

The original preflight tool does PDF, too

Preflight Software
Markzware FlightCheck Pro 5

by Lerrick Starr

It's 5 a.m. and everybody is mad at me. I explain that it was just an eagle screaming, but that simply isn't good enough for them.

Like all Mac people, when I sat down to run my first field tests of FlightCheck Professional 5 by Markzware, I launched it without turning a single page in the manual. Opting for the default settings, I opened a 16-page Quark file and let the magic happen. I didn't realize that the volume was at the max, and worse yet, I'd forgotten that FlightCheck announces completion of a job using the eagle's cry.

It had been five years since I'd used FlightCheck, yet it launched like an old friend. I was presented with a simple tool bar with eleven icons and a look that was decidedly OS 9-ish.

To test application files, you simply click 'Open', pick your file, and let it run using the default preferences. When you hear the warcry, the analysis is complete.

A pair of windows opened containing file content info and error descriptions, in excruciating detail. But these windows were very much OS X-ish. I was a little confused, and I had to doublecheck whether FlightCheck was running in OS X or Classic. However, none of this detracted from the plethora of file information, warnings, and error messages generated. This software can make you feel incompetent in the blink of an eye.

PREFLIGHT—WHAT IT MEANS

Until the PDF revolution four or five years ago, imaging directly from a DTP application was the exclusive methodology for generating film. And application files were very troublesome—most required the artist to include the images and fonts, together with the PageMaker, QuarkXPress or other

layout file. Then links were updated, fonts installed, and copy checked for reflow (a fairly common occurrence).

Preflight originated as a process, an agreed upon set of shop procedures that minimized the production of faulty film.

Automated preflight by a dedicated application was an inevitability, and the original FlightCheck was the first result. It came on a floppy! The Pro version has since developed into a customizable and usable tool, sophisticated in execution but simple in operation.

NEAR ANAL-RETENTIVE DETAIL

Ground Control settings direct FlightCheck's entire operation, and there are two modes of operation—application type or PDF (x-1a or x-3). To access the PDF tests, you must File>Load FlightPlan, manoeuvre to your FlightCheck 5 installation, and select the PDF.fpc.xml which is tucked in the Data folder.

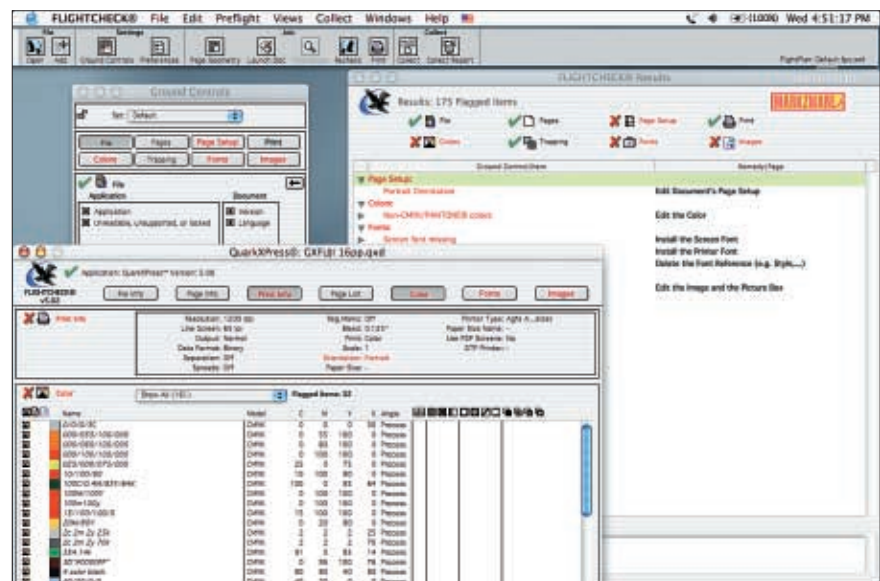
To appreciate the detail of the reports, let's examine the tests performed on a single image. In our XPress file, the front page image was tested for size, type, mode (color space), DPI, X-scale%, Y-scale%, and resolution.

Then there are a series of icons to denote other issues with the image related to the application—background set to none; image containing a clipping path; picture box or image skew; horizontal or vertical flip; image containing a halftone screen or transfer function—and the list goes on.

Each report examines seven specific areas of file construction. File Info and Page Info have complete stats on the job. Print Info lists all the basics for resolution and line screen, separation status, bleed, and more, while Page List offers a review on a page-by-page basis (a double-click on an individual page pops up a detailed report of its elements). Color is as extraordinarily detailed as the picture info, if not more so. Fonts identifies system fonts, missing printer and screen fonts, font usage in the document, and whether they appear in an EPS file.

