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Spindrift

News Focus • Opinion • Reviews
Techno-Babble • Attitude

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...Savouring The Graphic Arts Industry Since April 2003

complex • *adj.* 1 consisting of many different and connected parts. 2. not easy to analyse or understand; complicated or intricate.

– From The Compact Oxford English Dictionary

Dear Reader,

As we all know it is getting increasingly tricky to define our industry. Where, exactly, does graphic arts production start? Printers who understand their customers and their market would, without blinking, say it starts when someone creates the first page of a digital document destined for printed reproduction. Less savvy individuals might suggest it starts when the printer receives a digital original from a customer. Obviously, the latter would be correct. The big challenge facing the print and publishing industries today is understanding, including and managing that entire sprawling digital world that is preproduction. This world is inhabited by originators, print buyers, IT people and others to whom print production may be less than riveting. Yet they need to become part of our processes, rather than work in creative, splendid isolation. Managing digital workflows has until now been a fairly linear task; receive files, check them, process them, move them on, and so on, until they are spewed out of the press as gorgeous printed matter. But things are getting much more complex, and workflows have become three-dimensional. A major task for systems suppliers is being able to identify and address the points of file transfer across a work network which includes not only prepress workflows but also creative workflows, MIS, etc.

In this issue, Laurel Brunner plunges head first into the weird and wonderful world of preproduction management, and, when she comes up for air, declares the term preflighting finally obsolete. We also introduce a new department called Expandocs, where we pick a news story and expand on it, delving a bit deeper.

Enjoy the read!

Cheers from the Spindrift crew,

Laurel, Cecilia, Paul and Todd

In This Issue

From the Control Tower

Writes Laurel Brunner: "Preflighting. What a word. What does it really mean? These days rather less than it used to, unless you're a pilot or into your dusty post-30 slide. The term, originally borrowed from the aeronautics industry, refers to the collection of checks done to a digital data file or aeroplane, prior to sending it off elsewhere, be that to a production workflow or the runway." She suggests that perhaps preflighting has become a misnomer, and that it's high time to address the complexities and dynamics of graphic arts preproduction in a different way. Can we suggest calling it Traffic Control?

see page 9

And then there was one...

Some years ago several different vendors including Basysprint, Escher-Grad, Esko-Graphics and Alfa Systems had projects going on for digitally imaging conventional plates. Their aim was to build a platesetter that could expose conventional plates because, even though many printers have wrapped digital platesetting in a loving embrace, many more have not. As it turns out, Basysprint is now the only supplier left in this particular sector. Paul Lindström talks to Esko-Graphics about why they threw in the towel, and to Basysprint about how they intend to stay in the game.

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News Focus

SWOP Certifications

In our March issue of Spindrift we reviewed a series of collaborative proofing systems. Two of the systems have now become SWOP certified: Creo Insite and Dalim Dialogue. It's reasonable to expect the systems not only to render pages according to SWOP correctly, but to properly colour manage any embedded or assigned ICC profile, for example the ISO12647 series.

Any SWOP certification is most often given for a specific combination of software and monitor. In Creo's case the certification is granted when the additional module Insite Color is installed and operates in conjunction with the Eizo Coloredge CG 21 LCD Monitor with Gretag Macbeth Eye-One Spectrophotometer, and the GTI SOFV-1ex lighting booth for viewing.

In Dalim's case the certification is granted for use with the GTI SOFV-1ex viewing booth and the Gretag Macbeth Eye-One Pro spectrophotometer, for images and pages viewed on a 23-inch Apple Cinema display.

The systems recently reviewed in Spindrift that already are SWOP-certified are ICS Remote Director and KPG Matchprint Virtual Proofing.

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A Plague of Platesetters

Aren't there enough of these beasts? Apparently not. Kodak is launching a new Newsetter V120 at Newstec (Brighton UK, 23rd to 25th May). This violet digital platesetter is for newspapers and obviously optimised for Kodak's Violetnews printing plate, introduced at Ifra last year.

The new device is an entry level engine for newspapers who want to print up to 120 1270 dpi plates per hour, but Kodak haven't stated output size so this number isn't terribly meaningful is it? We'll just have to wait and see what Brighton brings forth.

In the Beginning Was the Rip

Global Graphics has introduced the Genesis Release, its latest version of the Harlequin rip. The new features extend data management in a range of areas. There is native PDF 1.5 compatibility, advanced font emulation for time critical production such as newspapers and print on demand, basic in-rip imposition, improved colour management and support for PDF/X-1a, PDF/X-3 and JDF 1.2 including compliance with CIP4's Interoperability Conformance Specification. This last means that Global Graphics OEMs such as Agfa, Esko-Graphics and Screen will be able to test and prove interoperability sooner rather than later.

