



ILLUSTRATION COURTESY INGRAM PUBLISHING FROM THE DIGITAL IMAGES COLLECTION. BUSINESS SYMBOLS

THE FUTURE OF DESKTOP REVEALED

Fonts as system helpers. Software in suites. Applications only by activation. Images only in megapixels. Print as a tributary of the web. What kind of desktop world are we heading into?

by Dan Brill

Let's take a quick look back at the Desktop Age, which for all intents and purposes began in 1985 with the introduction of Adobe PostScript.

This 18-year period divides rather neatly into three six-year epochs; 1985-1991 saw the development of low end black-and-white printing, with the first PostScript fonts and initial versions of page layout applications. Between 1991 and 1997 came the refinement of high end desktop color print tools and utilities, the emergence of Adobe Photoshop and QuarkXPress as the premier desktop graphics applications, multimedia production on the desktop,

the beginning of computer-to-plate in commercial printing, and, of course, the materialization of the web as a force with which to be reckoned. From 1997 through to 2003, we witnessed the explosion of the Internet and its rapid adoption around the globe as a vehicle for low end digital delivery (including the rise of spam), as the printing industry slowly sagged into a lethargic state, despite its wholesale migration to CTP.

It would seem that we're due to begin a new epoch in desktop graphics—but what significant developments will demarcate the next six years?



WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH FONTS?

As the hallmark of professional quality graphic design, expert typography has, sadly, become a minor requirement. However, fonts are still a fundamental building block of page creation (and they're also far and away the most problematic element in the print production workflow).

I can remember discussions from years ago about why fonts and font management couldn't be more tightly integrated into the operating system. Part of the answer seemed to point at font vendors, who viewed this idea as a threat. If fonts were essentially married to the OS, how long would it take before they would be perceived as another \$99 add-on?

That was then, and this is now.

By the end of this year, Apple will release OS X Panther, which will incorporate Font Book (www.apple.com/macosx/panther/font_book.html), its new system level font manager. Apple has been taking a very low key approach with Font Book, suggesting that it's not designed for high end users—and maybe they're right. But the idea of managing fonts at the system level has already tweaked the interest of many designers, and Apple has promised to sweeten the pie with a collection of new typefaces bundled with Panther.

And haven't we been looking at that non-operational "Buy Fonts" button on the OS X Fonts Panel for quite a while? And hasn't Apple demonstrated its mass marketing savvy with the iTunes Store? Is there any reason to think Apple wouldn't take this model and apply it to the font market, partnering with major font suppliers to supply typefaces online to the Mac community? What's so bad about that?

Looking for a special font, but just can't find the right one in your own set? Just preview Apple's library in Font Book, find what you want, and drag-and-drop it into your drive—and it automatically gets charged to your Apple account.

But how much is a font worth?

Adobe, Corel and Microsoft have been chucking free fonts into application packages for a long time. Font vendors, on the other hand, still value individual font families at hundreds of dollars each. Is there a magic price point for typefaces where volume sales and marketing can balance off mass marketing discounts?

Meanwhile, Diamondsoft's Font Reserve font manager has been absorbed by Extensis, somehow to co-exist with Suitcase, while Alsoft resurfaces with MasterJuggler for OS X, and FontAgent must now share Cocoa status (whatever that means, since there are rumours that Panther won't really care).

And in China and Japan, a red PostScript dragon is rising—Kanji OpenType fonts in OS X, which may spark the migration of this huge market to desktop.

NOW THAT THE REVOLUTION IS OVER...

Why do we create pages? That's easy—for screen display or for print. A screen page can be browser-based or application-based—

and some even do both. A print page can be high res or low res, and color is no restriction. But in either case, content creators will be working in a new environment in the epoch now upon us.

The desktop revolution is over. In the next few years, we'll be watching Adobe, Apple, Macromedia and Microsoft—the only major players left standing in the desktop arena—battle for user control through the appeal and usability and comfort of interface and interoperability. Users will augment their personal interfaces with third party applications, utilities, plug-ins and extensions to customize their particular working needs and preferences. No longer is it a matter of comparing application to application individually. Instead we must choose a desktop environment—just as the Xerox PARC team foresaw it.

It's now the battle of the software suites. Microsoft just brought out a Professional edition of its MS Office suite for OS X at US\$499, the same price as the old "standard" version (which is now a hundred bucks less). Macromedia Studio MX 2004 is here, with heavy emphasis on interapplication integration. Apple has had iLife almost forever, it seems, but now the new Final Cut 4 and DVD Studio Pro 2 suites for prosumers and up have just been released. And Adobe—which in its pricing structure has long emphasized Collections over standalone products—is promoting Adobe Studio with the description, "...for creative professionals working in print, web, digital video, or digital imaging"—www.adobe.com says this new marketing wrinkle is coming soon.

And QuarkXPress 6 has come, and gone. Even though Quark users will persist for many years—just as Illustrator users have carried on—QuarkXPress is now a legacy application.

And InDesign 3 will seal Quark's fate.

THE PRICE OF ADMISSION

Here's a dirty little secret that everybody should know about by now: embedded software activation.

Welcome to the digital dongle, goodbye casual "copies". No more sharing programs with friends and family (but, ahem! we always knew this was "technically illegal"). No real need to keep backups either—the latest version is right there online, just waiting to be downloaded and reactivated.

