A desktop publishing package can help you produce anything from a simple leaflet through to a fully-fledged book or magazine. This month we look at the latest packages, and tell you how to pick the right one for you

Today most word processors can do a lot more than simply edit words. A typical program enables you to mix text and graphics, create newspaper-style columns, box-out headlines and panels, draw shapes and more. So why would you ever need a dedicated desktop publishing (DTP) application as well?

Well, let's start with that word 'publishing'. If you want to create more than a hundred or so copies of a document, then a home/small office printer won't be up to the job. You'll need to go to a printing firm and professional DTP packages support several features – such as the production of colour separations – geared to outside printing. Then there's document management: DTP offers features for organising books into chapters, keeping track of illustrations and linking text 'frames' so you can break stories up on to various pages, newspaper-style. You'll also get much better typographic control, both for creating special effects, such as rotating text or creating logos, as well as modifying the appearance of text in columns.

Of course, once you have decided that you do need a DTP package, life starts to get complicated. You can buy one incorporating the above features for less than £50. Alternatively, you can pay over £1,000. This month we strip away the mystique to help you decide what features you need to meet your own publishing requirements.

Output

Though output is the last step of the publishing process, it's the first you should consider when buying a package. If you're publishing via an outside printing firm, the first question is whether you need colour. Commercial printing is done by using a separate plate for each colour, either for spot colours – solid areas of a specific ink, or process colour – a spectrum of colours created by overprinting tiny dots of cyan, magenta, yellow and black inks, as seen in photographs. If you want commercial printing in colour, the software you buy should support both varieties of separations.

PRESS GANG
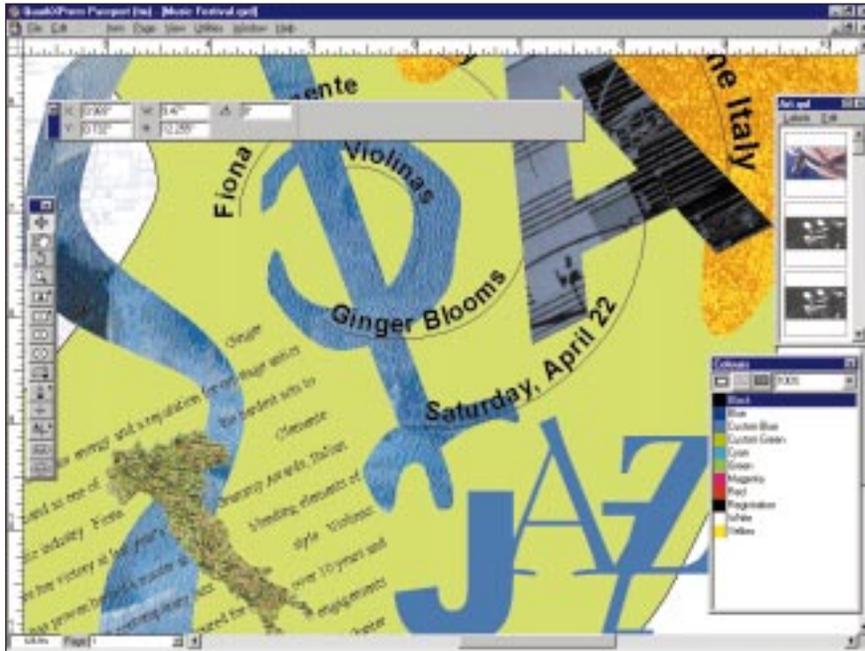
Quark XPress – typographic tweaking for top professionals.

Sticking to the subject of colour, one of the big problems in DTP is consistency – printed output can look very different from the display you view on screen. High-end DTP supports colour profiles which match scanner, screen and printed output.