Xaar Goes Wide

Xaar, developers of superduper inkjet printing heads, has introduced a new 360 dpi head. The XJ128/360 Plus (is it a car? is it a plane? ... no, it's a print head!) was developed specifically for indoor and outdoor wide format graphics printing with compatibility for a range of inks. It can be fitted to a Xaar OEM's existing models.

Fujifilm Silver Plated

Fujifilm has announced the opening of a new digital plate line in South Carolina, USA. The newly improved site in Greenwood is one of four global plate production hubs and Fujifilm is also investing into its European manufacturing facilities in Holland. Overall the company has recently spent more than €200 million on plate production worldwide.

Presstek-Europe Established

Following completion of its acquisition of AB Dick, Presstek has renamed the company to be Presstek-Europe with its headquarters at AB Dick's premises in the UK. The man in charge is Quen Baum who has been responsible for AB Dick UK for the last seven years, and who was involved in acquiring the rights to Presstek technology for AB Dick. Plans are afoot to build local organisations, particularly in Eastern Europe where Presstek sees considerable potential for its technology. This is already paying off,

with AB Dick recording income from operations of over $500,000 in the first quarter of 2005. This compares to a loss of approximately $700,000 in the eight weeks of ownership in the previous quarter.

Presstek reported record consolidated revenue of $70.4 million in the first quarter ended April 2, 2005, compared to $54.1 million reported in the fourth quarter of 2004 and in $23.3 million in the corresponding quarter last year.

Kodak to be Michelson-free Zone

Amos Michelson and Mark Dance, Creo's current top boss and top money boss, will not come into the Kodak fold when the company completes its acquisition of Creo. David Brown, responsible for Creo's business strategy, is also leaving, but Dan Gelbart, Creo's founder and Judi Hess, the company's president will stay on to work for Kodak.

Hola Truepress 344

Spain is the first European country to install Screen's Truepress 344 digital press. Estudios Uriarte is a pre-press company producing posters, displays and exhibition collateral material and is extending its services. The company used to subcontract small format work to outside printers but will now be able to handle this work inhouse.

Also in Spain, Sprint Digital is a digital printing company producing short run work. The new Truepress will enable Sprint to produce larger format work in runs of 500 to 6000 copies, unsuitable for toner based digital printing.

Globalis & Objectif Lune Bringing Variable Data Tools to the Middle East and Africa

Globalis International and Objectif Lune Inc. are working together to provide Arabic and Persian support to Planetpress Suite for the markets in the Middle-East and Africa.

Objectif Lune is a developer of software for efficient design and high volume print management of transactional and variable content documents. Globalis International is a leader in developing and marketing multilingual and multi-technology printing systems and will work with Objectif Lune to provide and support Arabic and Farsi versions of Planetpress Suite in the Middle East and Africa.

Planetpress Suite is a variable data printing software suite for conditional printing of text and graphics and efficient management of output distribution.

The announcement is the conclusion of a two year cooperation, with both companies having invested substantially into the market for integrated variable data printing systems.

Digital Dots in a Spin?

Digital Dots, publishers of Spindrift, is blowing its own trumpet in the worst possible way. After dedicating the last two years to smugly poking fun at excessive hype and self-aggrandisement in its independent e-newsletter, the company is doing the very same thing and announcing a new service package for its readers and consulting clients.

The new initiative, called Spindrift Client Services, has been launched to provide graphic arts manufacturers, suppliers, printers and publishers with a multi-level information and consultancy resource tailored to individual needs. The services, provided by Digital Dots consultants Laurel Brunner, Paul Lindstrom and Cecilia Campbell, combines independent and objective technology news, overviews and trends, with dedicated and expert research and advice, speakers for seminars, and cutting edge content for web sites and other corporate communications.

Three levels of service are available based on specific areas of interest. These broadly follow the topics covered in the Digital Dots Buyer's Guide series published last year at Drupa: Computer to Plate, Colour Management & Proofing, JDF, Preflighting, and Digital Printing. Each level of service provides multiple subscriptions to Spindrift, dedicated consulting support, private research reports and independent technology evaluations based on the five topics, publishing rights to selected content within the Buyer's Guide series, plus printed copies of the next edition published to coincide with Ipex in April next year.

