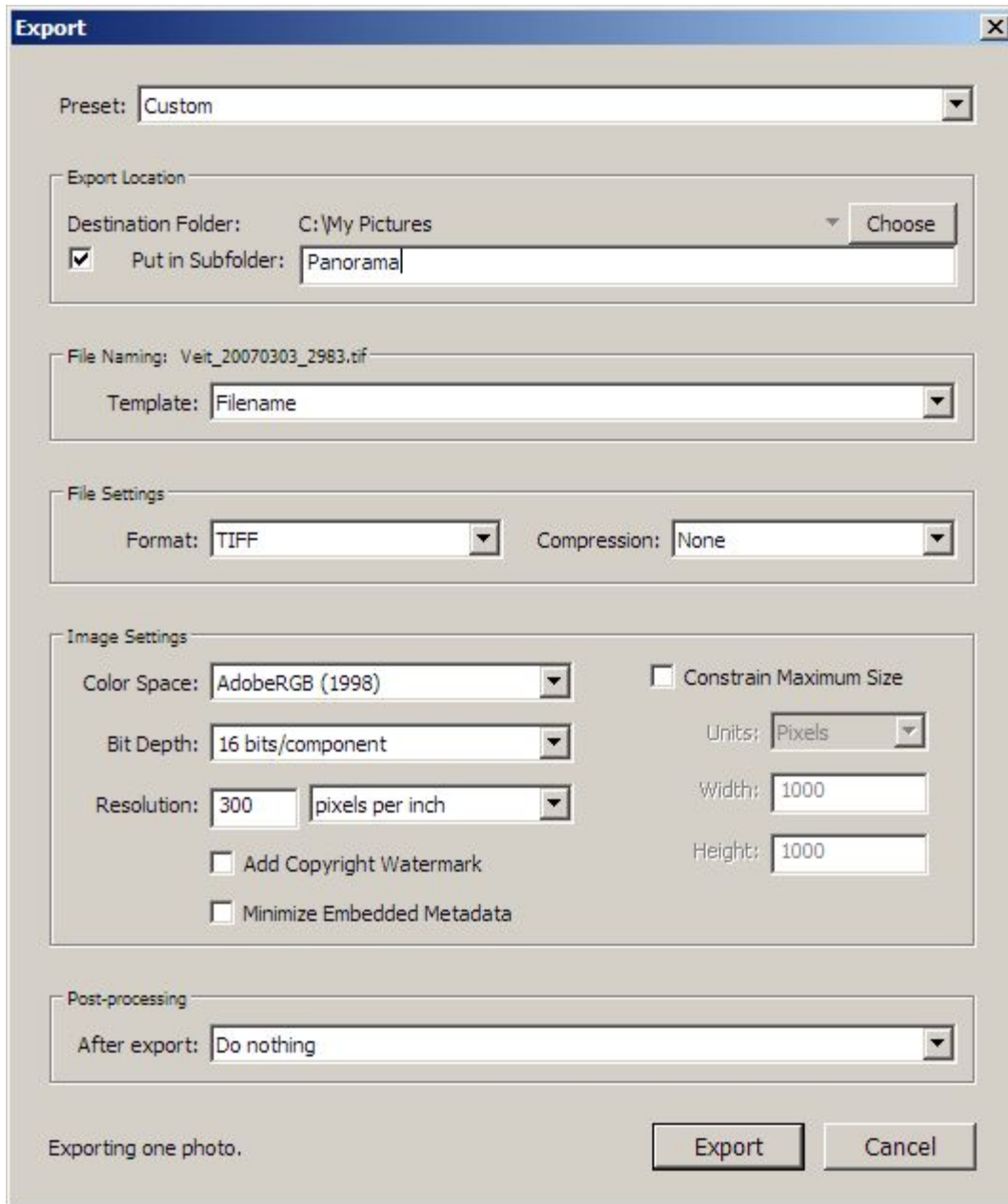
Lightroom And Me, Stitching Panoramas

I shoot quite a lot of panoramic images. Therefore, it is essential to me that my workflow allows me to go through the additional step of stitching a panorama (currently done with PTgui or other panorama tools, including Photoshop) as well as copying EXIF data from the original images into the newly stitched image (via Perl and ExifTool), so meta data such as ISO and Aperture get retained in the stitched image.