Microsoft has been quietly using product activation for over two years. Adobe just completed activation market testing in Australia with Photoshop 7, and the next phase is certainly set for its big North American product launch in the fall. Likewise, QuarkXPress 6, released in June, is strictly licensed for one CPU per copy—no moving back and forth between computers. Macromedia started testing a new EULA (End User License Agreement) this summer with Macromedia Contribute; at www.macromedia.com/software/activation/presentation, the company has a good presentation of its planned implementation.

For a certain group of cybernauts, product activation will be anathema: no more key generators, pumping out bogus product registration codes, and no more swapping registration numbers. It



will also create a monumental divide between “pre-activation” and “post-activation” versions—and users.

Maybe this will be a boon for the professional market. Certainly it means that only those who play by the new rules of engagement will realize the benefits of new product features and workflows.

WHO'S WINNING THE MEGAPIXEL WARS?

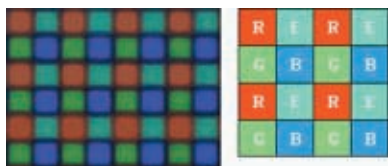
Pages can't do without pictures, and digital format images will be the first choice. But when it comes to the digital camera market, even a week can be long enough to make you lose your bearings.

Canon started this summer with the most eagerly awaited digital camera out there, the Powershot G5. This little number was a 5-megapixel marvel, as high resolution as Canon was prepared to go with CCDs. Even Nikon was saying that it was time to stop escalating the megapixel war—also indicating that they'd like to stop at 5 megapixels and concentrate on improving how the CCD info would be interpolated.

As 5-megapixel cameras started to appear, however, it became obvious that something was wrong.

Both Canon and Nikon had switched to smaller 1/8” sensors from the previous 2/3” ones. However, smaller sensors being pushed to read more made for much higher noise in the images than last year's 4-megapixel models!

Then news started to leak from a Taiwanese website that Sony (maker of the 1/8” chip) was working on an 8-megapixel 2/3” CCD (the ICX456). In June, Sony announced a brand new approach to gathering color info, a four-color RGB+E grid (Red, Green, Blue + Emerald) instead of the old video-tech RGB system. Within a month, it was announced that Sony was coming out with the new Cybershot DSC-F828 (to be available by mid-November), using the new chip and this four-color grid.



Sony's new four-color digital capture system is based on RGB+E—red, green, blue and emerald. Sony says this setup produces color that is better balanced and looks truer to the human eye.

But wait!

On Aug 20th, with no pre-release fanfare, Canon announced the September release of the EOS Digital Rebel/EOS 300D, a 6.3 mega-pixel CMOS camera priced at under US\$1,000 (~CDN\$1,400) including zoom lens!! Canon has declared the EOS 300D to be the single most important consumer SLR since the AE-1 in 1976!

Is Canon dropping its new models before they even get into stores? Canon couldn't keep up with the demand for its D-60, and discontinued this model to make way for the 10D! Popular consensus now is that the EOS10D (6.3mp, US\$1,400) will be upgraded before Christmas with an 8mp chip (and maybe a remote release?), letting the REBEL/300D flood electronic superstores around the world.

Nobody is going to believe everything that shows up on the Internet, but it sure is beginning to look like leaks out of Japan and Taiwan are forcing changes in marketing strategies faster than sales figures used to. In this savagely competitive digital camera market, rumours will probably kill more than a few models long before they're allowed to sit on the shelves.

PRINT AND THE WEB

Think global. The Internet gives almost anyone the ability to communicate within minutes or seconds with up to a billion people. Every day. Virtually free. And publishers, designers, photographers and creatives are the final links in this communication chain.

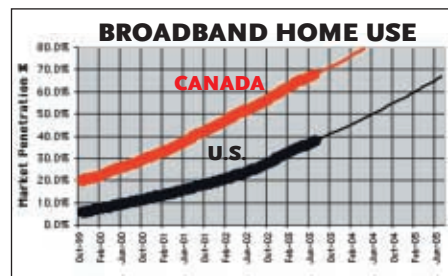
But where does printing fit into the new world order of graphic communications?

The graphic arts industry, which has been stagnating since before the 9-11 disaster, has suffered even worse since. In July, Heidelberg, the world's largest press manufacturer, posted consecutive net quarterly losses—the first in its 153-year history—as sales slumped by almost 20%. Quebecor World, the world's largest printing company, reported a loss of CDN\$100 million for the past quarter, along with plans to eliminate 1,000 jobs. Vancouver-based Creo, the world's leading supplier of computer-to-plate systems, barely broke even in its most recent operating period, following losses in the year before.

Are these the signs of a temporary slowdown in the printing industry—or that print has lost its position as the backbone of graphic communications?

With broadband use in North America climbing steadily (see the chart above), there seems to be little doubt that the world will continue to rely more and more on digital communications—not paper—for its information fix. Graphic designers and publishers now have little choice but to prepare to work in both environments. And, with a working set of open standards finally in place, the corporate masters of desktop are readying their new toolsets and technologies for the next era in desktop graphics.

Print will not die. But it will yield to cyberspace as the dominant communication vehicle. It will become a feeder, pointing users to online sources and interactive tools. It will be a specialized medium for customized information through variable data technologies, as the web migrates to broadband delivery of rich media content. And those who produce graphic communications will be forced to move with the shifting sands of technology, or suffer the fate of typographers and color separators. 🌐



High speed Internet connections permeate North America homes, and Canada leads the way with a penetration of about 70% (second globally only to Korea); as at July, 2003, 39% of U.S. homes had broadband, 70% of offices had access to high speed connectivity. [Source: www.websiteoptimization.com]