

Interview with Ed Hamrick:

VueScan's Creator Speaks on the Art of the Scan

Q: When did you start programming for yourself? Have you always been interested in imaging software? Was photography an old hobby?

A: I first started programming when I was 15, and got interested in photography at the same time. The first computer I used was a CDC mainframe that was programmed in FORTRAN with punched cards. At the same time, I was taking classes in photography, working in a darkroom with black/white film. About 15 years ago, I quit my job at Boeing and struck out on my own, trying to develop software independently. It was a painting program for the Atari called Leonardo da Video (hey, program names aren't my strong suit). For a variety of reasons, I failed miserably at this, but I learned a lot from it. About 10 years ago I wrote the first version of VuePrint (a JPEG viewer), but this time started selling it before quitting my day job (a much better approach). It was an immediate hit, and after a few months I was making enough to quit my job. I've been independent ever since. I first got interested in imaging software when I worked at NASA/JPL while I was in college. I worked on the Voyager project along with a few other projects that worked with satellite images, and I've been very interested ever since. My father is an avid photographer, and I've always been interested in photography as well. I'm not an especially talented photographer, but I enjoy it.

Q: You used to have a product called VueSmart. What happened to it? Was that the prototype for VueScan?

A: I bought a PhotoSmart scanner to scan negatives, and was fairly disappointed with the software. I decided to reverse-engineer the commands it uses, and produced a very primitive program to scan with the PhotoSmart. I called it VueSmart, and gave it away free to VuePrint customers. I decided to buy a Nikon LS-30 scanner, and changed the name to VueScan when I added support for it.

Q: How can a program be written by just one person?

A: The trick is to be very productive, and the one thing that hurts productivity the most is phone calls. Studies have shown that it takes almost 30 minutes to get productive again after a single phone call. I decided 10 years ago that I'd do all customer support and order taking via e-mail and web, and haven't taken any customer phone calls in that time. That's been the single most important reason I've been able to do so much to VueScan in such a short time. The other thing that reduces productivity is meetings. When I had a "real job", my days were consumed by meetings. I haven't been to a meeting in 10 years, and VueScan has improved rapidly as a result.



VueScan's Ed Hamrick

Q: What challenges does releasing software for Mac, Windows and Linux bring?

A: The main challenge was learning all three operating systems. The one decision that made all this possible was choosing wxWindows development platform, which made it possible to use the same source code for all three operating systems. One advantage of building VueScan on all three operating systems is that it's helped me find some subtle bugs. Using three different compilers and three different operating systems helps flush out a lot of bugs.

Q: What's harder to scan? Color or black and white?

A: It's much, much harder to scan color. People are quite sensitive to subtle color variations, and especially to color balance issues. I put a lot of work into automatic color balance, and this is the one feature in VueScan that's most under appreciated.

Q: What future do you see for scanning and film photography?

A: I've been around long enough to remember everyone claiming that the paperless office was just around the corner. However, offices are more awash in paper than ever before. Similarly, digital imaging is generating more photographs on paper than ever before, and some percentage of these images will be scanned again some day. There are 50 years of photographs, slides and negatives that people are going to want to scan, and this will keep me busy with VueScan for years to come.

Q: What advice would you give to someone who's got a lot of negatives and slides they want to archive?

A: The number one suggestion is to plan ahead. Develop a realistic plan, work out a procedure for efficiently doing this, decide how to organize the scans, and regularly burn the scans to DVD (don't use CD - it's too small). The other thing I'd recommend is scanning to raw files - this lets you scan each negative or slide once, and you can leave the post-processing and color correction to a later date (even years later). Lastly, use a scanner that has an infrared channel for helping remove dust spots. Film gets dust on it, and this is a real time saver. One brand of scanner I particularly like is the Nikon CoolScan line - they use an LED light source (which works particularly well for scanning film) and acquire the infrared channel in the same pass as the red, green and blue channels. A lot of people have used VueScan to scan thousands of slides and negatives, and they've actually been the source of many of the best improvements to VueScan. There are a lot of subtle features in VueScan that are designed to help people with large, complex scanning projects, while at the same time I've worked hard to make VueScan easy to use for simple one-off scanning jobs.

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