InDesign 2.0 review

On InDesign's 20th anniversary, we look back at version 2.0 – the release that changed everything and brought excitement and innovation back to graphic design. Here's our review first published on March 4, 2002.

The world of DTP – once the vanguard of art and digital creativity – has often taken a back seat in recent years to the thrill of other desktop-driven pursuits. Web design, multimedia, 3D games, digital video, and streaming media have captured the minds of content creators the world over, and DTP has been forced into the slow lane.

Sure, desktop page layout has seen the advent of PDF, XML, better colour management, hexachrome, digital printing, and faster output – but it's all so much engineering, all infrastructure, and very little to do with pushing the boundaries of print-based creativity. In fact, it seems more to do with shaving time off deadlines, making sure documents are correctly preflighted, and slashing repro costs by going straight to print. Creativity has been left on the pasteboard.

Until now. One look at Adobe InDesign 2.0, and it feels like 1986 all over again, when PageMaker first burst onto the scene and anyone with an Apple Mac could become a magazine publisher.

A DTP odyssey

InDesign 2.0 is quite simply *the* state of the art in desktop publishing. It's like a Kubrick movie – almost obsessive in its attention to detail, yet able to deliver new horizons on what's possible. It puts design back where it belongs – at the heart of DTP. And everything ties together with such panache,

it makes layout feel almost organic. Simply put, InDesign 2.0 is the very best desktop publishing tool ever made. End of story.

But, before we lose ourselves in ground-breaking layout features such as true transparency, frankly astounding typographic controls, awesome output options, and a million little touches, let's tackle Adobe's main problem with InDesign. It's not liked very much.

Or rather, it's not liked by repro companies and printers. They like QuarkXPress. It's a standard. You can be sure that a publication created in QuarkXPress will output accurately. QuarkXPress – InDesign's biggest and market-dominating rival – is a standard that works. Best not mess with it, then.

So why go with InDesign 2.0? The answer is three letters: P-D-F. The PDF workflow is becoming a new standard in printing – smaller files, an end to output problems, and guaranteed quality. And printers can work with them with, no problem. Soon, PDF will be the standard currency of professional print, and InDesign creates the best PDF files in the easiest way I've ever seen. With the output side swinging to PDF, what then separates QuarkXPress from InDesign? We're back to the beginning, again. Creativity.

InDesign 2.0 is aimed at designers, editors, layout artists, book and magazine publishers, newspapers, and print professionals. People who produce page-based content for a living. In short, people like me. Yet it also brings a renewed emphasis on being creative, of creating pages that simply weren't possible – or at least too difficult to bother with.

InDesign 2.0 adds several hundred new features – but among the top is the addition of transparency. It lets you add drop shadows (real ones, with opacity and soft edges), apply transparency to any object such as text, frames, and strokes. Even better, you can place Adobe Photoshop images with

transparency settings intact – meaning wispy strands of hair instead of crude cutouts, and see-through eyeglasses that cast faint shadows over text.

Transparent page layout

Even better, all the blending modes from Photoshop have made the jump across – so you can make objects interact with layered objects, complete with difference, multiply, colour dodge or burn, and soft- or hard-light settings. To use, simply select the object, then use the transparency palette to adjust its opacity, apply blending modes. The result is instant.

Output could be a downer – repro houses don’t do transparency, remember? Except that Adobe has two solutions: a new PostScript driver that’s shipping with new RIPs and imagesetters that does handle transparency, including PDF transparency. The second is what Adobe calls Flattener styles. These slice artwork into raster and vector objects that preserve transparency – in essence, creating new graphic elements – and you can adjust these for everything from quick proofs to high-fidelity documents, and then send straight to repro.

Also new is the ability to use tables for layout. Here you can create and format tables – a real boon for structured documents. Using a table palette, you can apply fills, text formatting, merge cells, place graphics, and import Microsoft

Excel and Word tables.

Typography is simply gorgeous in InDesign 2.0. It has expanded support for OpenType fonts – meaning you can set true fractions, swash glyphs, discretionary ligatures, contextual alternatives, and more. A glyph palette makes using them a snip. But no-one uses these typographical wonders today, detractors say. That’s because they were too damn hard before.