Stitching a panorama is very easy to do in a Lightroom workflow

Fortunately, this is very easy to achieve in Lightroom. Just use Lightroom's Export function to export all the images you want to stitch. Similar to Adobe Camera RAW or any of your other RAW processors, Lightroom "develops" the selected images and stores them in the format you specified (I always choose TIFF, typically 16-bit, non-compressed, 300 ppi). You can even save the initial export format as a preset for future use, which makes future exports much easier to set up.

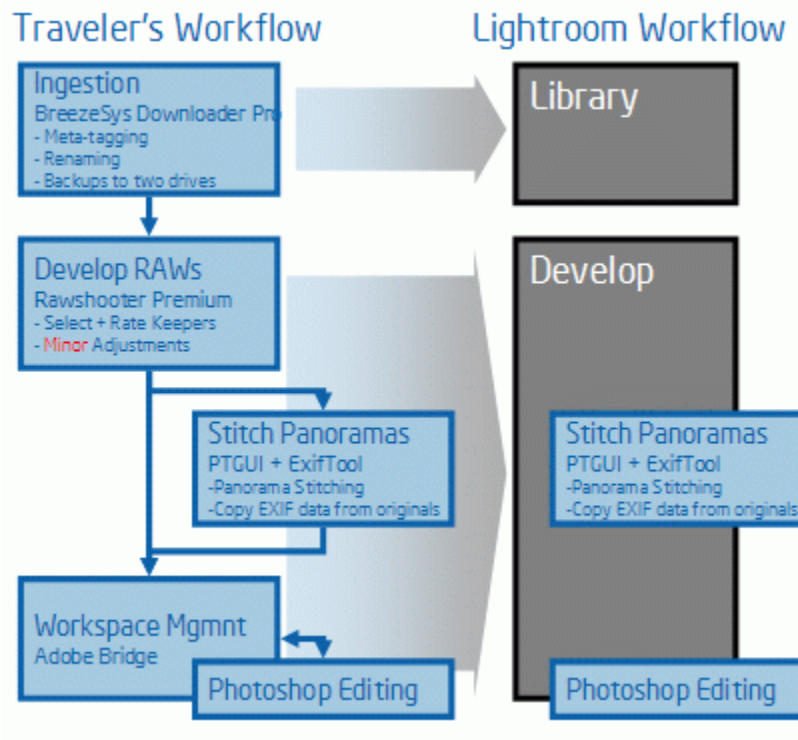


Exporting images from Lightroom is a quick one-step process

Once exported, all I have to do is to fire up my favorite panorama stitcher (typically PTgui), stitch my panorama and then copy my metadata (not a necessary step, but I'd like to retain some of my EXIF data in the stitched panorama, so I copy the data over). Once done, just import the panorama back into Lightroom via the "Import Photos..." function. Very easy!

Lightroom And Me, Traveling (The World)

Whenever I travel for work (in real life, I'm in high-tech Marketing), at least one camera always goes with me. I often end up with hundreds of images that I need to manage while on the road. And while my mobile computing equipment consists of a 3 year old corporate notebook, which is hopelessly underpowered, under-RAM'ed, not color-calibrated and features only a 10 inch screen, I often find the time to work on my images, be it stitching a panorama during a meeting (panorama stitching takes a lot of time on an old clunker, so yes, what better time to stitch than during a meeting when you don't need your notebook), working on layer masks while on an airplane or doing some non-destructive editing in a hotel room. Thus, one critical question concerning Lightroom is: how can I export new images from my work notebook, including all the individual settings per image, and then import them into Lightroom on my main machine?