Other aids to consistent spot colour are library systems such as Pantone: the designer has books of numbered

Power on a budget – Power Publisher includes drawing and photo-editing as well as the DTP shown here.
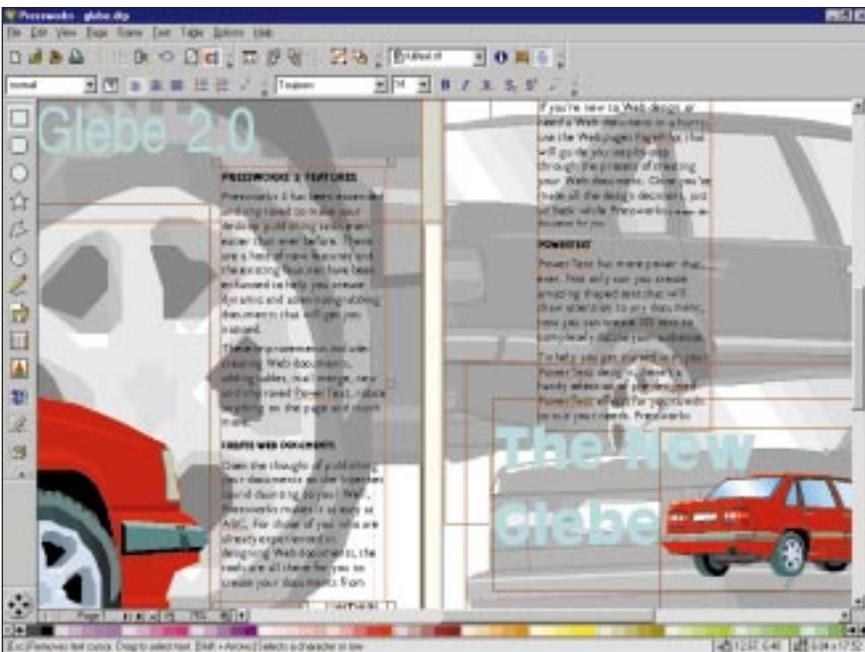
swatches, rather like a paint sample card, that show exactly how specific inks will look on various papers. The good news here is that all but Microsoft Publisher and Ipublish offer both types of separation and colour libraries.

Drawing and typography

All DTP software offers some drawing tools and your choice of package should depend on your specific needs. Page-Maker, Quark XPress, Ventura and Power Publisher also let you use shapes as 'containers' for text. Ventura, unsurprisingly given its Corel ownership, has the best range of drawing tools. For typographical control, Quark offers very high precision, with accuracy to

.001mm, though PagePlus comes close with .1mm precision. Practically all DTP software will let you rotate text to any angle and Quark, for example, also lets you fit a line of text to a curve, or fill letters with a pattern or picture.

Text and document control

A sure sign of good page design – espe-

Output options

For small runs of home, small business or community publications, a colour inkjet printer – and some patience – can produce perfectly adequate results. We recommended the Epson Stylus 600 in our awards this year.

The next step up, for larger print runs or a larger format, is an 'Instant Print' shop – these use industrial-grade colour laser printers. A run of 250 A3 posters would cost around £1 each (inc VAT) on a digital colour printer.

For even larger runs the best bet is to use traditional four-colour printing. This is a two-stage process – though it's now common to find both under one roof. First, a bureau needs to produce film output for each separation, on ultra-high (2400dpi) resolution laser printers, known as imagesetters. From these films the actual printing plates are produced, and the paper is fed through a press four times using the different plates and ink colours. For 2,500 copies of the same poster, this would cost around 25p (inc VAT) per copy.

If you want Web as well as paper publishing, then several of the products reviewed here will produce HTML output, but you may need additional software to get these loaded up to a Web site.

If you're exclusively concerned with Web publishing, however, you'd be better off with bespoke Web authoring software such as Microsoft FrontPage or Adobe PageMill.

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cially with text in columns – is consistent text colour. This doesn't refer to the actual colour spectrum but the visual evenness of text. Lines of an uneven length (when left-aligned) or 'stretched' (when justified or aligned to both margins) look awful and are hard to read, as are blocks of text with rivers of white space meandering down them. Though there are simple rules, such as balancing column width and font size, it's often necessary to hyphenate words. Most DTP software will do this automatically but the degree of control varies. In general, the more you pay, the more you get, in terms of avoiding awkward hyphenations or consecutive lines ending in hyphens.

If you're publishing a book rather than a brochure, it's important to be able to create indexes and tables of contents. All the professional products will do this, but only PagePlus offers these at budget level. Although all DTP applications will let you edit text 'in-place', it's often far more convenient to load stories into a text editor – especially when they are spread over several pages. Only Ventura, PageMaker and PagePlus come with a built-in editor.