"The service formalises what we have, in fact, been undertaking for companies for several years," says Laurel Brunner. "Early response has been very encouraging, with particular interest in consulting services and publishing rights to topical material for use on web sites, intra and inter-newsletters and general education."

The second edition of the Buyer's Guide series will appear as a series of articles over the coming months within Spindrift and culminates in a collected edition at Ipex. The content ranges from introductory tutorials through to detailed industry surveys and topical research reports.

Letter From...
Mega Mud Corporation

Dear Sir/Madam,

We are sending this written communication to you from Mega Mud, developers of groundbreaking software, and one of the most profitable companies in the graphics industry.

We make so much money that we don't need to find out your name. We are writing to you to remind you that you are not important to us, nor do we want to serve you, or understand what you do. We want you to know that we care about your business as long as you don't expect us to provide service or understand it, and that we tell you this in order to comply with regulations that say service means sending out form letters. We are quite proud of this one.

Of course we have to tell you about our technology too, so please remember that we are pushing the envelope and thinking outside the box with our value proposition supporting the paradigm shift your industry is going through, as well as standards, automation, globalisation and naturally digitisation and digestion, involving two fingers or one, depending on which part of the planet you are living on.

We have every confidence that you will be most pleased with our service imperative, as it allows us to earn so much money without delivering much besides a revamp of what we developed ages ago. Customers like you need to understand that we are much higher up in the food chain, so we can articulate the market with groundbreaking software enhancements, sometimes mistakenly called by normal people bugs or new names for old features. The latest version of our software offers customers worldwide the opportunities they need to further advance ~~our~~ their business, overcoming challenges using our solution for integrated industrialisation and glutinisation of their business.

This letter complies with international directorate PD/J/F/1-Xs/007.

Please do not reply.

Say What?

(Iffy Writing Award Presented in the Ether for Obfuscation, Confusion, Misinformation or All Out Pretentiousness)

We couldn't resist this which appeared in a recent issue of the UK's Print Media Management. According to editor, Jonathan Levy, commenting on the UK national election:

"The Government, whichever party may be at the helm, influences many aspects of our industry, from such issues as publishing distribution channels and support for the print manufacturing sector, to environmental legislation, economic policies and Europe.

However, it could well be argued that in the short term we are in a much stronger position to shape our own destinies. Government policies are not necessarily going to help us implement JDF-enabled production technology or become print media innovators."

Well, that's a relief then!

Driftwood

(Useful stuff washin' in on our shores)

The Uniform Rule Language

It sounds like a linguist student's dream but it is neither quite what it seems, nor as boring as it sounds. The Uniform Rule Language is a W3C initiative to develop the necessary semantics to allow the various standard rule sets used in different businesses and types of applications specific development, to cooperate. There is already a bevy of rules languages used for different business data interchanges, but although they are mostly written in XML there is no formal definition of the rules that apply for all of them. There is no single set of common rules that work for any type of software development. This is what the Uniform Rule Language is about.

For the printing and publishing industries this initiative is important because it could provide an means of extending bespoke content delivery and production management. More significantly this sort of technology is key to software development, particularly for cross media applications and integrated media services.

The idea of using rules to manage software and processes is of course not new. The most basic programming commands are based on applying rules, such as the classic "if/then" model. And rule technologies underlie some extremely sophisticated systems, many of which rely for their cleverness on artificial intelligence, combining rules with seeing how things work out by trial and error and modifying subsequent processing.

Rule technology isn't something we hear much about in the graphic arts, but it is used in all sorts of disciplines. Rule languages handle database schema translations, workflow branching, and make modular systems work: a software module can be accessed by a larger system using a rule. Of course the enormous scope of rule technologies means that there are shedloads of them, hence the W3C's desire to develop some sort of workable standard specification. It's all about interoperability.

It is hoped that the Uniform Rule Language will improve integration on the web, so furthering more powerful applications development. A single rule language should also help with processes such as the transformation of data from different sites and databases into something that looks the same wherever it appears, regardless of source. It should also help with controlling information delivery and access and process management in a rather more sophisticated manner than is currently possible. It's not that through a Uniform Rule Language we will see the end of website vandalism and spamming any time soon, but it's a step in the right direction. The clue is surely in the acronym.

Expandocs

(In our new section, we aim to cast some extra light on a particular recent news story. Our first Expandocs takes a closer look at Xinet.)

