

Designer goods

These days, publishing is anyone's game. Alistair Dabbs rounds up the latest desktop publishing programs, ranging from entry-level software designed for creating template-based newsletters and flyers to packages used by the professionals

Desktop publishing, otherwise known as DTP, is the process of designing page layouts for print. It's a bit of a misnomer – 'publishing' involves a good deal more than just designing pages – but the term was coined when practically all typesetting was still handled by specialist companies. DTP changed all this by letting you prepare quality print publications on your own computer.

Essentially, a DTP program is a cross between a word processor and a vector graphics package. It provides integrated text and page design tools, so that you can work with flowing text columns and graphics all in one place. For example, you can spellcheck and stylise text as in a word processor, then tweak and rotate it as in a graphics program.

There's a clear division between DTP software intended for design studios, publishing companies and editorial offices and the cheaper packages for home and business users. While the former group provides powerful and versatile page design, the latter comprises an almost innumerable variety of low-cost programs for designing anything from greetings cards and posters to websites. Here we take a closer look at both classes of software, ranging in price from £50 to £800.

Entry-level packages

Adobe PageMaker 7.0

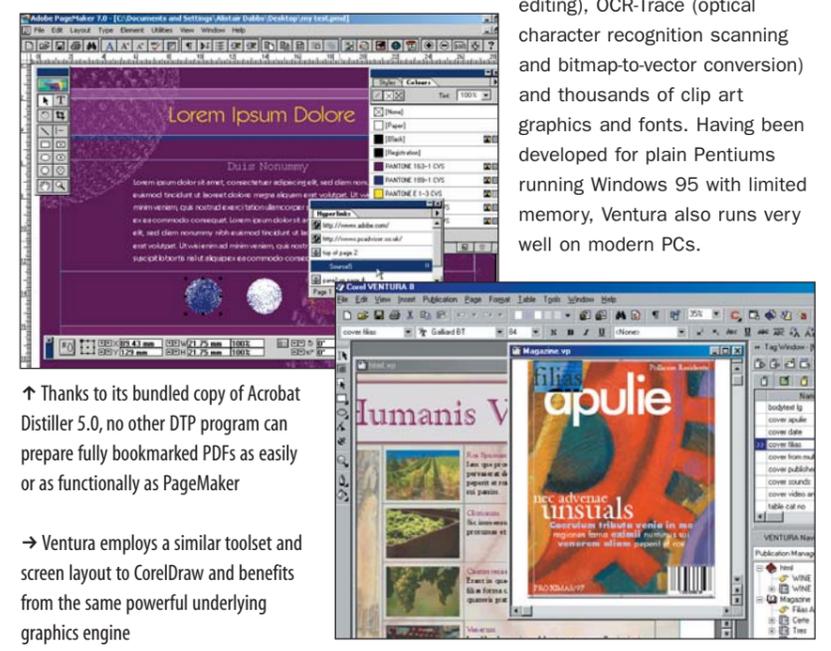
If 'heavy metal' was a term originally conceived to describe Led Zeppelin, 'desktop publishing' was coined back in the 80s to describe Aldus PageMaker (now in Adobe's stable). But after losing the battle with QuarkXPress 10 years ago to dominate the professional design world, PageMaker set its sights much lower. Adobe now targets the program at serious business and higher education buyers,

where quality and reliability, especially for PostScript printing, are more important than a modest price tag.

PageMaker is an unusual compromise between high- and low-end DTP. Its precision layout and intelligent kerning (letter spacing) put even QuarkXPress to shame, yet it also has reams of page templates and clip art like domestic DTP programs.

Its support for Acrobat's PDF (portable document format) is unparalleled, including a full copy of Distiller 5.0 rather than just a half-featured export filter. If you want to design publications for PDF, for instance, for the eBook format and visually impaired readers, PageMaker is the best.

Version 7.0 includes a word processor-style data merge for auto-personalising multiple documents and places native-format Photoshop 6.0 and Illustrator 10.0 files directly on the page. However, it looks a bit old fashioned, lacks a dynamic context-sensitive interface and drawing tools and is pricey at around £400 ex VAT.



↑ Thanks to its bundled copy of Acrobat Distiller 5.0, no other DTP program can prepare fully bookmarked PDFs as easily or as functionally as PageMaker

→ Ventura employs a similar toolset and screen layout to CorelDraw and benefits from the same powerful underlying graphics engine

Corel Ventura Publisher 8.0

Believe it or not, the original Ventura Publisher predates even PageMaker in the history of DTP. Now, however, Version 8.0 is a few years old and Corel has even removed it from its flagship product listing. It is still widely available, though, and offers exceptional value for money.