Traveler's Workflow is similar, although I cannot finalize an adjustments

Upon a cursory glance, my traveler's workflow looks pretty much like my regular workflow. But there are differences. In general, I cannot finalize any adjustment that requires me to make a visual judgment, since I don't work in a calibrated environment. In reality, I can go through the entire ingestion process as I would do on my main machine, including backups to portable hard drives. But while I can also select and rate almost all of my keeper images, I can only make minor adjustments in Rawshooter Premium, basically relying on the histogram to not overdo any of my adjustments. Typically, I "under-adjust" and then fix later on my main machine in Photoshop. And

while I stitch panoramas, I can only do non-destructive editing in Photoshop (through layers) in addition to labor-intensive tasks such as masking. Thus I end up with backups of my originals, RAW files with minor adjustments in my workspace folders and Photoshop files in various states of editing that need to then be finalized on my main machine at home.

When I return from a trip, I typically copy the following from one of my two external backup drives:

- my originals
- my Rawshooter Premium settings, so I can retain how I “developed” my RAW files
- my Photoshop files which contain images (single and panoramic) in various states of adjustments.

How does Lightroom handle this challenge?

- Originals: Since I keep my backups of my originals outside of Lightroom, I can simply use Windows or OSX to copy them from one machine to another
- RAW files: The early beta versions contained a nifty feature called the photo binder that allowed a user to put a selection of images, including all their adjustments, into one big file, then transfer the file and import the Photo binder on another machine. Unfortunately, that feature did not make it into version 1 of Lightroom. So the best alternative is to select the images I want to copy in Develop mode and then click Metadata -> XMP -> Export XMP metadata to file. For every image in my selection, Lightroom then writes an XMP sidecar files containing all the adjustments I made (if I had changed my preferences to “Automatically write changes into XMP”, Lightroom would have already generated the XMP files and I would not have to do it manually). So I just grab the images and the corresponding XMP files, move them to the other machine and Lightroom automatically adds back all the adjustments when importing the images
- For my Photoshop adjustments, since I use the Edit in Adobe Photoshop feature, I save these adjusted images in Photoshop format. Even although I bring them back into Lightroom, I don’t make any changes there, therefore, I don’t have to worry about XMP sidecar files. Again, I just grab the Photoshop files, transfer them to my main machine and import them into Lightroom.

While this process is manageable, I’d wish Adobe brought back the Photo Binder function from earlier beta releases or another function that allows me to create a selection of images, write everything within my selection to one big file and then re-import that file into Lightroom on my other machine.

I give Adobe big kudos for making Lightroom work reasonably well on an underpowered notebook like my old IBM X31 (Pentium M 1GHz, 512MB, 10’ LCD, 5400 rpm disk). Not only does it run OK, but screen real estate is at a premium on a 10 inch LCD screen. How could I ever work in Lightroom without the ability to automatically hide the

toolbars? I typically set the left, right and top toolbar to auto hide, thus being able to work within a much bigger and less cramped workspace. I use mainly keyboard commands to switch between modes and calling up the most important functions, thus being able to work efficiently even on my small travel notebook.



Lightroom on a 10 inch screen –the toolbar auto-hide feature helps a lot!

It's often the little things that make a difference. And being able to use Lightroom on an old traveler's notebook made a big difference to me. Well done, Adobe!

Come to think of it, I should probably install it on a Samsung Q1 seed unit that I received recently. The Q1 is a UMPC (Ultra-Mobile PC) running on an Intel Celeron processor, featuring a 7 inch screen and works like a tablet PC with no keyboard. But that's outside of the scope of this series.

Lightroom And Me, Photo-Blogging

Yes, I go with the times. I photo-blog (check out my blog at <http://www.marinphotoblog.com>) And there are multiple reason for doing so, from having to work with my images all the time to being able to publish my work in a new output format (the web, as opposed to print) to forcing myself to get out of my comfort zone by doing what I'm not so good at (street shooting, people, sports) and not just doing

the same old landscapes and panoramas. It's actually a very interesting experience, so I'm glad that I started my blog.