Xinophonic

Apart from occasional but excellently loud parties, and equally occasional but strangely unloud marketing sorties, Xinet doesn't do much to draw attention to itself. Best known for its well-ripened Fullpress and Webnative technologies, the company has been around for years, albeit it quietly. Still without a lot of noise, Xinet is now repositioning itself to take the idea of print servers and applying it to workflow servers, managing and routing digital data files. The goal is to develop technologies that support media production workflows, providing a server based turbine to manage the traffic.

What's new

Fullpress is technology for workflow management, and Webnative is a web based front end to it. Webnative Venture adds an integrated database for web based archiving. To this foundation Xinet is now adding a versioning plug-in for Photoshop, set-up automation tools for Indesign and Xpress, and tools for fast application file previews.

The new plug-in for Photoshop gives users the option of creating new versions each time they save the file. This sounds like a good idea, but it could be a little dangerous, without some sort of added security to keep chaos at bay. Even though all versions are linked to the originating file, users in the habit of frequent saves could end up creating massive collections of marginally different versions and so choking the workflow.

Xinet is working with developers Triple Triangle, a Seattle based software group which has developed Mechanical Queue, an Indesign plug-in. It uses known data to create a new Indesign file with the file specifications built in. Mechanical Queue automatically sets up documents with preset coordinates coming from an older document or derived from MIS data.

It is now possible to view file and image thumbnails, using Indesign's XMP facilities to capture and manage metadata, so that files can be shared, archived and accessed. To support the use of PDF in archives, if required, Xinet is also tightening the links in Webnative between the desktop and the backend digital asset management environment. XMP provides a very simple means of managing metadata and is a logical feeder to JDF. XMP is Xinet's route to JDF support later.

Using URLs, Xinet's software automatically maintains the links between application files and assets stored in a database, giving it the means to provide fast file previews and access. The Linked Files Viewer also builds a perpetual file history, although the new document linking features are mainly for viewing linked files, rather than for providing a publishing and usage history. This would be a useful addition, particularly as the company develops links to external systems such as MIS.

We don't really need yet another softproofing tool, so it's good that Xinet has been developing its software to support soft proofing, rather than reinventing it. Users will soon be able to work with tools such as Dalim Dialogue, KPG's Realtimeimage and ICS within the Fullpress environment and with Fullpress managing the dataflows.

Picture Wrangler, Xinet's relinking plugin to Indesign, now has transparency detection on low res images. Images with transparency are now automatically linked to the high res file to help with flattening, and Picture Wrangler maintains image links, even if files are moved between the server and client machines. Relinking from the document preview can be done either on a document or individual image basis.

Over-the-hill Prepress Idea?

In principal the underlying design concept of Xinet's technology isn't original: it's the Open Prepress Interface (OPI) model redeployed. What's special is that Xinet is applying the model to workflows, mixing MySQL database technology with metadata strings associated to data files. The metadata helps route the file, using OPI principals for data warehousing and system communications, and of course digital images.

Hasn't OPI had its day? Shouldn't it be extinct by now, a relic of that bygone age where networks were sticky slow and processors pathetically anaemic? You'd be forgiven for thinking so, but interestingly enough, many companies prefer to work with low res data, and still see a need for low res conversion, particularly as they move to RGB workflows. Maybe it's a security thing? Maybe the thought of all those megabytes trundling around, blind and vulnerable, terrifies them? Or maybe they don't see the need for high ticket IT?

Whatever it is, there are still enough OPI-niks out there for Xinet to justify continuing with OPI developments. As well as using OPI principals for asset and image handling, Xinet is working on PDF to PDF OPI and over the next eight to nine months will strengthen links between PDFs and asset management, again using URLs. The idea is to help clients improve online product portals, and support such things as digital catalogues and online asset management. One of the company's latest customers is appliance suppliers Sunbeam in Florida, which came to Xinet as a customer of one of Xinet's customers.

Rather than managing parts of the workflow in isolation, Xinet is developing tools to feed production. Finding such new customers as Sunbeam comes out of extending the scope

of workflow technologies, as digital media production processes continue to migrate along the supply chain.

Xinet is a great example of a company that is reinventing itself without dramas. The company has always been in the business of process efficiency and in that respect nothing's changed. What's different now is that Xinet technologies are reaching further along the supply change, towards asset management and towards integration with MIS, leading ultimately to data management that's relevant for all data files and users in a preproduction workflow. Maybe OPI isn't dead yet, only resting?

BTF files are highly structured, containing both job and layout data so that objects are positioned accurately on the page. One of the few technologies we know of with white space management, BTF can also manage variable numbers of pages within a document, as well as variable data on the pages.

