

ENHANCED VIRTUAL HDR WORKFLOW FOR ADOBE LIGHTROOM 3

The purpose of this short note is to show how to add an automatic virtual HDR workflow into Lightroom. The workflow has been validated with Lightroom 3.

It is an automatic workflow as it exploits a plug-in called Excessor, which may be downloaded from <http://www.knobroom.com/excessor/>. Excessor is a free Lightroom 3 plug-in that allows you to run a preset folder, containing multiple presets, on a single image; in this case generating as many virtual delta-EV copies with applied presets as you need. [Note the Excessor plug-in may also be used for other multiple presets, ie other than HDR virtual brackets, eg creating multiple virtual copies with different development settings].

When applied to HDR workflow Excessor speeds up the creation of the virtual brackets that you need to export into your HDR software, eg Photomatix. Without Excessor you can still carry out virtual bracketing, but you need to manually create three (say) virtual brackets, and for two of the brackets manually adjust the exposure, ie -2EV and +2EV, say. Every time and for every image!

Setup (once only)

Download Excessor, open up the plug-in manager and add Excessor.

Go to any Lightroom image (RAW or JPEG), reset the image to its base configuration (you may wish check settings, eg set the blacks to 0 and make changes to other base settings here), create three virtual copies of the base image by right clicking on the image three times. You now have the base image and three virtual copies.

Select one of the virtual copies and adjust the exposure to -2EV. Select another and adjust the exposure to +2EV. You now have three virtual copies at -2EV, 0EV and +2EV.

In the develop module click on Presets to open up the existing folders. You will see at least two existing folders, ie Lightroom Presets and User Presets. You may already have other folders as well, ie if you have already set up a presets folder. Right click on any of the existing folders and select New Folder. Name the new folder to, say, Virtual x3 (or Virtual xn where n is the number of brackets you wish to automate).

Select one of the virtual copies you made, say, the -2EV one. Under the Presets panel click the + symbol. This will bring up a new window. Select the Presets folder you just created, eg Virtual x3. Name the preset, say, -2EV, and select the Exposure under Basic Tone and the Black Clipping if you zeroed that above (if you changed other settings you want to include select these, however, when doing HDR it is best to do the tone mapping before playing around with too many other image settings). Click Create.

Repeat the above for the 0EV and +2EV virtual images, ie selecting each first and then opening up and naming the New Develop Preset.

You are now set to let Lightroom create virtual brackets for you. Note the above set up is for three virtual brackets, each separated by 2EV. You could just as easily set up a folder with 5 virtual brackets, each separated by 1EV. I have set up both to allow virtual HDR experimentation.

Workflow

To use the new Lightroom virtual bracketing functionality is simplicity itself. The following is my suggested workflow, I'm sure you will find your own. It assumes you have Photomatix or some other HDR software, eg HDR Efex Pro, linked into Lightroom (if not you will need to export the virtual images manually):

1. In the develop module, select (click on) the base RAW image (the process works for JPEGs but will result in degraded HDR images relative to a RAW starting point);
2. Correct white balance in the base image if necessary;
3. Correct for lens distortion under the Lens Correction sub-module, ie Enable Profile Correction;
4. Under the File menu select Plug-in Extras and Excessor;
5. Select the number of Virtual Brackets you require, ie x3 or x5. Click OK. Close the Excessor info box;
6. Watch as magically three virtual brackets are created at -2EV, 0EV and +2EV (or if you have set up and selected 5 brackets, at -2EV, -1EV, 0EV, 1EV, -2EV);
7. Without selecting anyone image, right click on any of the highlighted images;
8. Select Export and select your HDR software;
9. As you have a uniform EXIF data in all the virtual brackets you will need to manually select the EV separation range, eg 2 for three bracket and 1 for 5 brackets (or whatever you set up);
10. Do your HDR 'stuff' and automatically export back into lightroom (the reimported HDR TIFF will be placed next to the virtual brackets (assuming you have selected this functionality));
11. Finish off your image, either in Lightroom or your favourite image processing software, ie Photoshop.

Bottom line

The above Lightroom 3 workflow will allow you to use all your single images and create virtual brackets for HDR processing with the minimum effort.

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