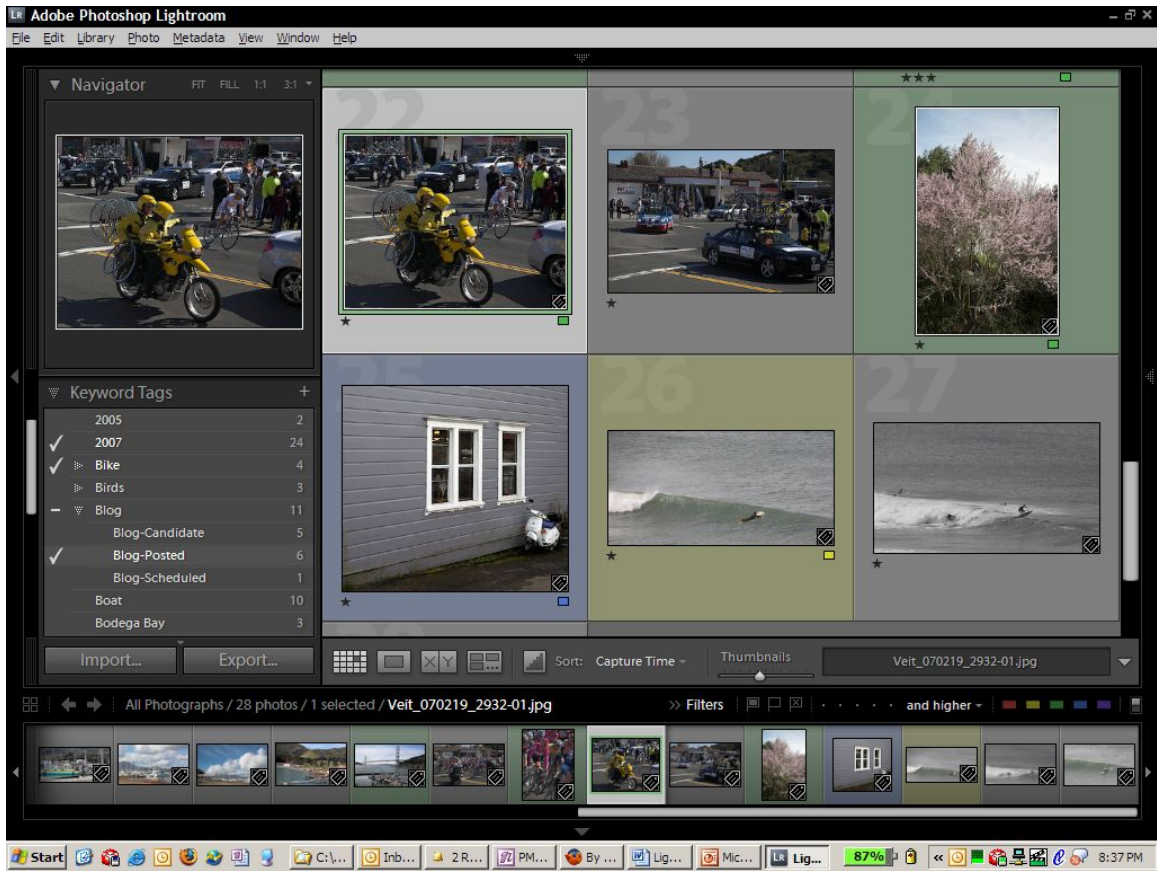
But photo-blogging also creates some interesting workflow challenges:

- Some of my images that are not good enough for printing (e.g. too much cropping needed and thus not enough pixels for printing), but are still good enough for posting on the web. So they exist, but not in my archives.
- Some non-keepers tell a story and are perfect to be posted on a blog, but not good enough for print
- Some keepers, esp. landscapes, are not that interesting when scaled down to 600 pixels wide
- Since the theme of my blog is images from the county I live in, some of my best images are not "eligible", since they were taken somewhere else
- Keeping an editorial calendar and thus tracking images as posted, candidates or potential candidates
- Using a set of keywords on my blog that might not match the keywords I use in my image archives
- Do I need to keep derivatives for photo-blogging?

Thus, the real workflow challenge for me is organizational and not so much how Lightroom could help me to get an image up on my blog. In fact, my hosting provider has such a buttoned-down implementation of Wordpress (the blogging software) that I have to use their interface and have no other means of posting, be it from Lightroom or any other imaging software package.