This data format, written of course in XML, also supports imposition management by referencing external imposition templates, plus screening, production marks and a range of post-print parameters. Much of the content in this format is finding its way, via PPML, into the JDF specification as necessary components for variable data digital printing applications.

Acrobites

(Something to get your teeth into)

JLYT

This is a weird one because its letters don't actually stand for four words, but rather for two: Job Layout. It's is an HP invention, via Indigo, and it is an important job file protocol for configuring variable print jobs for Indigo digital presses.

JLYT works, as we understand it, by generating a job file made up of fixed and variable data text, plus variable image layers, in a single composite file. This is basically driver software that figures out how many usable layers it has to create and which of those can be reused without reripping. It's a sort of internal rip data management technique that only works with Indigo presses. Fortunately other developers have their own means of managing variable data layout files (see below).

BTF

Book Ticket Format (or Files depending on whom you talk to) was originally developed by Barco for use in its Printstreamer technology. Nowadays Xeikon use it as a means of describing how a collection of graphic objects should appear on press.

Spindocs

(Where the spinner gets spun!)

This curiosity appeared in a well known trade title, and tells but half a tale.

"XXXXXXXXXXXXX: apology
In an article headed "The barrow boys" which appeared in the supplement called XXXXXXXX that was sent out with the edition of XXXXX, we made a number of highly defamatory statements about Mr XXXXXXXXXXXXX.

We totally retract those statements, which are completely false. We entirely accept that there was no basis whatsoever for us to suggest that Mr XXXXXXXXXXXXX has acted unlawfully, unethically or in any way improperly.

We also accept entirely that Mr XXXXXXXXXXXXX had no involvement in the types of conduct that were referred to in the article.
It is regrettable that such statements were ever published.

We would therefore like to apologise to Mr XXXXXXXXXXXXX unreservedly for any loss, distress or inconvenience caused to him by the publication of this article. We have also agreed to pay him substantial damages, as well as his legal fees, as a result."

Inconvenience? Thorough apology or what? What more can there be to it, we wonder?

Preflight reinvented

Everything changes and everything stays the same. We know less, forget more and need to keep track of truckloads of extra stuff, even though much of it is a complete mystery to us. Sounds familiar? Well, of course it will if you're the dusty side of 30, but even if you're on the fresh and dewy side of it, the feeling should be familiar, especially if you're in the media production business. It's the fate of any workflow not kept in constant trim, and for many contributors to the digital supply chain, when it comes to file checking and preflighting, it's doing their heads in.

Preflighting. What a word. What does it really mean? These days rather less than it used to, unless you're a pilot or into your dusty post-30 slide. The term, originally borrowed from the aeronautics industry, refers to the collection of checks done to a digital data file or aeroplane, prior to sending it off elsewhere, be that to a production workflow or the runway. Apart from the security issues, not much has changed as far as checking an outbound aircraft's fitness for purpose, but for prepress production, much has changed, not least workflow expectations.

Preproduction & Preflight Checking

The whys and wherefores of how workflow has changed is a discussion best addressed over a ripe and ready Shiraz. What is less opaque and Shiraz-dependent, are the factors shaping the evolution of preflighting and production process management: standards, automated pagination and layout technologies, PDF's dominance in workflow management, the internet, process audit requirements, people and job functions, competitive issues, cross media production, asset utilisation and protection, the list is endless. For this reason, preflight checking is about managing preproduction data for all parts of the workflow.

Not that the need for accurate Postscript and PDF processing has gone away. Producing accurate files isn't the shot in the dark it once was, but improvements in Postscript and PDF have rendered obsolete the need for blunt instrument data processing checks. Postscript and PDF evolution are intertwined with advances in digital workflow management, in step with changes in digital production. Thus the scope of data and process checking is considerably larger.

Whatever the application, from newspapers to packaging, it's all about managing print production more effectively including all relevant equipment, skills, customers and costs. No longer can we speak exclusively of proofing workflows, platesetter workflows, or editorial, layout, asset management and archiving workflows. They all can, and increasingly do, share a digital foundation and the composition of this foundation determines data management requirements, not only preflight checking for individual output processing lines. This is where systems such as Agfa's Apogee and Delano technologies, Esko-Graphics' Scope and Web Centre, Fujifilm's Open Workflow, Screen's Trueflow, Heidelberg's Prinergy and Dalim's Twist fit in the picture. However they are largely production driven systems and do not yet fully reach all file originators' desktops.

The difficulty of managing efficient, automated dataflows is made worse by the fact that prepress production increasingly involves people for

This article is produced as part of an international graphic arts industry collaboration between Digital Dots, its publishing partners and its clients.

