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Technology Review column

## CLUTTER BUSTERS

By Paul Mormack

"...MediaPro is well-suited to the needs of most designers. With its support for other media, MediaPro is a strong application that meets or exceeds Cumulus or Portfolio."

"For individuals and smaller companies, there's no doubt that you'll benefit most from iView MediaPro 2. It's easy to use and includes all the tools you'll need to organize your digital assets and keep tabs on them for future projects."

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### VITAL STATS

iView MediaPro 2	Extensis Portfolio 7	Canto Cumulus 6
Rating: ****	Rating: ***	Rating: **
Price: \$160	Price: \$199.95	Price: \$99.95
Contact: iView Multimedia Ltd. 44 20 7223 8691 <a href="http://www.iview-multimedia.com">www.iview-multimedia.com</a>	Contact: Extensis Inc. (503) 274-2020 <a href="http://www.extensis.com">www.extensis.com</a>	Contact: Canto Software Inc. (415) 495-6545 <a href="http://www.canto.com">www.canto.com</a>

***Is your hard drive a jumble of photos, graphics and fonts that are impossible to dig up when you need them? Digital asset management software can help you find the needle in your digital haystack. We evaluated three popular DAM products.***

The project—a job for a local hospital, your firm's major client—is nearly ready for the printer.

Except for one tiny detail: the head shot of the hospital CEO for the inside front cover. You've done countless projects for the client, and most of them have included the CEO's mug. It shouldn't be that hard to find: On the server? In a job folder? On a CD?

Maybe you need DAM to keep your images from going MIA.

Digital asset management, or DAM, has been an issue in the design community for many years. Since the advent of the Mac in 1984, there's been a rapidly increasing need for keeping tabs on the explosion of

photos, graphics, fonts, video, sounds and other content that can quickly make a mess of a hard drive.

We've all tried to organize our assets using clearly labeled folders and consistent file names. But wouldn't it also be great to know what's on all those CDs on the shelf without putting them into a drive? And with digital photography making it easy to generate thousands of images per year, specialized database software, or digital asset management, is essential.

In many firms, DAM can not only dramatically simplify how you store and search for an image, but can also preview indexed images and add critical information such as photographer, exposure, etc.

For this review, HOW examined three DAM products: Extensis Portfolio 6 and 7, Canto Cumulus 6 and iView MediaPro 2. Both Extensis Portfolio and Canto Cumulus are familiar names; both have been available for years. Conversely, iView MediaPro is a relative newcomer that has a large following among photographers. Note: We reviewed Portfolio 6 and received an extensive preview of Version 7, which included all of the new features mentioned here at press time. You may want to confirm that Version 7 includes the specific features you're looking for.

If you're not currently using DAM software, the key concept with all of these products is the catalog of assets. To get any benefit from DAM, you have to either individually select content to import into a catalog or add content automatically by telling the software to watch specific folders for files that meet your criteria. Some data, such as creation date and file size, is automatically attached to a cataloged image, but for maximum usefulness, you need to add info important to you, such as photographer or project. When you're looking for an image that was shot five years ago for a hospital whose name you're not sure of and you only want the hi-res TIFF version, it's easy to see that a few seconds spent now in cataloging can be very helpful later.

### ***Portfolio: Simply Powerful***

Portfolio tackles DAM with an intuitive set of tools likely to be comfortable for most designers. Extensis says it studied designers' workflows and added tools such as the Express Palette, which floats in typical creative applications and makes it easy to pull in images without the extra steps of working with the full Portfolio application. You can then copy or drag images into Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator for editing.

Other new tools include instant cataloging for quickly adding items by Control-clicking on files or folders and interacting with a pop-up menu. Folder-Sync offers a straightforward way to copy, move, delete and rename files on a local drive or server through drag-and-drop while keeping the Portfolio catalog up to date. As files shift around over the course of projects, Portfolio will alert you that the files have moved and

let you update the catalog.

Extensis added other search tools such as QuickFind for searching on custom-defined fields without having to resort to menu picks. For photographers, Portfolio now supports the EXIF information captured by most digital cameras—shutter speed, aperture, white balance, etc. Because this information is searchable, you could query Portfolio to bring up thumbnails of all photos shot at  $\frac{1}{250}$  second at f8.

Portfolio is based on the assumption that 90% of any organization's DAM needs can be addressed with simple tools. Most users will be content to preview files and catalog images with a few keywords. (Of course, some will want to add all kinds of identifying data; Portfolio is up to the task.)

The function for bringing items into the catalog is integrated into the operating system: Go to the Add To Portfolio command then choose Catalog. Importing digital photos is an especially annoying problem because camera makers label files with DOS-like names such as "can003.jpg." Portfolio makes it easy to rename digital-photo files in a batch.

Extensis designed Portfolio to run efficiently on a network, and Version 7 includes a server sync function that does all updating in the background. This new version also supports the most common RAW formats favored by photographers.

Another new capability streamlines the collection of images for burning on a CD. This tool will also make low-res versions of the files, add a catalog and burn without having to run a batch. EPS files are rendered at full resolution, and PDF text files can be indexed.

One annoyance: A thumbnail view includes a list of keywords associated with the file. You'd think that you could select an unwanted keyword and delete it. But doing so deletes the entire file from the catalog. To delete a keyword, you have to click the Info button, call up a separate thumbnail window and delete the keyword.

### ***iView MediaPro: Strong Newcomer***

Media Pro from iView started as a cataloging application for digital photographers. It hasn't been on the market nearly as long as Cumulus or Portfolio but has already acquired a loyal following among photographers. And most of the digital assets that designers keep track of are photographs, so MediaPro is well-suited to the needs of most designers. With its support for other media, MediaPro is a strong application that meets or exceeds Cumulus or Portfolio.