To get an image ready for posting, I run the image through an action in Photoshop that resizes an image in 3 steps from its original size to an image which is 600 pixels wide (600 pixels is my own, arbitrary standard for posting all my images on the web.) During each step, the image will be sharpened with a decreasing amount. More than 90% of all the images sharpened with this action look usable and do not have to be manually resized and sharpened. Once completed, I save them as JPG and use a browser to post the image to the web. There's nothing that Lightroom can do to help me with this task. And while I save the JPGs in a separate folder, I don't manage them in Lightroom, since I don't have to keep derivatives!

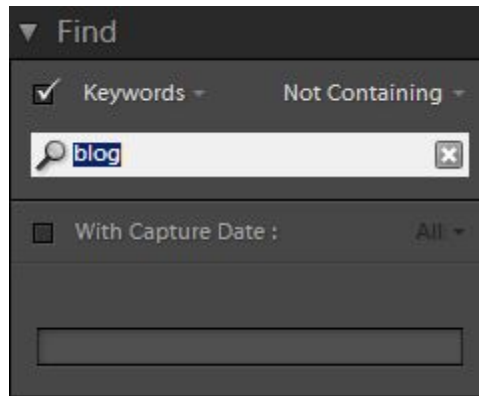
But there's plenty that Lightroom can help me with with regards to organizing my images. Here's how I implemented it:



Color-Labeling and Keyword Tags help to organize images for my photo blog

For my keepers, I've always used Photoshop's rating system that allows me to assign stars to my images. I have not used the color labeling in the past, so I simply color-labeled my images that I tagged for my blog: Green for posted, Yellow for Candidates and Blue for Scheduled.

Even more importantly, I built a keyword tag hierarchy and assigned the keywords "Blog" and the nested keywords "Blog-Posted", "Blog-Scheduled" and "Blog-Candidate" to all my images that are on my blog or will potentially appear there. Whenever I post a candidate, I remove the "Blog Candidate" keyword and then drag the image on "Blog Posted" to change the keywords to reflect its new status. With "Export XMP Metadata To File" switched on, all these keywords are immediately written into the image file (or an XMP sidecar file for any RAW or DNG images), so the keyword structure is somewhat visible outside of Lightroom and Photoshop as well.



No problem to select all the images that are NOT in your blog yet

Of course, I can use my keyword tags in any searches. If I want to see all my images associated with my blog, I just click on “Blogs” in the Keyword Tag sections to see what’s associated with my blog. Even better, if I want to see all my images that are not associated (which I often want to do when planning an editorial calendar), I can use Lightroom’s Find function and search for all images not containing the keyword “blog”. The power of metadata search at work!

The keyword tag system is scalable. If I were to start a second photo blog called “Sonoma Photo Blog”, I’d create a nested keyword tag for “Marin Photo Blog” under the “Blog” keyword and then drag all the existing images on it. Then I’d create another nested keyword “Sonoma Photo Blog”. For any new image, I’d drag it to the blog keyword as well as the status keyword (Posted, Candidate, Scheduled). It’s that easy.

However, the color labeling is not scalable, since Lightroom only supports one set of 5 color labels. While not strictly necessary (the keyword tags would suffice), I like the visual cue to see whether an image is posted in my blog. Maybe Adobe will implement multiple instances of meta-tags in a future version, so you could have color-labeling or rating based on the metadata instance you are using?

I realize that there are different ways to implement this functionality. My implementation not only works for me, but it seems to also be future-proof. And that’s all I’m asking for!