It is part of a special project to address business and technology issues crucial to digital print media production. The series of educational articles explains print media technologies, business issues and market drivers for print media production, in both existing and new markets. These articles will be published as a series of individual Buyer's Guides due for print publication in April 2006.

- *The Buyer's Guide to JDF*
- *The Buyer's Guide to Colour Management & Proofing*
- *The Buyer's Guide to Digital Printing & Direct Imaging Presses*
- *The Buyer's Guide to CTP*
- *The Buyer's Guide to Preproduction Data Management & Quality Control*

Further information is available at the Digital Dots website: www.digitaldots.org

This project is supported by the several organisations, including the following:

Digital Dots
Agfa
BPIF
CIP4
Enfocus
Esko-Graphics
Screen
Fujifilm
Ipex

whom print production is a bit of a mystery and the language completely obtuse. The territory between ideas and their mass produced expression is no longer the exclusive preserve of prepress, hence the evolution of project management systems such as Delano and Web Centre. Virtually anyone can and does create digital documents, ostensibly ready for full colour print. This is probably the single biggest reason that prepress production control has changed so dramatically in recent years. The rise in digital printing and on demand print media applications will complicate matters further.

The Workflow Reality Check

Preproduction data management efficiency is entirely shaped by the workflow and production goals, particularly in on demand models. It starts with understanding the scope of the workflow and where data management might improve matters, both directly and indirectly. Should one for example check PDFs or native application files or both? Should file checking be server or desktop based or both? Should the quality control system be open or closed? Is it production or file originators responsibility or both? Is it enough to use plug-in utilities and extensions? Should the workflow's ethos be production or editorially determined? Who is responsible for what, and where in the workflow does responsibility shift to the next stage?

Should one check PDFs or native application files or both? Should file checking be server or desktop based or both? Should the quality control system be open or closed? Is it production or file originators responsibility or both? Is it enough to use plug-in utilities and extensions? Should the workflow's ethos be production or editorially determined? Who is responsible for what, and where in the workflow does responsibility shift to the next stage?

Whatever the answers and wherever you sit in the workflow, keeping the dataflow moving is the prime objective. It's even more important in distributed environments and for companies planning to implement JDF. Preproduction data management is of course one of JDF's central purposes, but we are still a very long way from realisation of that particular dream (nightmare?). In the meantime effective data management is the route to production efficiencies, and the more people and processes involved, the trickier it will become.

Applications development

Customer requirements are also changing. The art of printing may still be the preserve of the few, but document creation is definitely no longer confined to the niche that prepress used to serve. The desktop publishing revolution (a dim and distant memory even for the post-30 sliders), put publishing technology into the hands of the masses. Having it in their hands, the masses have used the technology wonderfully, and developers have kept pace. A few years ago some basic understanding of preflighting and quality control, and their importance in the workflow, was enough, but now prepress involves many and different resources from pencils to presses, and everything in between.

Applications are getting more complex, but production understanding isn't always keeping up, so many forms of print, such as marketing materials and sales collateral, are now produced by people who don't know or care about production processing. Composition, layout, image capture and processing, font usage, printability, finishing concerns, and so on are not their primary concern. They are the concern of the system, and the IT department supporting their applications.

Changing Developer Landscape

Several early players in the preflight business have reshaped their business models to thrive in a rapidly changing market, where IT departments play such an important role. Many of those companies

contribute technologies to the powerful workflow management systems offered by the leading prepress suppliers. For example Enfocus, Markzware and Onevision all started life as developers of Postscript checking tools and yet all three have extended their technologies to provide comprehensive workflow management utilities and extended their reach to the web.

Enfocus Certified PDF is gaining serious kudos as a tool for quality control and life cycle file management. Enfocus' business is based on an OEM model plus direct sales, so this technology will likely crop up in other systems. The company is updating all of its products to be fully compatible with Acrobat 7 and PDF 1.5.

Markzware's technology is increasingly used in web based file delivery and management, although often under the name of a Markzware customer. The company's Flightcheck Professional quality control software has recently been updated to support PDF 1.5, with improved speed and more robust OPI support, and such subtleties as user definable path searching and detection of application generated clipping paths.

Onevision hasn't been snoozing either, adding more functionality and sophistication to its technologies which, in the case of the Solvero editing and post processing tool, look more like layout management systems than preflight tools. Onevision's latest developments illustrate just how far preflighting has come, with controls over the amount of toner or ink used, automatic control of rich black and support for PDF standards, such as those developed by the Ghent PDF Workgroup.

