

Is using Photoshop cheating with your photography?

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"Photoshop: Helping the ugly since 1988."

We've all seen this somewhere, and many believe this. It's not hard to understand why, though: when was the last time there was a magazine cover that *didn't* perform some sort of touch-up to the model? Yea, I don't know either. Many people think that editing a picture with Photoshop or any other editing program is cheating, but what many of those people don't realize is that just about every camera out there edits your photos as soon as you take them.

Your digital camera will edit your photo for you from the word "cheese," but many people don't know about or don't think about this. A .jpg image is edited by nature, as the camera has to decide how to compress the file - by taking some information out - in order to allow for smaller file sizes. During this compression, there is a bit of information added to the file to tell your image viewing program of choice how the picture should look. This could be a "Vivid" setting on your camera, or even the "Black and White" setting. the problem is, you have some software engineer that has to write a program to tell how your picture should look, even though he has no idea what kind of picture you are taking! This is why editing your photos has become such a prevalent activity.



This image has been enhanced with Photoshop. Photo by Benjamin Yoder

There are many reasons to use a photo editing program, the biggest one being that your computer can do a vastly better job processing the information; you did pay for that great computer processing power, after all. Your camera just can't match the computing horsepower of your computer. The other great thing about using a program to edit is that *you* can make all the decisions, and not leave it to that same software engineer that was mentioned above. But is editing your picture really cheating?

Let's dispel one myth right away: Even with film, it was common practice to burn (expose longer to darken an area) and dodge (expose less to lighten an area) the paper as you were making a print. Not only that, but many photographers scraped the negatives, and not just to put a scratch in them; scraping a negative took away a bit of the emulsion, allowing that area of the image to let a bit more light through while exposing the paper, thus allowing the photographer to darken part of the image more exactly than burning. Even Ansel Adams would use these practices to enhance his photographs.



So there is ample evidence that even the greats made modifications to their photographs when it was film, why should digital be any different? Many professionals have traded the darkroom and enlarger for a computer desktop and mouse. The photo at the start of this article is one that I ran through Adobe Photoshop. There isn't a whole lot done to enhance the photo, I adjusted the exposure and white balance a bit, and sharpened the photo to help it pop a bit more. The biggest change I did was to desaturate most of the colors, leaving the yellow channel fully saturated to give it that weathered look to accent the old fence and uncut grass and flowers; you can see the "original" just above, edited only to convert it to an acceptable file format to post here.

Do these edits make it no longer a photograph? That point is the most debatable part of editing images: How far is too far? The one thing that can be agreed upon by all sides is that it is easier for anyone to edit their photographs, and there becomes a point where it can go too far across the line and become a photo illustration; or go even farther and become graphic art that started with a photograph. However, these lines are different for each person, and you will almost certainly have a different line than I do.

If you find yourself editing photos just to make sure they look passable, however, you may need to take a look at your technique. If you are constantly cropping to improve your framing, or cloning out a branch that seems to be growing out of your subject's head, or making sure the exposure looks appropriate, you need to take a better picture! If you are having these problems, go back and look at some rules of composition; look at some rules for making a proper exposure. Taking a better picture from the get-go is vastly better than trying to "fix it in post." Professional photographers don't make money sitting at a desk trying to make their

photos look good, after all; they make money taking those pictures! Make it right in camera, and you will spend far less time at the computer.

Using an editing program like [Adobe Photoshop](#), [Picasa](#), or [GIMP](#) is definitely not cheating. Editing a photograph to become what you saw as you were clicking that shutter button (or your vision of what could have been) is a perfectly acceptable - and normal - work flow. How far you take it is up to you, just don't get upset when someone tells you you cheated.

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