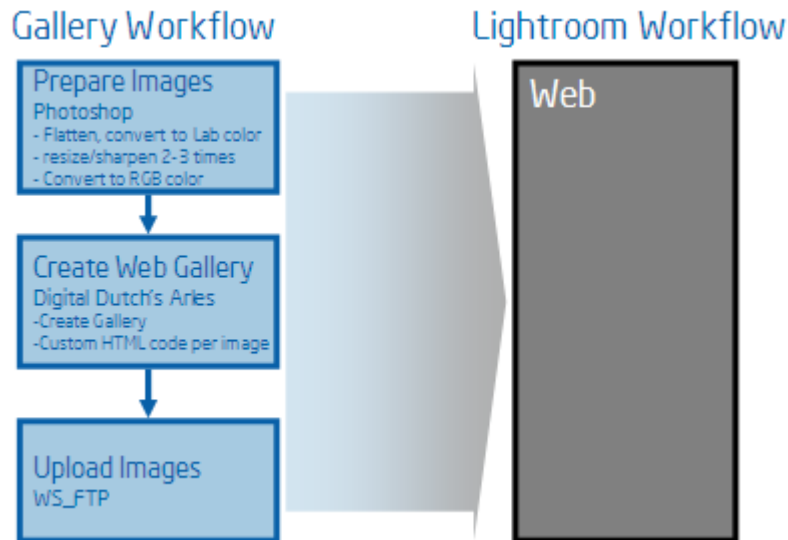
Lightroom and Me, Publishing On The Web

Ask any random sample of photographers and the majority will likely tell you that their main output medium is print. Yet online becomes more and more important, be it for promotional or marketing purposes, for interacting with your clients (from previews to the final products) or for selling your work.

I use online in three ways:

- I have my own [photo blog](#) (see part 3 of this series)
- I post my panoramas on a separate [site](#) with a different site layout
- I create and post web galleries on my [main site](#)

For all three, I automated my workflow as much as possible. Following is the workflow for generating web galleries to be posted on my main site:



The critical areas of my current workflow are:

- **Prepare Images:** During the first step, I use an action (described in part 3 of this series) that resizes an image to 600 pixels while applying sharpening at the same time.
- **Web Gallery Creation:** While not the easiest to use and not offering a lot of different templates, Digital Dutch's Arles offers the advantage that it allows me to embed custom HTML code into the gallery creation process, thus allowing me to create galleries that feature the exact same look and user interface as the rest of my web site does. Secondly, it does not touch my images that I created during the first step – it just creates thumbnails and the web pages without altering the images that I generated in the first step of my workflow.
- **Posting on the web:** Once all the images, thumbnails and HTML files are generated, I ftp them to my website. Any ftp tool would work here. I use either WS_FTP on Windows or use Dreamweaver's built-in ftp support on my Mac to upload the images.

On paper, Lightroom certainly seems capable of replicating this workflow. In fact, it manages everything in one interface, thus hiding the different steps of my workflow and requiring much less manual interaction. Gallery creation is fast, certainly much faster than my semi-manual process that I have been using so far. It supports Flash, which I am not ready to adopt yet, but it's great to have it as an option, thus "future-proofing" my investment in Lightroom. And if you know how to use Dreamweaver, uploading Lightroom galleries will be very easy to do.

However, there are some short-falls in Lightroom that prompted me to stay with my existing workflow:

- Image Adjustments: Below is a 100% crop of the original, a crop of what the image looks like after being processed by my own resizing/sharpening action and a crop of the image Lightroom created. It's quite obvious that Lightroom makes some adjustments (saturation tweaks and other changes) to my image during the process. Also, the image is not sharp enough to my taste. While the Lightroom image might be fine to, e.g., a wedding photographer who wants to post images, so clients can choose keepers and which images they want to order at what size, the Lightroom adjustments are not acceptable to me. Until Lightroom provides me with an option to turn off all internal adjustments while generating web sites, its output is not acceptable to me.



- Templates: Similar to Photoshop, Lightroom comes with a number of different templates. Unfortunately, it does not allow me to match the look and feel of my site by inserting custom HTML code (unless I tweak the template files on an OS level, something I don't want to do, since it might be broken by different templates in future releases of Lightroom. I already got burned doing this with Photoshop). I could live with that restriction for some of my web galleries, but I would expect Lightroom to eventually add support for custom HTML code in a future release.

Overall, Lightroom is a stable release with tons of functionality for a version 1 of a newly developed software product. Since most users use and thus spend a lot of their time in the Library and Develop module, I totally support Adobe's decision to put as much effort into strengthening these two modules for the first release. However, similar to Photoshop, the Web module seems to be an adjunct or an after-thought; something they had to do, since customers asked for it, but not to the same feature-completeness as they did for the other modules. It would have been great to give the user more parameters to influence or tweak the "engine" that creates a website. Ditto, the slideshow module feels bolted on as well. I hope Adobe will rectify this in a not-too-distant future release of Lightroom!