

Collecting memories of the beginnings of desktop publishing

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On May 22–23, 2017, a meeting was held at the Computer History Museum (CHM)¹ of a select set of pioneers from the early days of desktop publishing (DTP). Among the small group of participants were founders and key technologists from Frame Technology (creator of the FrameMaker DTP system), Aldus (creator of PageMaker), Ventura Software (creator of Ventura Publisher), Adobe (creator of the PostScript page description language and the software/firmware to drive a printer from PostScript images in a computer), Xerox PARC (where the first what-you-see-is-what-you-get, WYSIWYG, word processor interface was demonstrated and where early on they turned Xerox copier technology into laser printer technology), and Apple Computer (which promoted PageMaker running on the Mac with its early graphical user interface and a relatively low cost laser printer to become a highly popular early DTP system). A few other key pioneers also participated whose innovations preceded the liftoff of DTP or who moved among the DTP activities making important connections. Finally, a handful of professional and amateur computing historians were invited to be present. The meeting was organized and chaired by Burt Grad (co-founder of the CHM Software Industry Special Interest Group, SI SIG²) and David Brock (director of the CHM's Center for Software History³).

This meeting was the thirteenth pioneers meeting that the SI SIG has held since its founding 25 years ago. At these meetings, pioneers from various parts of the software industry share memories in meeting sessions that are videotaped and then transcribed into text for use by future historians. Individual oral histories are taken from the meeting participants and other significant software industry pioneers, and there has been ongoing collection of original documents. Prior pioneers meetings have resulted in six special issues of the *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, and hopefully another special issue will result from the DTP meeting.

While I have been studying the history of desktop text formatting systems for the past several years, I learned many new things as an observer at the DTP meeting. Below are a few examples.

I had not before heard of Rocappi (Research on Computer Applications in the Printing and Publish-

ing Industries) Incorporated. This company, founded by John Seybold in 1963, provided software and consulting for computer-based newspaper and magazine production systems, for instance to Atex. (Atex was an early and for a while a highly popular provider of computer-based newspaper production systems—more than just the page make-up function.) Rocappi's work was parallel to and independent of the RUNOFF-like stream of text processors developed in universities and industry research laboratories.

There were many other inter-company paths of connection.

The founder of Aldus (PageMaker) first got into computer-based publishing when the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* where he worked acquired an Atex system. He worked closely with Atex to specify what the computer-based newspaper system should do. Later he joined the Atex staff and, when Atex was sold to Kodak, started Aldus to build a DTP system.

People at these various companies tended to read the *Seybold Report on Publishing Systems* (begun in 1982) and, a little later, the *Seybold Report on Desktop Publishing* and to attend the Seybold Seminars (founded in 1981). Jonathan Seybold, who had joined his father at Rocappi a couple of years after its founding, was co-founder of the *Reports* with his father and the driving force behind the seminars.

The Seybold reports and meetings were one way the various DTP companies kept track of the market and of what each other were doing; and in collecting material for the reports and meetings Jonathan Seybold got wind of developments within various companies and in at least one important case put the key people in touch with each other. He told the appropriate Mac marketing manager at Apple, the founder of Aldus, and the PostScript people at Adobe that they needed to talk to each other. Out of this came an informal joint marketing campaign and Apple's push of the Mac as a DTP system.

Two pioneers at the DTP meeting are well known to the world of \TeX : Don Knuth and Chuck Bigelow. While some meeting participants don't think of \TeX as being a DTP system (not WYSIWYG, not commercial, not used on a massive scale), Don's description of his "business plan" for \TeX (public domain, not for profit, more or less unchanging, widely portable) was a useful contrast to the goals and plans of the commercial systems. Chuck's story was interesting in how widely he was connected throughout the commercial DTP world as well as with \TeX .

¹ computerhistory.org

² computerhistory.org/groups/sisig,
sites.google.com/site/softwareindustrysig

³ computerhistory.org/softwarehistory

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