Ventura Publisher 8.0 occupies the same middle ground as PageMaker 7.0, being intended as a quality DTP package for business and certain professional users. It is much more powerful than PageMaker for on-the-page graphic design and image support, but is still not really a designer's program. Instead, it takes a tightly regimented approach to structured documents and long publications. If you like, it's a lower-end alternative to FrameMaker for producing textbooks and manuals, with a 'chapter' analogy for related Ventura files. A database publishing utility is included in the box.

Ventura supports SGML (standard generalised markup language) and comes with a copy of WordPerfect 8.0 to help you prepare SGML code. While it's hardly a cutting-edge web publishing solution, Ventura can be used to create good-looking web pages (including frames), complete with image mapping. It even exports certain effects to Java.

A heap of extras makes Ventura Publisher very good value. These include a full copy of PhotoPaint 8.0 (image-editing), OCR-Trace (optical character recognition scanning and bitmap-to-vector conversion) and thousands of clip art graphics and fonts. Having been developed for plain Pentiums running Windows 95 with limited memory, Ventura also runs very well on modern PCs.

ILLUSTRATION: JESS READ

Greenstreet Publisher 4.0

Although not as well known as Microsoft's DTP package of the same name, Greenstreet Publisher is just as good, easier to learn and use, and costs a good deal less. For business publishing it's a very strong contender; for home DTP there's absolutely no competition.

Publisher 4.0 is a graphical layout package, in which you can draw vector illustrations with Bézier tools, and fill them with gradients, patterns and textures, and of course, use type. Photo images can be

enhanced using a pop-up utility and you can apply effects filters, too. You'll almost never use the menus thanks to the big friendly button bars and intuitive tools. Any selected object can instantly be resized or rotated simply by dragging on the appropriate side or corner handle.

There are over 300 templates that contain what Greenstreet calls 'styles'. This makes it possible to switch between colour schemes or layouts even after you begin editing, roughly similar to using style sheets in a modern web editor.

Publisher 4.0 is also a web editor, although it's a very basic package. You can create clean multipage sites with links, but there's no facility for optimising graphics, creating animations or building in any dynamic content. There is, however, a powerful table editor complete with spreadsheet functions, 3D chart creation and a 3D logo utility.

There is a full version of Publisher 3.12 on this month's cover disc, plus a 60-day trial version of Publisher 4.2.

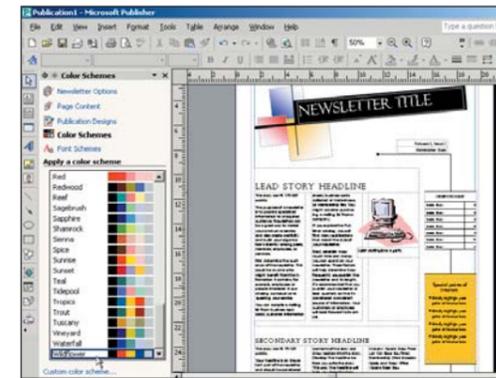
Microsoft Publisher 2002

Microsoft often comes in for a lot of stick for producing untidy, dawdling bloatware, but Publisher 2002 is not at all like this. It's a fast, functional and highly usable DTP package that will suit beginners and experts alike. It also runs a lot faster than certain previous incarnations of Publisher.

The program presents a wizard interface, which allows an easy, hands-off approach to print design. You simply choose a document type from the extensive libraries, enter some personal information and content details, and you're almost finished within a couple of minutes.

Advanced users can sidestep the wizards in favour of hands-on tools, which are highly automated and wonderfully context-sensitive – you'll visit the toolbar so rarely you'll probably forget it's even there. Best of all, the wizard interface can be kept onscreen as a Task pane. This means you can edit the content like an expert but still be able to do things such as change the entire colour scheme with a single mouse click.

Publisher 2002 integrates nicely with Office 2000 and, especially, Office XP, sharing many resources and templates.



↑ The joy of Microsoft Publisher is that DTP can be as automated or as hands-on as you like, with the Task pane always available for global document editing

Microsoft has also ensured the package supports high-end output devices by being able to export to raw PostScript and EPS (encapsulated PostScript) formats though, unfortunately, not Acrobat PDFs. It's a good page creator, though, and is one of the few DTP packages here that provides a quick web browser preview button.

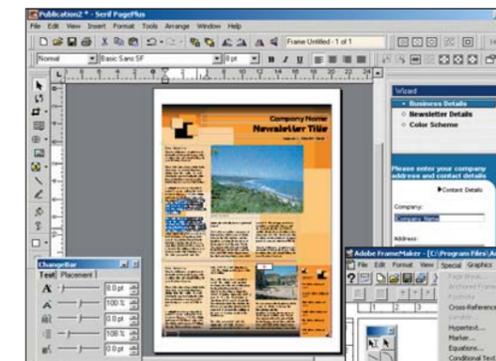
Overall, Publisher 2002 is the natural choice for the business user already running Microsoft Office who likes to work with customisable templates.