A rising number of prepress services and repro houses are building bespoke systems, often using Markzware technologies, to serve their customers. Many have found they can sell their technologies to other companies and some have taken the idea to extremes.

Next Generation Workflow Developers

Established suppliers will clearly die before they get old, but they will have to contend with some new young hippies elbowing their ways into the business. A rising number of prepress services and repro houses are building bespoke systems, often using Markzware technologies, to serve their customers. Many have found they can sell their technologies to other companies and some have taken the idea to extremes. For example, Stibo, a Danish printing company founded in 1794, now has three divisions including CCI Europe, one of the great names in newspaper systems, and a software division responsible for all sorts of clever things. One such clever thing is ePrint for online production status viewing. This woefully dull sounding product is actually quite interesting, having been developed it conjunction with some of the largest European catalogue, directory and magazine publishers.

Few can match Stibo's ancestry but W&Co, Colour Systems, JJays and Atelier are some other good examples of poachers turned gamekeepers. All used to be pure repro houses, but of these Atelier with its Digital Publishing Desktop, a set of web applications for publishers (see volume 2 issue 5) has moved farthest from its repro roots. Atelier's technology is the basis of an automated online workflow service for customers of Polestar, one of the largest printing companies in the UK.

By providing and helping to extend the links to the digital supply chain, all of these companies are edging their businesses into new territory. They are getting into the workflow management business by developing utilities to help their customers and of course, in order to keep them.

Where Will It All End?

What to expect for the future? Hard to say, but with printing and finishing the most stable part of the production process, the emphasis will obviously be on preproduction improvements. Efficient IT management is the ultimate driver for efficient digital prepress so looking at the stampede to digitisation, asset management, versioning and usage tracking are the next logical extensions to current workflow models. Data management is not the same as asset management, so we would also expect to see more sophisticated anticipation of potential problems in the mechanics of production data and file management, particularly for distributed profile driven and colour managed PDF workflows.

We also expect preproduction management to support the increased consolidation in print purchasing, through tighter links with distributed MIS and content databases. Large companies are starting to consolidate their print purchasing, not to use print less, but to use it more effectively as part of their media strategies.

Increased regulation and compliance will also encourage the trend towards inhouse management and control. For technology developers, workflow systems will have to have considerable scope to interact with datastores, on and offline, plus manage file distribution and delivery, communications and relationships with service providers such as agencies, and internally.

Managing the mechanics isn't just about data, so workflow management will need to manage complex and distributed resources, such as presses and platesetters, with load balancing across related hardware and software, and even skills and distribution options.

Although we've a development community bordering on the fanatic in their efforts to help smooth the paths of production data flows, mayhem lurks snarling all too close. It will get worse as the printing and publishing industry starts to work with variable data output and on demand production. Web based proofing, distributed production models, compliance management, standards implementation including PDF/X1. PDF/X1a, PDF/X3 and ICC standards, multiple format support, profile management; all are turning what used to be a collection of discrete and manageable tasks into a digital rat's nest. Yet we still refer to it as workflow and still we speak of preflighting. Time to change shoes.

– Laurel Brunner

What became of the UV-setters?

Some years ago several different vendors including Basysprint, Escher-Grad, Esko-Graphics and Alfa Systems had projects going on for digitally imaging conventional plates. Their aim was to build platesetters that could expose conventional plates because, even though many printers have wrapped digital platesetting in a loving embrace, many more have not. There is one primary reason for this: printers prefer to stick with the plates and workflow they know. For many, digital imaging of conventional plates may be preferable to taking a plunge into the unknown. Conventional plates are familiar, proven, stable, competitively priced and don't need special light. They also are manufactured all over the world, so they're not subject to the import levies that might be applied to CTP plates. Given these facts it's easy to appreciate the attractions of a UV-setter.

The first developer to come up with a commercial product was Basysprint and although both Escher-Grad and Esko-Graphics made a reasonable go of this technology, neither chose to pursue it. Despite announcing at Ipex 2002 that it was ready to fulfill orders for the internal drum B1 Aqua LHP UV platesetter, the device was subsequently withdrawn; at $249,000 its price was just too high for the market. Alfa Systems Fastrak for newspaper applications, has the speed but not the quality for commercial work. That left Basysprint and Esko-Graphics which only recently withdrew its Espresso device, before even launching it. Since technology for exposing conventional plates should be very appealing, we asked Esko-Graphics why it pulled the Espresso plug, so close to the worldwide launch of a long awaited product.