A very important concept in DTP is that of master pages. These are templates containing column layouts, headers and other common page furniture that appear on many pages. What distinguishes the professionals from the amateurs is multiple master pages. If you're working on a magazine (such as this one), you'll probably want to have a variety of layouts. With multiple master pages, these can be applied with a single mouse click.

Another useful feature is the use of libraries or scrapbooks as storage areas for pieces of text and graphics – this is especially useful for logos and page ornaments that you are likely to use more than once but not always in the same position on the page. High-end packages,

DTP made easy with Ipublish's browser-style interface.
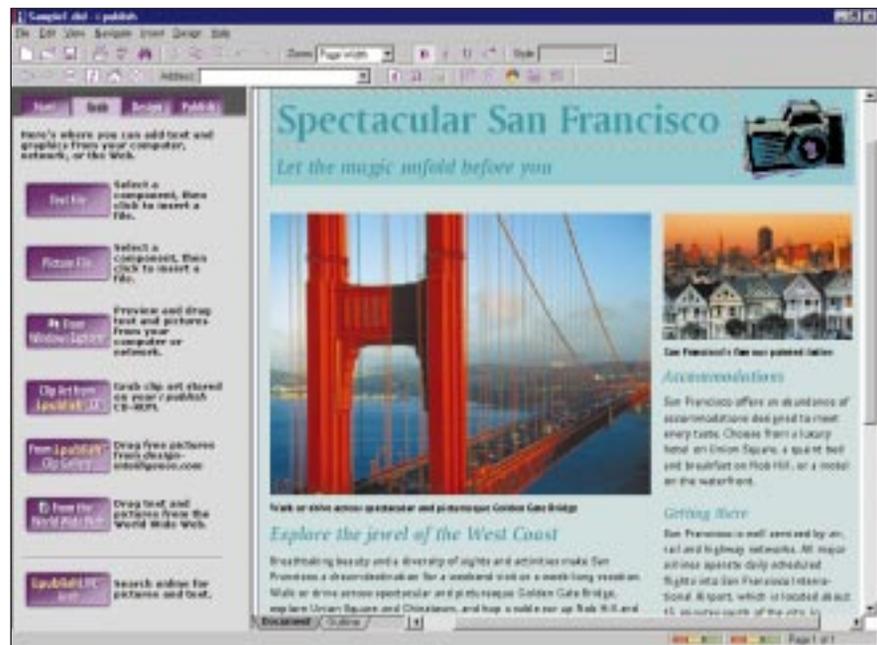
like PageMaker, Quark and Ventura all offer this facility but the only budget package to include it is PagePlus.

Finally you may want to produce different versions of the same publication – a manual in different languages or a poster showing different dates and venues. PageMaker, Ventura and FrameMaker all have ways of combining these into a single conditional or layered document.

Resources

Apart from the DTP program itself, most applications come with extra resources and programs. Of these, the most important are fonts. Your publication is going to look very dull if you just stick to the standard Windows typefaces and it is also important to remember that a few, well-chosen, high-quality fonts are better than a hotchpotch of typefaces.

Of the high-end applications, Ventura offers a generous 1,000, Adobe FrameMaker and Pagemaker come with

220 each, and Quark XPress is the definitive Scrooge of the pack with no fonts at all. At the lower end, Publisher comes with the highest quality typefaces, with PagePlus offering the most variety of 'own-brand' fonts. Clip-art (ready-made drawings) probably won't be of much interest to professionals who will be using original artwork, but can be a valuable asset for the rest of us.

Again it's Ventura that scores best at the high end. Of the budget applications, Microsoft Publisher has the best balance of quality and quantity. Other extras can include photo-editing software, support for Plug-Ins (third-party add-ons) and templates or Wizards for filling in the blanks in pre-designed publications – again, this is probably of interest mainly to non-professionals. At the budget end, Publisher and Ipublish offer the best in terms of design quality.

