

The DTP contenders: which page layout program for you?

by Gordon Woolf

Which page layout program for you? The following are the major contenders. The web addresses given are, where possible, those of an independent information site, often that of a mailing list serving users, rather than of the software company itself. Most give links to other useful sites.

Any top quality word processor: If most of your work is straight down the page, or very simple multi-column newsletters, then MS Word or Word Perfect or StarOffice etc. may be all you ever need. However, in such programs it can be difficult to achieve small movements of graphics or text items without much planning. There's a lot of Word advice at: <http://www.mvps.org/word/>

Microsoft Publisher: Comes with many templates and with "wizards" to help you achieve a passable layout in a very short time while shielding you from the technical side of print production. Best suited to the person who has to produce a printed item occasionally, and the latest versions are much more acceptable by many printers, who are now less likely to tell you: "Publisher file? No we won't touch that." It also does a fair job of producing simple web pages. Contact the MS-Publisher group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/>

Adobe PageMaker: Now it should work with current operating systems, and though its code is old, and convoluted, it still provides professional quality output (it is, for example, used by many of the independent newspapers throughout Victoria). Fairly easy to learn and also easy to automate with templates and scripts. It emulates the pasteboard working method; assemble the contents of a page on the surrounding pasteboard and then drag them into position. Will work on anything that will run Win98 or better with 32MB of RAM. The PageMakr List website: <http://www.makingpages.org/pagemaker>

Adobe InDesign: A complete rewrite of the PageMaker code, with an ability to produce top quality typesetting -- better than anything seen since the days of handset metal type (with the possible exception of TeX, a command-line typesetting system that is horrendously hard to use). It provides many of the facilities users of page layout programs have been calling for, but omits a number of essentials, some of which are available as plug-ins from other vendors. The InDesign List: <http://www.blueworld.com/blueworld/lists/indesign.html>

QuarkXPress: Quark has produced a Windows version of its page layout program for many years, but if you think Quark, you think Mac -- one of the reasons being that the Windows version cannot be scripted. It is also the most expensive of the layout programs, but will work on almost anything you can call a Windows computer. QXP has similar problems with Win2000 as did PageMaker 6.5, and these should be solved with QXP5, expected late this year. Try <http://www.xpressobar.com/>

Corel Ventura: This program originated from Xerox PARC along with the graphical user interface, the mouse, postscript, and, it seems, almost everything else which plays a major role in today's computing. However, the transition from the GEM operating system to Windows was a disaster and it was not until a major rewrite after acquisition by Corel that it started to regain credibility. Well worth consideration but any user will be in a minority. Like InDesign, and unlike QXP, Ventura can be scripted under Windows using Visual Basic. A starting point is <http://www.solid-us.com/>

Serif PagePlus: Often forgotten, this program has the advantage on price, but many users swear by it. I know of at least one newspaper produced using it. If capital cost is a problem, you should look at this program (currently US\$59.95). See <http://www.calcaria.co.uk>

Adobe FrameMaker: This is the program of choice when you have complex long documents. Have you heard the story that the maintenance manuals for a Boeing 747 weigh more than the aircraft itself? I'm not sure that's true, but they are

produced in FrameMaker, which specialises in handling tables, indexes, etc. The Framers forum is at <<http://www.frameusers.com>>

Creator: Originally known as "Multi-Ad Creator", this was a Mac-only program used by many (we could almost say most) Mac-based newspapers for producing all those mini-display trader ads, which were then taken as EPS files into pages in QuarkXPress. Yellow-page directory firms around the world swore by it. Now it has grown into Creator6, a fully-fledged page-layout program for PC as well as Mac and you can get a 20MB trial version from <<http://www.triotech.com.au>>.

Ready Set Go: In the earliest days of DTP, the choice, on a Mac, was PageMaker or Ready Set Go. And RSG was around for many years until development stopped and many users moved to other programs. It was revived under new owners Diwan Software in the UK and is at version 7 for the Mac. Very recently they released version 1 for the PC on which it offers a workmanlike and low cost alternative. There's a 9MB 14-day demo at <<http://www.diwan.com/>>

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