

‘Image service metamorphosis’ at the NGV



National Gallery of Victoria Photographic Services Studio – Christian Markel, photographed by Selina Ou

Like most image archive services, the National Gallery of Victoria’s Photographic Services department has the responsibility of delivering accurate and simple image indexing for fast identification, providing efficient image management and ensuring that images (saved in the correct format) are available quickly. What had previously been a time-consuming manual job for several years became more manageable when digital asset management software Canto Cumulus was utilised together with the existing collection management system, Vernon. Colleen Bate spoke to four pertinent members of the Photographic Services and IT department involved in this ‘image service metamorphosis.’

Prior to installing Digital Asset Management system, Canto Cumulus in 2000, image archives for the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) were well managed. The relatively small archive of approximately 10 000 5 X 4 inch colour trannies and 6000 black and white negatives were systematically categorised and manually filed – a record of these was held in Vernon, the Gallery's collection management system for artworks. The Photographic Services department was traditionally film based at the time so it was easy and convenient to store film in bulk. There was also a very brief period when transparencies were scanned and a very simple filing system was adapted.

Image Digitisation

The Cumulus Archive Server (seven client Cumulus Workgroup Archive Server Solution) was installed by ColourFast Systems, and later Icorp, at the same time as the 'team' became involved in digital capture – the beginning of a big project.

Garry Sommerfeld, Manager, Photographic Services, one of the first staff members to receive extensive training on Cumulus, recalls, "The Digitisation project was part of a two part project – to digitise the Collections as well as create a database and management system for the NGV's electronic records and for web. Image digitisation was being done well before the database management system was actually in place. Virtually within day one of getting the digitised system started, we had Cumulus in place."

As it turned out, the 'team' was well ahead of its time and soon caught on to the fact that not everyone was equipped for the digital age.

"When we first started to supply images digitally for external requests it was a new process for a lot of people and they were almost aggressively anti-digitisation. They wanted what they always knew (the old tried and tested trannies), so it was a tremendous learning curve for everyone concerned," says Jennie Moloney, Photography & Copyright Coordinator, a major user of Cumulus.

Back then the team consisted of two photographers, a darkroom person (who became a defacto image technician) and a multimedia department that was managing the implementation of the tender process for digitisation with three people.

Now the photographic Services department consists of seven staff and the multimedia department has moved into other areas. There was very limited support from the IT department, due to the department's small size.

Progress and integration

How times have changed! The IT department has grown substantially and now plays an active role in the 'evolution' of all hardware and system software (including Cumulus) and the NGV's collection of digital assets has grown extensively to more than 50 000 images.

The Cumulus Archive Server was recently upgraded to Cumulus Publishing Server (nine client Workgroup Publishing Server Solution with Web Publisher Pro) and Melbourne-based AIMTec was brought in to assist with custom development integration, namely to develop a means of improving the workflow for linking data to images into Cumulus.

"Initially we were using the system in a simplistic way, exporting text from records in Vernon, our collection management system, and then running Filemaker runtime actions. It was a fairly static system – we had runtimes for each collection which it meant that only one person could input data into Cumulus at any one

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– Ricky Patten, DataBasics

time," explains Kathryn Marshall, Application Manager, who looks after all corporate applications at the NGV.

There are quite a number of museums and art galleries in Australia that use both Vernon and Cumulus and each system has its own strengths, thus integration is paramount.

"As many of the digitised photographs did not have accompanying written information, it was essential to capture image content metadata with expediency. What we got AIMTec to do was to improve this so that anyone could use it at any time. Closer integration also meant that the manual processes were removed and everything became more automated," adds Marshall.

Keepers of the 'keys'

While Marshall manages Cumulus for the institution, photographer Predrag Cancar administers the system for Photographic Services. They are the designated 'administrators' of the system – the only staff permitted to delete files, lock or change metadata fields, set various levels of access permissions and control general accessibility.

'Different strokes for different folks'

Cumulus has provided different benefits to different members of the 'team'. For Garry Sommerfeld it is the fact that it is a very stable program with the added bonus of being both PC and Mac friendly, making integration from the photography studios to the rest of the building relatively straightforward.

For Jennie Moloney it is the fact that it is an excellent research tool with a powerful search mechanism – files are instantly available and easy to source, pdfs can be created effortlessly and emailed anywhere in the world.

For Predrag Cancar it is the fact that it has assisted in the creation of a more efficient work environment and no time delay – visual recognition of artworks is achieved at the same time as collection management metadata is received.

Future plans

In the next six to eight months the system will further evolve; moving from a DVD based archive towards server storage – a huge project for both Information Services and Photographic Services. At this point the 'team' will investigate improved and standardised ways of using Cumulus to increase automation, free up embedded data and generally utilise the program to its full potential.

"Cumulus has matured as a product and understanding what we need from Cumulus has become clearer over time," says Jennie Moloney.

"NGV has been one of the best users of Cumulus since their initial installation in 2000. The NGV team has fought on through many difficulties and as they overcome each problem they have improved their understanding in managing such an important image library," says Ricky Patten of DataBasics, Australian distributor for Cumulus.

"The lesson learnt here is that digital asset management is an important skill for organisations to acquire if they are going to deliver the services they are mandated to provide at present and in the future.

"Putting in the right technology is just the first step... to make it to the end of the journey you need people with experience in managing digital assets and a highly devoted team to make it all work," he concludes.



Narelle Wilson, NGV photographer, using Cumulus

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Digital Reproduction magazine is the region's only super sized publication that targets the indoor graphics sector, including users of pigment and dye based printing systems and the giclée printing process.

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