Serif PagePlus 7.0

Back in the early days of DTP, PagePlus was regarded as one of the pro-class contenders alongside PageMaker and QuarkXPress. Today, PagePlus is a broad-based page layout program for everyday people, rather than professional designers. Serif packs in lots of easy-to-use features and it's sold at half the price of its most obvious competitor, Microsoft Publisher 2002.

Despite its low-end label, the program shares plenty of features with professional design applications such as QuarkXPress and Adobe InDesign. In addition to free object rotation, you can enjoy unrestricted word-wrap around irregular objects and flow text inside oddly shaped boxes, such as spirals. QuickShapes lets you play with high-end functions such as drag-editable gradient fills, transparency and process separation output.

Beginners can use wizards to automate the creation of standard documents such as newsletters, brochures, certificates, greetings cards and websites, while advanced users can take advantage of its more conventional hands-on tools. However, the wizards are very powerful, picking up on 1,400 document templates, and you can actually keep a wizard running while manually customising the layout.



↑ You don't have to complete the wizard straight away in Serif PagePlus: you can type in the required information at any time using the Studio bar

→ You can index more than just keywords in FrameMaker. For example, you can also set up references and bibliographies

A large Studio bar to the right of the program window holds the main palettes tidily. Also, the universal pointer tool is fully context-sensitive so you don't have to keep going back to the tool palette.

Best of all, PagePlus isn't too demanding in terms of processing power, certainly not compared to Microsoft Publisher 2002. It'll run on just about any Pentium processor with just 32MB of RAM.

Professional packages

Adobe FrameMaker 6.0

When you have to produce a very long and complex publication, such as a technical manual or detailed corporate report, you need FrameMaker. It's the only shrinkwrapped DTP package that has been created specifically for handling this type of material. Designers will probably hate it.

Imagine the kind of tasks involved in managing and updating vast tomes of text and you'll appreciate FrameMaker's strengths. While some other programs provide fundamental support for indexing, footnotes and tables of contents, FrameMaker gives you far more control when it comes to big multifile projects.

Dealing with hierarchical sections, chapters, volumes and bibliographies is a breeze rather than a headache, as everything stays in sync when content is updated. Preparing a 1,000-page science textbook in anything else is inconceivable.

In terms of graphic design the program is limited. The layout tools are basic, but more than adequate for clean page designs for technical books. Newsletters and posters, however, will be hard work and as for magazine work, forget it.



Desktop publishing packages

Details	Price (ex VAT)	Minimum RAM/disk space	Create web pages/PDFs	Paragraph/character style sheets	Customisable kerning and tracking	Colour gradients	Object rotation	Dictionaries	Find/change	Table/story feature	Logotype	Clip art editor	Templates	Free fonts effects
Adobe FrameMaker 6.0 020 8606 4000 www.adobe.co.uk	£655	32MB/90MB	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y	N	Y	spellchecker, thesaurus	all text attributes	Y/N	N	N	18	N
Adobe InDesign 1.5 020 8606 4000 www.adobe.co.uk	£539	48MB/75MB	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y	Y	Y	spellchecker	all text attributes	N/N	N	N	N	N
Adobe PageMaker 7.0 020 8606 4000 www.adobe.co.uk	£400	32MB/175MB	Y/Y	Y/N	Y	N	Y	spellchecker	all text attributes	Y/Y	N	5,000 images	100+	150 Type 1
Corel Ventura Publisher 8.0 0800 581 028 www.corel.com	£350	16MB/80MB	Y/N	Y/Y	Y	Y	Y	spellchecker, thesaurus	all text attributes	Y/Y	N	41,000 images	80	1,000 TrueType and Type 1
Greenstreet Publisher 4.0 01480 496 789 www.gstsoft.com	£50	16MB/190MB	Y/N	Y/N	Y	Y	Y	spellchecker, thesaurus	text only	Y/N	Y	200 images	300	Y (number not given)
Microsoft Publisher 2002 0870 700 2000 www.microsoft.com/publisher	£103	32MB/180MB	Y/N	Y/N	Y	Y	Y	spellchecker, thesaurus	text only	Y/N	Y	Office XP Media CD	100+	Y (number not given)
QuarkXPress 4.11 0800 1787 8275 www.quark.co.uk	£800	16MB/12MB	N/N	Y/Y	Y	Y	Y	spellchecker	all text attributes	N/N	N	N	N	N
Serif PagePlus 7.0 0800 376 7070 www.serif.co.uk	£51	32MB/90MB	Y/N	Y/Y	Y	Y	Y	spellchecker, thesaurus	text only	Y/Y	Y	N	1,400	400 TrueType

There are none of Adobe's trademark floating tabbed palettes in the interface and the main toolbox is hidden unless you specifically open it. Even the main button bar across the top operates in an odd fashion – you can only switch between button sets rather than open multiple bars.