InDesign also features optical kerning for producing great-looking, kerned type, and optical margin alignment. It has had its multi-line composer revamped, now dubbed the paragraph composer, which scans paragraphs of text to accurately justify and fit copy, rather than the line-at-a-time of QuarkXPress, which can lead to some odd hanging text. The result is great justification without resorting to a search-and-destroy mission, armed only with a soft return.

Printing itself has been enhanced. An integrated print dialog box gives dynamic feedback on how settings interact with each other. You can set separate bleeds for each margin, and version 2.0 has done away with the requirement for a PostScript driver, so it works with a greater number of proofers, such as inkjets. You can print master page elements

(or hide them), guides, grids, and thumbnails, and apply a range of industry-standard print settings.

Adobe is also looking to the future with InDesign, and sees the ability to output to multiple media as a key need for content creators. InDesign excels here, and is able to support PDF, export pages to HTML, or Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) for vector output to the Web. There are new output options here, too. InDesign can create tagged PDF files for output to eBooks – with automatic reflow for different eBook readers, hyperlinks, and even text-to-speech conversion.

Adobe makes great play of its XML support, too. A Structure View and Tags palette that can import and export XML files – allowing you to drop XML content into tagged frames, or export and combine content with XML templates to create a live Web site.

InDesign also adds the missing link of long document support and table of contents (TOC) creation long demanded by book publishers. Elements, such as text styles and colours, can be gathered across a document and sychronised in a book list. A TOC can apply styles such as section headlines, and flow a contents page with correct page numbers. The same applies to index lists, and you can create either simple keyword or more complex indexes based on topics and references, such as page numbers or other topics.

The InDesign trap

Finally, colour and trapping is handled well. You can create swatches that are easily accessible from a Swatches palette, and sample colour from any part of the desktop. A Trap Styles palette provides a quick way of entering trap settings. Better still, a colour management system is in place, letting you set various levels of colour management, such as ColorSync and Europe prepress. You can customize the gamut and management settings, embed ICC profiles, soft proof colours, and adjust colour profiles for individual images.

There are hundreds of new features in InDesign 2.0 – too many to list here. But, of note is an overprint preview that proofs

spot colours, WebDAV support for creating documents in a workgroup environment so you check work in and out, and the ability to set on-screen graphic quality for speeding up document navigation.

It almost seems a shame to home in on the few flaws that do surface in InDesign. However, as a habitual QuarkXPress user, the interface is downright daunting when you first use it. There are more palettes than an art school, and it’s easy to grind to a halt searching through them all. It also affects screen real-estate to an extent that you’ll need at least a 21-inch monitor to feel comfortable. A couple of the dialog boxes have text-fitting glitches under Mac OS X.

It requires a new way of working. Instead of one tool doing

many jobs as in QuarkXPress, InDesign forces you to use the correct tool for the job. Need to input text? Use the text tool – but to resize the frame you'll need to switch to the Selection tool – something that's done with a single Content tool in QuarkXPress. And despite some impressive speed gains – up to 700 per cent faster in some areas according to Adobe – it's still slower than QuarkXPress – at least on an 533MHz Apple Mac G4.

Table handling, especially with graphics, can be difficult – often requiring you to resize graphics on the pasteboard before placing to prevent overspill from cells, and there's no word-counting facility.

Worse, I was dismayed to see the XML features were still in beta, even in the boxed, shipping version. It all seems robust, but you'll probably need to download an update in the near future.

1986, all over again

And yet… this really *is* still the best DTP package on the planet. Forget, for a second, the headline features. It's the little things that add polish. I love the ability to align objects and distribute the space between them (great for pages with lots of screenshots), and the way you can toggle a preview mode that hides everything outside the page edge – giving an accurate view of how the page will look when printed. Viewing high-quality images shouldn't be underestimated – Macromedia FreeHand files are no longer greyed out boxes with 'EPS file' scrawled across the centre.

Here at *Digit*, we rate InDesign 2.0 so much that we're moving towards ditching QuarkXPress and moving over to InDesign. Recommendation indeed.

Make no mistake, even with its flaws, InDesign 2.0 has lit a fire under the world of DTP, and it demands that you go out

and produce stunning layout that simply hasn’t been done before. This is real innovation at work, and for those that missed 1986, it’s like a first-class ticket to the DTP revolution, all over again.

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