According to René Delbar at Esko-Graphics, it wasn't so much about technology doubts as about marketing concerns. The prototype Espresso machine was seen at Drupa 04 making plates, so the technology was viable. Instead Esko-Graphics worried if they could generate a decent return on investment, with the increasingly fierce competition from vendors that can offer bundled deals, plates and platesetters. The market conditions have rapidly grown worse, making the picture look different from 12 months ago. Therefore, Esko-Graphics decided to not continue the Espresso platform development plans, but instead to focus on the packaging market for their long-term development investments. This led us to ask Basysprint what its reasons are to not give in to the competition.

Wim De Blauwe vice president of sales at Basysprint's parent Punch Graphics, confirms that it's a little problematic not being able to easily throw a bundle of plates into a deal, but he is very confident that all the good reasons to opt for computer to conventional plates are compelling enough. "The conventional plates are a stable and mature product. Not only are they cheaper to manufacture than the double layered CTP plates, be it light sensitive or thermal, the conventional plates also produce a sharper dot with our technology. I'm sure many people live with the misconception that it's only the thermal plates that offer a sharp and square dot. But studies by Fogra confirm what we knew already that our UV-setters produce an even sharper dot than thermal imaging. And there is even more reasons to go conventional. The chemistry in the processor is relatively harmless and may be flushed down the normal drain in many countries."

Being the only vendor in the market puts Basysprint in a quite interesting position. On the one hand there is no competition in this particular field so if the machine takes off, there are plenty of companies who might want to OEM it. But on the other hand there is no other company doing the same thing, which doesn't do a lot for customer confidence.

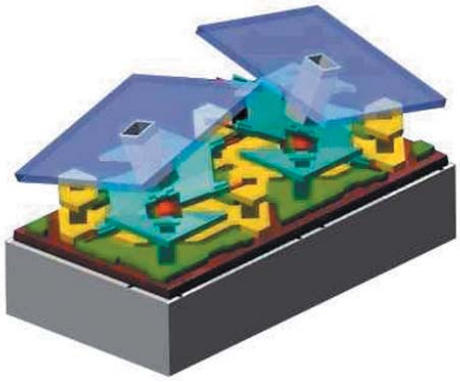
We asked Wim if the fairly high price of the UV platesetters (an entry level machine has a list price of €119,000) isn't also a difficulty in the selling process. Wim De Blauwe admits that this has been the case, but since Basysprint now starts to reach critical mass with its installed base (537) and increased monthly production – they manufacture 10–12 machines a month – prices for these engines are coming down quite considerably. With the joint efforts of some of the engineers at both Strobbe and Xeikon which are also under the same group ownership, a strategy has been drawn up to make the manufacturing process even more efficient. This makes even lower prices possible in the near future. If Basysprint can make some favourable deal with a plate manufacturer, which would seem to us to be crucial to its success, highly desirable bundled deals could be fully possible.

What about speed and cost of the imaging head then, we insist to Wim? No problem it seems: "When it comes to speed our scrolling technology has made all the difference. Our machines used to be relatively slow, this I have to admit. But with the scrolling technology we are now up at 147 plates per hour maximum [we assume this refers to the 900 dpi newspaper device, previewed at Drupa], which isn't exactly slow. As for the imaging head, we offer a three year guarantee, and this I think should provide security and speed enough for most anyone."

Being the only vendor in the market puts Basysprint in a quite interesting position. On the one hand there is no competition in this particular field so if the machine takes off, there are plenty of companies who might want to OEM it. But on the other hand there is no other company doing the same thing, which doesn't do a lot for customer confidence. Basysprint's only serious competition is blue-violet laser imaging on light sensitive ctp plates and if Basysprint had still been on its own, potential customers might have worried about the company's long term survival, given the market stampede to violet. And indeed Basysprint was not doing at all well prior to Punch's interest. Having grown out of a family owned printing business, Basysprint didn't really have the expertise or the money to compete with the likes of Agfa, Fuji and Screen. Punch plans to change all that.

Now that it's in the same family as Xeikon and Strobbe, Basysprint is no longer all on its own, and this should be reassuring for both existing and future customers. Computer to conventional plates has always seem to us like a good and pragmatic approach and the future will tell if Basysprint can punch this message home hard enough to the market.

– Paul Lindström



The Basysprint UV-setters series are all flatbed CTcP (Computer To conventional Plate) devices. The imaging head focuses a beam of light from a UV-lamp to the DMD (Digital Micromirror Device), pictured in the illustration above.

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