



The verdict on Quark 7

The layout software war enters a new era with the latest from Quark. Our columnist weighs in

AFTER a solid decade of undisputed rule in the page layout marketplace, QuarkXPress has been steadily losing sales to Adobe's InDesign over the past few years. Five years ago, QuarkXPress had over 90% of the market – now it's down to about 65% of the installed user base in Canada (mostly v. 5 and v. 6.x), and new unit sales have been clearly in Adobe's favour for some time. Many top Canadian magazines are switching to InDesign.

InDesign moved ahead of the aging QuarkXPress 6 by offering superior type control, good PDF support and alpha-channel effects like transparency, smooth drop shadows and object edge feathering – all making the program much more attractive to designers looking for a more polished image and production teams working in PDF workflows.

This year, Denver-based Quark fired back. Late in May, the company released QuarkXPress 7 for Mac and Windows (\$879 or \$299 as an upgrade from v. 6.x), with a free Intel Mac update expected over the summer. With Quark 7, Quark has caught up with its rival in most areas and opened up a couple of interesting new possibilities, while maintaining much of its familiar look and feel.

And so we begin a new round of page layout wars. But which is best for you and your work?

Let's start by looking at the new key features in Quark 7 and compare its capabilities to those in InDesign CS2, Adobe's most recent version of the program (\$819 or from \$199-\$399 as an upgrade from an earlier version of InDesign or PageMaker).

Transparency and drop shadows

In Quark 7, Quark has done Adobe one better when it comes to transparency. Both programs allow you to apply any degree of transparency and/or a smooth transparent drop shadow to a text or graphic object, but Quark 7 takes it a step further. In Quark 7, different transparency levels can be applied to the background, content and border of a box, allowing you, for example, to create a text box with a yellow background colour at 50% transparency, black text at 70% transparency and a 5-point thick orange border at 30% transparency. While that combination is not something I'd likely use, it demonstrates the flexibility of Quark 7's transparency controls. Also, transparency can be applied to a colour (as opposed to an object), so you can affix translucent colours to objects or text, or even use a blend between one or two translucent colours for the fill of a text or picture box. Another point scored for Quark 7. There is, however, no quick and easy way to feather the edges of an object to create smooth vignettes or masks in Quark 7, something InDesign does easily. The verdict? Call it a draw.

Typography and type control

Quark 7 offers good support for OpenType and Unicode and a Glyphs palette allows you to pick any glyph in a typeface and add it to a text block (as InDesign does). Quark 7 now lets you import a formatted table created in Excel into a text box, in the same way InDesign does, but Quark 7 also allows you to create multi-page flowing tables with repeating headers and footers – a nice feature. It still, however, lacks a few type capabilities that are available with InDesign. While Quark 7 has added some handy presets for the H&J settings box, its composition



Quark evens the playing field with its latest release, QuarkXPress 7

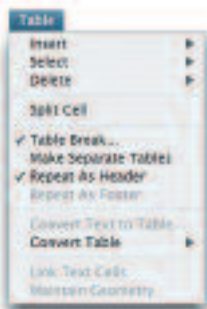


Table creation, editing and import are newly improved

engine lags well behind InDesign's clever and interactive system. Quark 7 still does not offer hanging punctuation (where punctuation marks at the end of a line are properly 'hung' out in the gutter on fully justified text). Nor can you convert type to outlines in Quark 7, allowing you to fill large decorative type with blends or placed graphics, a relatively simple task in InDesign. The verdict? InDesign wins.

Interface look and function

Quark has always had a no-frills interface that's short on polish but long on efficiency and functionality. With version 7, it adds the handy grouped/tiled palettes InDesign has used for some time, allowing you to create your own custom interface with just the combination and placement of palettes you want, where you want them. Its new tabbed, floating, Measurements palette gives you all of the controls from the long-standing Item...Modify dialog box in a handy context-sensitive palette that's always with you. On a large monitor with a powerful graphics card, I like the slick look of InDesign but on a smaller monitor with a weaker graphics card, Quark 7's interface is faster and easier to work with. Both interface designs are good but very different. Judging this category is based on what you're used to. If you're an Illustrator guru you'll like InDesign. If you're an old hand at QuarkXPress, the familiarity of the new version will win you over. The verdict? Too close to call.

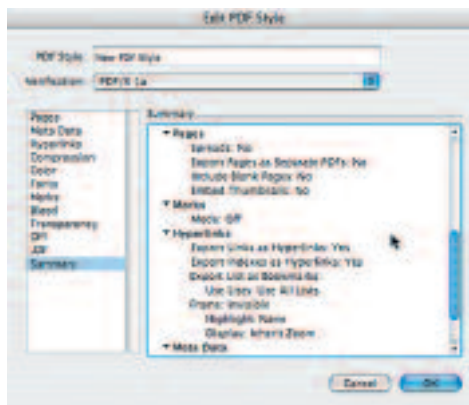
Production, output and prepress

Quark 7 has built-in, solid support for PDF and PDF/X, giving you good control over the file export settings. It's also improved its support for colour management, allowing you to track profiles in a job, colour manage proofing devices and soft proof to your intended output space on-screen. You can also easily create and store output styles, capturing all of the settings for printing or exporting EPS or PDF for instant recall as needed. Quark 7 has beefed up its preflighting capabilities as well, to spot potential problems on output. In these areas, Quark 7 has again caught up to InDesign. The verdict? For the average designer, the two programs are about equal on production issues.

Performance

Both programs require serious processor power and memory. If you don't have a recent 2GHz or faster processor and a gigabyte of RAM you'll find both to be sluggish, especially Quark 7 (earlier versions of InDesign had similar performance issues). While Quark 7 is considerably slower than v. 6.5 on current Macs (especially under Rosetta on Intel Macs), performance should improve over the next year as minor updates are released. The Mac Intel update (in beta as of this writing) is reportedly much faster running natively on Macs with the Core Duo chip. The verdict? At the moment, InDesign is a faster program overall on both PowerPC Macs or Windows. That said, Quark 7 is likely to catch up on both platforms and it's promising a native Intel Mac version that should easily outperform the current versions of Quark and InDesign, several months earlier than Adobe's plan to release a Mac Intel version of InDesign.

The final score? Quark has caught up with InDesign in most areas and for production/ prepress techies in JDF environments, surpassed it. A year ago, I could not honestly recommend Quark over InDesign to most users. Now, it's basically an even playing field. If you're used to QuarkXPress, the update is worth every penny, especially if you have (or plan to get) an Intel Mac. For new buyers, try each program before deciding – they're very different programs but both get the job done.



QuarkXPress 7 offers built-in, vastly improved PDF and PDF/X support

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