The Overlooked Alternative?

There is an alternative to the high cost of Mac and PC DTP: Atari ST or Mega hardware running Calamus or PageStream.

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Atari? For desktop publishing? Give me a break! Do yourself a favor, and go out and get a real computer!" Someone actually said those exact words to me not more than a month ago, and for those of us who have used the ST/Mega platform during the past five years—for everyday tasks like word processing, spreadsheet and database calculations, telecommunications, CAD and Desktop publishing (DTP) —them's fightin' words!

Many people are not aware that Atari's ST and Mega computers have the horsepower under the hood to handle top-notch DTP applications, and that these applications do exist. There are numerous reports of people running service bureaus who, after being impressed with the quality of a document, are astounded when they find out it was created on an Atari system. The two top packages, ISD's Calamus and SoftLogik's PageStream, have no problem holding their own in comparisons with the best packages for the Macintosh and PC. The cost-effectiveness of the Atari platform? Many Atari retailers will be happy to sell you a complete DTP system — 4MB RAM, monitor, hard drive, either Calamus or PageStream, and 8PPM laser printer — for substantially less than $4,000.00.

When the October 1990 issue of BYTE magazine featured a comparison of DTP packages for their lead article, they neglected to include Atari packages in their comparison. Well, if BYTE won't do it, we'll take care of it for them. This article is the result, and it outlines how Calamus and PageStream handle the tasks covered in BYTE. There is also a companion comparison table of Atari, Mac, and PC packages.

In order to make room for PageStream and Calamus in the tables, I used only three of the packages from BYTE—PageMaker 4.0 (Mac), Quark XPress 2.12 (Mac), and Ventura Publisher 3.0 (DOS). While it's clear that PageStream and Calamus do not have every feature in the list, keep in mind that the Mac and DOS packages also fall short by about the same degree. Also note that major upgrades to both Calamus and PageStream are in the pipeline, and should be available sometime within the next six months.

Installation and Hardware Requirements

Both Calamus and PageStream require a minimum of 1MB of RAM to run, and are happiest with 4MB. Calamus requires a monochrome monitor, while PageStream uses either monochrome (recommended) or color. Both packages also support the 19" monitors available for the Atari system.

Both packages are installed in a similar manner—copy the program files to the hard disk, and edit the system paths so the program can find fonts, printer drivers, documents, etc. Neither program is copy-protected in any way, nor do they require write-enabled master disks.

Preliminary Layout

Like most of the other page-layout packages, Calamus uses the frame method for placing items on the page. PageStream, on the other hand, is similar to PageMaker, where both graphics and text "objects" such as headlines can be placed anywhere on the page. PageStream also uses frames called "columns" for the body text of a document. Once a column has been placed, it can be manipulated in a similar manner to other objects on the page.

PageStream and Calamus both use clipboards to store design elements. PageStream has the normal cut/copy/paste clipboard for text and graphic elements, plus a special clipboard for cropping bit-image pictures before they are pasted into the document.

Somewhat more convenient is the approach used by Calamus, which has five different clipboards for design elements, each of which is large enough to provide a preview of the clipboard's contents.

Master Pages

PageStream uses the same method as PageMaker and Quark XPress, with one right and one left master page available per document.

Calamus' approach is more like Ventura Publisher. Any frame in the document can be grouped and treated as a header/footer for the document, and thus be repeated on every page of the document. The contents of headers and footers can be changed in the middle of the document, and the changes will only affect those pages after the change was made. Separate headers and footers can be defined for right-and left-hand pages. Once these header/footer frames have been created, the page can be stored in a disk file, allowing a collection of “master pages” to be built.

Neither PageStream nor Calamus support on-screen thumbnail views, although these can be printed to paper if desired.

Rulers and Guides

PageStream and Calamus both allow use of rulers and guidelines, and multiple measuring systems. Elements can be snapped to guides, grids, or guides and grids at the same time.

Typography Capabilities

The only limit on the number of fonts in either ST program is the amount of memory in the machine. More memory allows more fonts to be loaded and used. Point-size increments are 0.1 point for Calamus, and 0.01 point for PageStream.

Leading, Tracking and Kerning

PageStream has defaults built in for leading and tracking. If the default values don't work right, they can be changed, either for the entire document or selected blocks of text. Leading can either be fixed or variable, depending on the size of the letters in each line. Kerning is handled by editable kerning tables, as well as manual overrides.