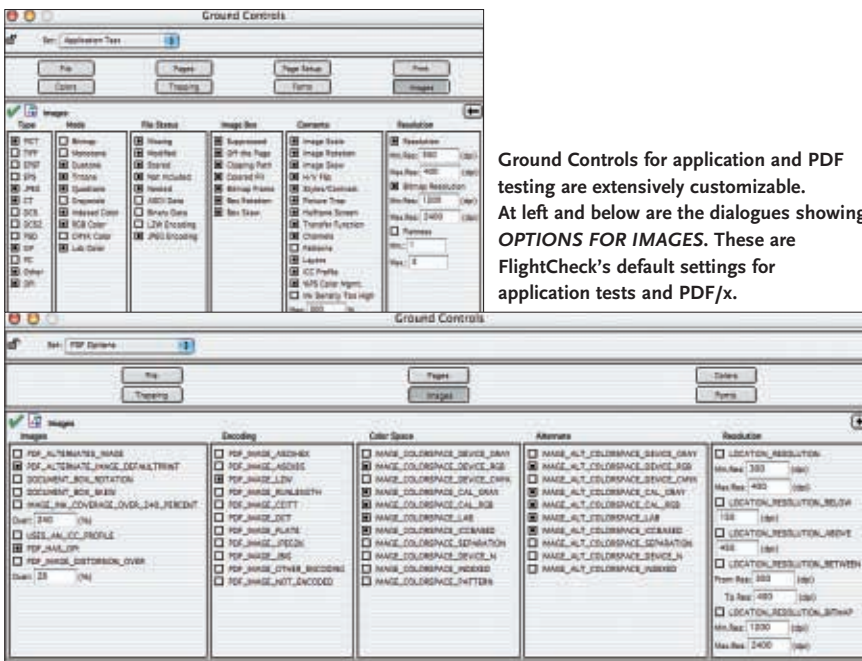
THE TEST FILE

The 16-page Quark test file was a live job which had ultimately been printed from a PDF, and all the issues present were originally solved by creating a PDF and completing file prep using a combination of Enfocus Pitstop (www.enfocus.com) and QuiteABoxOfTricks (www.quite.com). So the original status of the file was unknown.





To **FLIGHTCHECK PDFS**, go to File>Load FlightPlan and pick up the PDF.fpc.xml in the Data folder of your installation. Note that you cannot load the *.fpc.xml files for application and PDF preflighting simultaneously. FlightCheck's PDF/X-1a and PDF/X-3 specifications come preconfigured. Here we see that the test file failed to meet PDF/X-1a specs.



Ground Controls for application and PDF testing are extensively customizable. At left and below are the dialogues showing **OPTIONS FOR IMAGES**. These are FlightCheck's default settings for application tests and PDF/x.

I ran FlightCheck on the application file, and it was problematic. There were scaled images, ICC profiles, and image resolutions considered out-of-range. It found a TruMatch color without a CMYK equivalent and output settings for a 65-line screen and 1200 dpi resolution. But the original job was run from a PDF and these issues had been dealt with there.

The collected Quark job weighed in at

55.2MB. Spun into a PDF, it dropped an incredible 40MB to 15.3MB. With fonts and images aboard, link-related issues for images and fonts disappear. I knew it was all there, but what shape was it in?

PDF/X TESTS AND CRITERIA

In essence the PDF/x-1a standard is obsolete. It is based on PDF version 1.3, but the PDF spec is now at version 1.5. As PDF

1.3, only the barest set of attributes is allowed—CMYK, page box definitions, output intent set, trapping defined, and a few other bits and pieces. Image resolution is not part of the standard (but preflighters can optionally test for minimum settings). But x-1a files work beautifully and are welcome anywhere, because they're imageable under almost any circumstances.

The default sets for testing application files or PDF/x1-3 (or x-3) in FlightCheck establish a good baseline. But too much info can be a hindrance. All FlightCheck tests can be toggled on and off, allowing for customized setups based on printing environments or customer criteria.

If the detail presented isn't enough, there are many additional checks that can be selected, including DeviceN color, ink density, and acceptable resolution ranges.

BUILT-IN COMPETITION VS THE OLD PRO

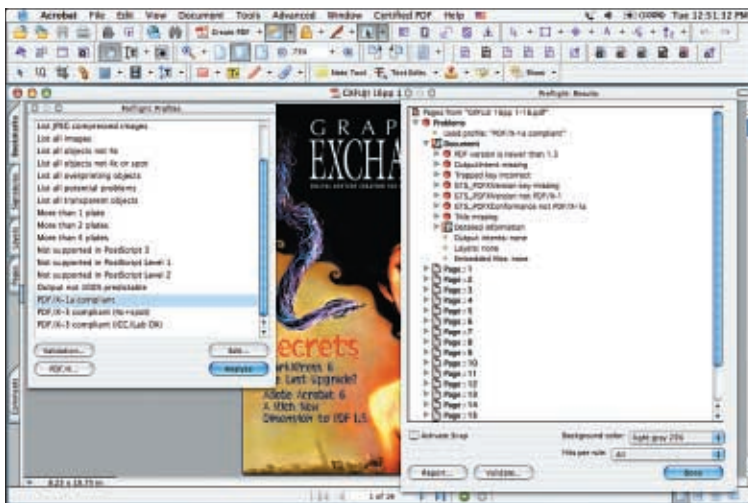
At the time my test file went to press, Enfocus' PitStop Professional plug-in for Acrobat and the callas-designed preflight tools built into Acrobat 6 offered roughly an equivalent range of options, both including PDF/x-1a and x-3. However, neither offers application file support.