DTP software

DTP software compared

|	Model	XPress 4	PageMaker 6.5	FrameMaker 5.5.3	Ventura 8	PagePlus 5	Publisher 98	Power Publisher	Ipublish 2
Product	Manufacturer	Quark Systems	Adobe	Adobe	Corel	Serif	Microsoft	GSP	Design Intelligence
	Contact	01483 454397	0181 606 4000	0181 606 4000	0800 973189	0800 376 7070	0345 002000	01480 496575	001 206 343 7797
	Web address	www.quark.com	www.adobe.com	www.adobe.com	www.corel.com	www.serif.com	www.microsoft.com	www.gspltd.co.uk	www.ipublish.com
	Price (inc VAT)	£1,551 (multilingual), £1,169 (English)	£495	£517	£374	£99.95	£99.99	£49.95	£59.00
Features	Table of contents & indexing	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
	Colour libraries	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	○
	Colour separations	●	●	●	●	●	Spot only	●	○
	Wizards	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	●
	Text editor	○	●	○	●	●	○	○	○
	Master pages	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple	Pair	Pair	Pair	○
	HTML output	○	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
	Fonts	0	220	220	1,000	400	179	50	44
	Clip-art	0	0	750	40,000	17,000	13,000	20,000	1,000
Ratings	Documentation	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★
	Ease of use	★★★★	★★★★	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★
	Features	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★
	Value for money	★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★
	Overall	★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★

★ = Poor ★★ = Below average ★★★ = Average ★★★★ = Good ★★★★★ = Excellent

○ No ● Yes

Ease of use

A powerful program doesn't have to be hard to use. Of the high-end products, both Quark Xpress and PageMaker have comparatively simple interfaces. Ventura bristles with toolbars but is not quite as complex as it looks. FrameMaker relies on a proprietary interface and is really aimed at the corporate in-house publishing market, rather than general DTP.

Ipublish aims its 'choose a layout and fill in the placeholders' approach at the absolute beginner. Almost everything, from resizing graphics to applying colour schemes is done automatically, using a Web-browser-style interface. This means the ambitious user will soon outgrow the program. Microsoft Publisher, though also aimed at 'first-timers', offers more flexibility, but has limited 'pro' features.
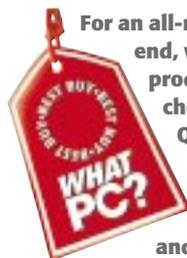
For an all-round solution at the top end, we have three excellent products with little to choose between them. Quark XPress is the acknowledged leader in magazine publishing but it is expensive and offers little in the way of extras such as clip-art and fonts. Consequently, its appeal is limited to those organisations who are already running Quark, or those who 'must have' the industry leader. Both PageMaker and Ventura offer far better value for money for a high-end start-up solution. Despite the added value of the latter, we reckon the former offers a cleaner interface whilst sacrificing little in the way of high-end features. Consequently, Adobe PageMaker gets our Best Buy award.

At entry level, competition is fierce. For sheer ease of use, Ipublish takes the prize, with Microsoft Publisher coming a close second. Both, however, offer few professional features and limited scope to those who are prepared to make an effort to learn about DTP. So it's a neck-and-neck race between PagePlus and Power Publisher. Both of these packages offer a lot of power features for the price. In our opinion, Power Publisher is the more versatile (as long as you're not publishing books), and is better aimed at the UK market. Hence it gets our Recommended award.

Tim Nott

Hardware essentials

You don't need a superfast PC for DTP – although, as with any application, it helps. All the packages here will run on a 100MHz Pentium with 16Mb of RAM, though more memory will always speed things up, especially if you are using lots of high-resolution images. The greatest favour you can do yourself is to get the biggest and best monitor you can afford. 17 inches should be regarded as the minimum for serious work, and a 21in screen will let you view a double-page spread at almost life size. As luck would have it, there's a 17in monitor roundup in this very issue!

You also need to think about importing photographs. The advent of digital cameras has made this a lot easier, but be warned – the output quality of budget devices, though adequate for Web publishing, isn't really good enough for print. Though there are alternatives – such as putting films onto PhotoCD, FlashPix, or other electronic formats, a scanner is extremely useful and for most publishing a 300dpi output is adequate. For top-quality work, low-res scanned 'placeholders' can be replaced by high-quality scans of the original photos by the output bureau. Finally, even if you're using a printing firm, you will need a colour printer to produce proofs of your work.