Calamus also uses the default with override method for leading and tracking, and also supports fixed or variable leading. Kerning in Calamus is a function of the font itself, and the only kerning control within Calamus is a manual override. Full control of kerning requires the companion Calamus

Calamus’ header/footer frames allow multiple "master pages" in a document

Font Editor, which installs as a desk accessory and allows the user to modify the “outline” around each character, and thus change the kerning value. If the font designer has done their work well, this is seldom required.

Leading and tracking values in both Calamus and PageStream can be included as part of a style tag or macro (described in the next section), allowing as many levels of tracking as are deemed necessary.

Style Sheets

Ventura Publisher they're not, but each package does allow paragraph tagging and the creation of the equivalent of style sheets. The current version of PageStream does not allow collections of tags to be loaded and saved from disk, but this promised for the next version, due out by the end of the year.

Calamus' “style sheets” are actually two separate items:

PageStream’s graphic tools may negate the need for a separate object-graphics program

page-layout information , and tags created as macro lists that define any combination of typography, paragraph style, and text strings. Layout information and macro lists can be stored in disk files, and either one retrieved as needed.

Hyphenation & Justification

H&J is one area where the current versions of Calamus and PageStream do not measure up to the other packages. Neither Calamus nor PageStream allow alteration of the default H&J algorithms. PageStream does offer three justification options that allow some fine-tuning in the document.

Text Editing

As with most DTP packages, Calamus and PageStream can't hold a candle to specialized text editors and word processors for power and ease of use. They're not entirely helpless either. Both have approximately the same level of capability as the Macintosh products, with cut, copy, paste, search, and replace of both text and style attributes. Calamus adds a separate text editor similar to Pagemaker's Story Editor.

Graphics

Different hardware platforms tend to generate different file formats, and the ST is no exception. Calamus and PageStream support a wide variety of formats for graphic importation that are generated by ST-specific graphics software. Foreign” file formats are generally limited to GEM metafiles and .IMG bitmaps, although PageStream also imports PostScript and EPS images.

For internally-generated graphics, Calamus has the basics—lines, boxes, circles, and other pre-defined shapes—with border and fill control. PageStream truly goes above and beyond most other packages, providing object-oriented drawing tools that may negate the need for a separate object-graphics program.

Both packages allow grouping of elements on a page. As far as text flow around graphics, Calamus

does not automatically flow around irregular objects, but PageStream does.

Bells & Whistles

Drop caps are done manually in both packages. PageStream handles "step and repeat" with a "duplicate" feature that defines the number of times an object is duplicated, as well as the x and y offsets.

Calamus supports rotation of selected text to any angle in tenths of a degree. PageStream allows the rotation of ANY object (text column or graphic image) to any angle in whole degrees.

Long Documents and Books

With its automatic footnote and index generation, Calamus is more suited to handling long documents than PageStream. Calamus allows the text in a document to be exported with its style and formatting information embedded in the file, allowing relatively easy updates, and has the ability to name graphic frames, allowing them to remain empty until the final graphic image has been supplied, or reserving the space for a photograph.

Printing and Typesetting

There's a big difference in Calamus' and PageStream's printing capabilities: PageStream can output in PostScript, and supports 4-color separations. Calamus does not, although both PostScript and color capabilities are on their way in the next upgrade.

For everyday 300DPI output, this is not an issue, but the need for high-resolution typesetting means that Calamus users will need to find a service bureau that has an Atari system with Calamus hooked up directly to an imagesetter, bypassing the PostScript RIP.

PageStream users can create a PostScript disk file and either modem or carry the file to the nearest PostScript service bureau.

Do They Measure Up?

Whether or not Calamus and Page-Stream will serve your needs as DTP packages is something that only you can determine. The point of all this is that there are options in DTP hardware and software that can provide a competitive, cost-effective alternative to Mac and DOS solutions.

Even if initial purchase cost is not an issue, find a local Atari dealer or user group and explore Calamus and PageStream before you make a final decision. You'll probably be pleasantly surprised at the abilities of these packages, and amazed at their cost!

Aldus Corp.
(PageMaker 4.0)
411 First Avenue South
Seattle, WA 98104
(206)622-5500

ISD Marketing, Inc.
(Calamus 1.09N)
P.O. Box 3070
Markham Industrial Park
Markham, Ontario
Canada L3R 6G4
(416)479-1880

Quark, Inc.
(Quark XPress 2.12)
300 South Jackson Street
Suite 100
Denver, CO 80209
(303)934-2211

SoftLogik Publishing Corp.
(PageStream 1.82)
P.O. Box 290071 St. Louis, MO
63219 (314)894-0431

Ventura Publishing Co.
(Ventura Publisher 3.0)
15175 Innovation Dr.
San Diego, CA 92128
(800)822-8221