The callas preflight tools are well-integrated into Acrobat. Almost any manner of test profile can be configured from a robust list of rules and conditions, and there are built-in profiles for PDF/x-1a, PDF/3 (four-color plus spot) and PDF/3 (ICC/LAB).

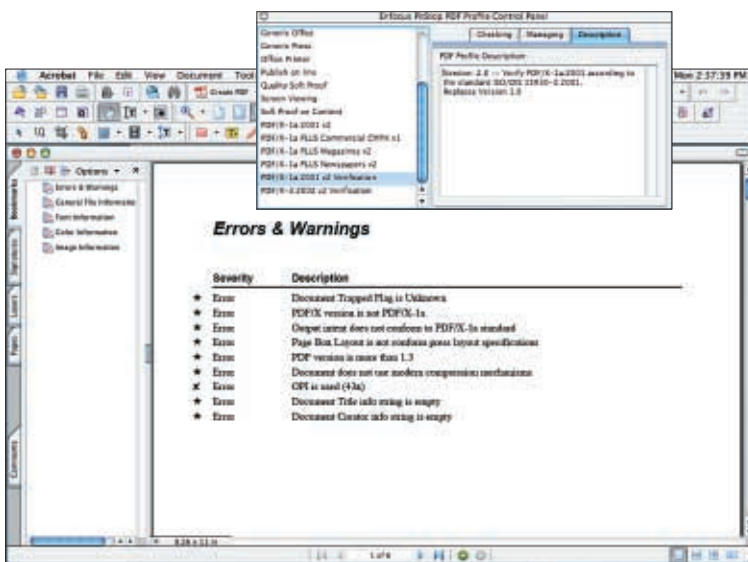
The Acrobat 6 preflight analysis ran in just a fraction of FlightCheck Pro's time (which was approximately two minutes on a 500MHz G4 Titanium with 512MB RAM). Acrobat found a wealth of problems with our test PDF—apparently everything was wrong. Unfortunately, as with FlightCheck Pro, problems are only reported. No repairs or changes to the file condition are possible during verification. However, there was a relatively easy way to correct the file's deficiencies and yield a PDF/x-1a final file.

Open Document>Preflight and click on the Save as PDF/x-1a button. The resulting dialogue allows for limited customiza-

ACROBAT'S PREFLIGHT ANALYSIS displays the results and marks failures in red. It takes a bit of rooting around to expose the details, but the preflight log can be saved to PDF, XML or ASCII text.



PITSTOP'S PDF preflight control panel offers six options for PDF/X preflighting, four of which alter the original file to either make it conforming or to add enhancements to its printability. It's fast, and the errors in the resulting report are dynamically linked to the identified problem.



tion of the specification in the area of image resolution. The saved file now passed the PDF/x-1a test when verified. It was ready to go.

PitStop is the granddaddy of Acrobat plug-ins. Its preflight suite has always been extensive, with profiles for a variety of printing conditions. PitStop Pro 5 brought out five new profiles to verify PDF/x's and four additional profiles that fix file defects, making them conform to standards.

PitStop offers PDF/x-1a standards customized for commercial, magazine and newspaper environments and tailoring each profile to suit. For example, the PDF/x-1a PLUS Magazines v2 profile brings everything into x-1a spec but limits the number of pages in the file to one.

SOMETHING STRANGE

I was surprised by a few of FlightCheck's characteristics. I thought it was a little poky, and I never really got over the interface's split personality—sort of half and half, OS-wise.

But something else odd occurred after I saved the test file as a PDF/x file in Acrobat. Afterwards, both Acrobat and PitStop reported that the file conformed to the spec. But when thrown at FlightCheck one more time, it failed to pass, with two errors. The version was reported as wrong, and the PDF/x version was invalid.

To my surprise, when opened in TextEdit, the PDF reported itself as v1.5 in the first line. It appears that FlightCheck was technically right, but I can't say that this

particular error would effect imaging in any way. But something was sure amiss!

PREFLIGHT, POSTFLIGHT

In the world of PDF, FlightCheck has competition. With Acrobat's built-in utility, or the speed and facility of PitStop, FlightCheck's additional detail offers only marginal advantages. Still, the interface and reporting windows are clearer and easier to understand, and the balloon help is extensive and explanatory.

But in the land of application preflight, FlightCheck has few peers. It is thorough to a fault, and lists fourteen different types of application files that it can open, while its PDF competitors deal with one well-defined format. For that, it can be considered the Swiss army knife of preflight, and I think it's pretty sharp.

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MARKZWARE FLIGHTCHECK PROFESSIONAL 5

System requirements

Macintosh
Mac OS 9.2, OS X v10.1 or higher
Power Mac G3 or higher
128MB RAM

Windows

Windows 98, 2000, XP, ME and NT 4.0
Pentium 233 MHz or higher
128MB RAM

List Price US\$489 (~CDN\$660)

Markzware www.markzware.com