One of FrameMaker's key features is the ability to create huge websites from these long documents, as well as fully bookmarked, indexed and hyperlinked Acrobat PDF files. FrameMaker 6.0 comes supplied with a copy of WebWorks Publisher to help the HTML (hypertext markup language) and XML (extensible markup language) transition.

Adobe also sells an advanced SGML edition of FrameMaker, which costs a rather toe-curling £1,179 ex VAT. This version is popular with bodies such as archival departments, government institutions, the military and so on.

Adobe InDesign 1.5

InDesign is a high-end package for graphic designers as well as print production. Although you could prepare a newsletter or book with it, you'd be wasting your time: InDesign is for designing colourful adverts, brochures and glossy magazines.

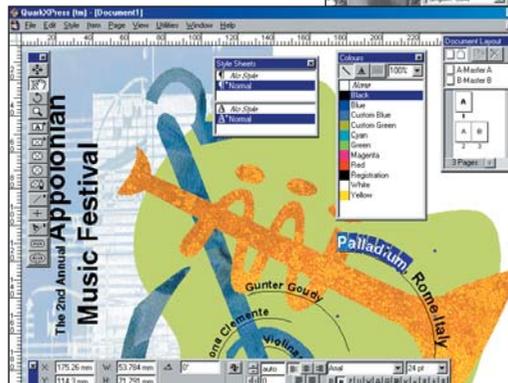
InDesign's big advantage over all the other packages is its advanced typography features, which offer the most sophisticated control over how text is presented on your pages. Punctuation marks which occur on the left- and righthand edges of a text column can be made to 'overhang', creating a more pleasing visual effect, while a Multiline Composer feature produces far superior text spacing and split-word hyphenation than QuarkXPress ever could.

The program benefits from tools nabbed from Adobe's other professional design packages, Illustrator and Photoshop. For example, you can create multicolour gradients, and there's an Illustrator-style Eyedropper tool which copies the properties of any object you click on (colours, line thickness, text attributes or whatever). These can be applied to another with just one click.

You even get Illustrator's freehand drawing tools, so you can scribble out a complex curved path or shape without plotting individual points, round off any sharp corners interactively with the

→ Adobe's trademark floating tabbed palettes are immediately recognisable, along with a beautiful onscreen preview as you work

↓ Text-on-a-curve, vector drawing tools and clean palette controls have been cutting-edge features in QuarkXPress for years



bland and unhelpful. For example, you can't place text or pictures on a page without first creating boxes to put them in. Switching between move, edit, zoom and rotate tools requires you to return to the toolbar each time or remember keyboard shortcuts. There are no button

Smooth tool and delete sections of the line you have drawn by using the Erase tool. Experts can also edit and move each Bézier node on a path individually.

Unlike QuarkXPress, the ability to export to HTML and Acrobat PDF formats is built in, although you can only create flat pages because of the lack of hyperlinking and table tools in the program. Another problem is the need for a fairly powerful PC (Pentium II is the absolute minimum) and as much RAM as you can spare to handle the slick features, neat interface and onscreen previews.

Be aware that version 2.0 of InDesign is just around the corner (it will be released in early 2002), bringing with it proper book indexing tools, full object transparency, table design and XML support. This is the one we're waiting for.

QuarkXPress 4.11

QuarkXPress has dominated professional DTP for the last 12 years or so by making itself as versatile as possible. Today, XPress is used by graphic designers everywhere for just about any print job you can imagine and by 99 percent of book and magazine publishing houses.

QuarkXPress is a very hands-on program with few automated features. This is great for production desks and studios where users know exactly what they need, but beginners often find Quark impossibly

bland and unhelpful. For example, you can't place text or pictures on a page without first creating boxes to put them in. Switching between move, edit, zoom and rotate tools requires you to return to the toolbar each time or remember keyboard shortcuts. There are no button

bars, floating palettes are far outnumbered by dialog windows and right-click context menus are almost non-existent. On the other hand, this is the package by which all others are judged. Quark provides precision text control and supports many image file formats, including those for high-end pre-press systems. Features include vector art tools, reliable colour gradients and there's even support for HiFi and other multi-ink mixes, such as Hexachrome. You can combine CMYK process inks with spot inks. Contrary to its reputation, Quark lets you work with long documents using a Ventura-like book-and-chapter palette, add footnotes and generate tables of contents and page-referenced indexes.

Third-party plug-in modules known as Xtensions add important new functions to the program. However, the program lacks many smaller features that make low-end packages so attractive, such as a table editor, a thesaurus and website creation.

It's not as if XPress serves a small, specialist market, so the £800 ex VAT price tag seems unfair. Hopefully Quark will rethink this when XPress 5.0 is launched in the very near future. ■



See the cover disc for our Greenstreet Publisher tutorial, and a full version of Publisher 3.12