First, MediaPro has a better interface than either of its competitors and pulls in more functionality in an easier-to-use way than the other

products. This may be because the latest version of MediaPro was designed for OS X. With DAM, you definitely want the easiest-to-use interface because cataloging images isn't fun, and anything that makes the process more fluid, flexible and complete is welcome.

MediaPro's interface includes the typical thumbnail, list and detail views of all of these products. But it organizes a more extensive set of functions across its menu bar, and the limited use of icons makes it easier to figure out where to go to add more information, manipulate the catalog and contents, and produce items such as slide shows and CD-ROMs from the catalog.

With MediaPro, it's simple to set up and import files from a watched folder, where you normally drop images during a project. Or if you're working on a project where you've intelligently named all of the images with a prefix such as "Mall Bro Photo..." you can type this into the Import option dialog box and MediaPro grabs the whole batch for a catalog.

Many photographers want a simple mechanism to show photos to clients, so MediaPro makes it easy to create and export slide shows, burn CDs, make contact sheets or create HTML galleries. A simple menu pick gets the ball rolling. Other DAM software also offers many of these options, but they're more straightforward with MediaPro. Also reflecting its origin as a photographer's tool, basic image editing is also easy to access and perform.

I loved the flexibility of MediaPro's catalog and keyword labels. Just click on a catalog name or keyword and the program instantly pops up just those thumbnails that fit the selection. The Field Finder window on the left of the main screen is handy for quickly selecting individual files or groups of files. For instance, the media format field shows how many GIFs, JPGs, etc., are in the current catalog, and a click on the GIF label pulls all of them into the main viewing window. Similarly, you can select all of the files from a given day, month or year. Cumulus and Portfolio can pull up files within similar groups too, but, again, it's simpler with MediaPro.

### ***Cumulus: Solid But Stark***

All three programs are solid performers that handle the basics well. With fewer distinctions in functionality, the interface becomes more important in deciding which program is right for you.

Portfolio's interface is friendly and uncluttered, minimal but not as stark as Cumulus's. Cumulus' toolbar is monochromatic, and the icons are not completely intuitive. Cumulus shows directory info, categories and keywords to the left of the main window, but the information presented isn't as useful as in MediaPro's display.

Cumulus has an interesting "Asset Reference" tab in its info window that shows a file's directory path in Mac, Windows and Unix style to simplify file location for those who work in multiplatform environments. Cumulus also can separate large catalogs into multiple catalogs and open and search on them in one window.

On the whole, though, you either love or hate the Cumulus interface. It's easy to get lost in. After clicking on an image to enlarge, for instance, the program wouldn't let me return to the main catalog view of thumbnails.

After a lot of clicking, I returned to the thumbnails view, but the thumbnails were smaller than before. There are several options that can be set in Preferences, but as with many of the functions in Cumulus, I got the spinning beach ball when I made selections, so the program sometimes was lethargic.

Although Cumulus has powerful search and cataloging features and the ability to rename and move files, it isn't as enjoyable to use as Portfolio or MediaPro, and it doesn't provide file information in an easy-to-use or accessible way. Maybe with practice it would be easier to tap the full potential. On the plus side, the single-user version is less expensive than MediaPro or Portfolio. Also, the enterprise version of Cumulus may be great at handling huge servers with thousands of images.

### ***Import and Find: Critical functions***

Speed of importing and processing is an important issue if you have to catalog large numbers of files. To pull in 250 images in a mix largely of JPGs, TIFFs and PDFs, Cumulus and Portfolio took about three minutes, while Media Pro took about half that time. Obviously, you wouldn't normally pull in this many images unless you were just adding DAM to your workflow. But when you consider that many digital photographers produce 5,000 to 10,000 photos per year, importing should be an ongoing activity unless you set up a server for this task. These programs can watch a server, so any high-volume shop that's already using a server can set up the software to centrally manage your cataloging chores.

I didn't find a huge practical difference in import speed between these programs when adding just a few images, although MediaPro typically was fastest, followed by Portfolio, then Cumulus. Adding PDF files seems to be more time-consuming with all three programs. Portfolio's import function is easy to use, but it crashed once when I tried to import 500 images. The problem didn't recur, but it was a hiccup.

We catalog images so that we can later find exactly the ones we need. In this regard, all three programs have strong Find functions. All three

search by obvious parameters such as file name, file type, creation date and location. The Find function is complete in MediaPro as you can select from more than 50 search parameters and use up to six simultaneously. Cumulus and Portfolio also permit wide search parameters, but don't offer the same depth, as both rely on 25 find criteria. For most users, that's more than enough. Portfolio and Cumulus do include a handy Quick Find window where you type in a word or two that might be in the file name and the related list pops up immediately.

All of these programs are similar in that they can show catalogs as sheets of thumbnails at various sizes; list views consisting of file names, dates, directory path, etc.; or individual records that include a thumbnail and name, location, keywords and descriptors you've attached. You can also double-click on the thumbnail for a larger view with some additional info about file size and resolution.

### ***Recommendations***

If you need to manage large numbers of digital files, you need a DAM program. Any of these three products will do the job. If you work with multiple servers, you'll want to look closely at Extensis Portfolio 7 and Canto Cumulus 6, which have proven themselves in large organizations managing huge image libraries. For individuals and smaller companies, there's no doubt that you'll benefit most from iView MediaPro 2. It's easy to use and includes all the tools you'll need to organize your digital assets and keep tabs on them for future projects. All three of these products are available in free trial versions, so it's easy to decide which interface and workflow best suit your style.

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