Escape those Repetitive Photoshop Tasks!

I really like working in Photoshop, but after a while I sort of looked over my own shoulder at what I was doing and I saw I was having to do the same simple (or sometimes complex) keyboard combinations over and over again. I've managed to escape from many of the most repetitive tasks. I'll show you how I did it and then you'll be able to evaluate your own work patterns and perhaps come up with solutions for yourself.

To start out, I'll tell you a little about my workflow. Since yours will be a bit different from mine, my solutions won't work perfectly for you, but I hope they'll inspire you to create shortcuts and actions which will streamline your own workflow.

Each digital image needs at least a tiny bit of sharpening. I do a bit of sharpening when I first work on an image and then I do a little final sharpening each time the photo is output for a specific purpose. I change the image size and resolution for the purpose at hand and then sharpen it appropriately. You may use Un-Sharp Mask or you might use High Pass Filter to sharpen, but whichever you use, you'll notice it requires you to go through several menus before you get to your desired dialog box to do the sharpening. When I sharpen an image,

I create a composite layer (shift-alt-control-F in CS3) and sharpen that one. That way I'm not permanently changing the original pixels of my image. I can go back and sharpen less or remove the sharpening anytime I want, even after I've Saved and Closed the image. I've created an Action which makes a composite layer of the layers of my image and then opens the Unsharp Mask dialog box. I assigned that Action a Function key, so all I have to do when I want to sharpen is press F4. By the way, while making the action, I put a layer mask on the layer which will be sharpened. That way I can quickly mask out part of the sharpening if I want. That simple action saves me perhaps a hundred keystrokes each day.

I sometimes have to remove noise (ISO "grain") from an image. I've purchased Noise Ninja for this task and assigned another Function key to that Action.

I've created a similar Action for Gausian Blur, which I use a lot. Yes, Smart Blur does a bit better job, but for most purposes I use Gausian Blur because it's so much faster. Again, I blur a copy layer with a layer mask which would've been more keystrokes, but I've assigned that Action to my F3 key.

I prefer to do my selective lightening and darkening (dodging and burning) on a neutral Overlay layer (see page 3 of my Everyday Photoshop Techniques). This requires quite a few steps, so I've assigned it to one of my Function keys.

I use brushes a lot. I don't paint new pixels on my image, but I do paint black or white on masks a great deal. You can refer to my tutorial about Masking if you're interested. Photoshop has helped us here. F5, of course, gives you your Brushes Panel, as will clicking on that little "menu" icon in the Options Bar. You probably already know to press b for the brush tool and the common brush modification shortcuts:

the [key for smaller brush,] key for larger brush and add shift to those keystrokes to make the brush softer or harder. I don't know how to touch type [or], so I've put little plastic "bumpers" on those keys so I can find them without looking at the keyboard.

My mouse died and since it was time to buy a new one, I got a gaming mouse with six programmable buttons on it. I've assigned b (brush) and x (toggle between foreground and background colors) to two of those buttons.

The mouse I use is a Logitech G5 Laser Mouse, but there are quite a few other gaming mice out there which have programmable keys.

I also make selections all day long. I've assigned the keyboard shortcut L (for Lasso tool) to one of my programmable mouse keys and Backspace (Delete - to undo a Lasso click) and Control/Command-d (de-select) to other mouse keys. My hand doesn't have to leave my mouse nearly as much when I use the gaming mouse.

Has it ever occurred to you how often you hit your Enter/Return key? Any highlighted "OK" button in a dialog box can be most quickly clicked using your Enter/Return key. Anytime you want to close a Lasso selection, you can hit that key as well, so I've programmed yet another mouse key to be simply another Enter/Return key. Again, my hand doesn't have to leave the mouse. Actually, before I got the gaming

mouse I'd just whack the Enter key on my keyboard with my mouse thumb.

Another aid to my avoiding those repetitive tasks has been a gaming keypad. It sits at the left of my computer keyboard.

I found it awkward to press shift-[on the keyboard, not to mention control-delete or alt-delete (to fill with background/forground colors), so I assigned keyboard keystrokes (or macros) the eleven keys of the keypad.

The keypad has A, B, and C "modes." what you see below are what I have the A mode keys programmed to do. In the B mode, I have them programmed with Illustrator's Pen Tool shortcuts.

OK, now it's time to take a look at your own workflow and see what repetitive tasks you can start assigning to single keystrokes. You'll be amazed at how much faster, easier and therefore more fun Photoshop will become.