

STONE UPON STONE

One small software company founded by a former architect is bucking the trends in design software – inertia, bloat and 'me-too' development. Jason Walsh speaks to Andrew Stone of Stone Design.

Graphics software is unlike most other areas of computer application development. We all want the latest features but we don't want to break backwards compatibility and certainly don't want to pay multiple times over. Other industries think nothing of using legacy software, be it through emulation or 'pickled' hardware.

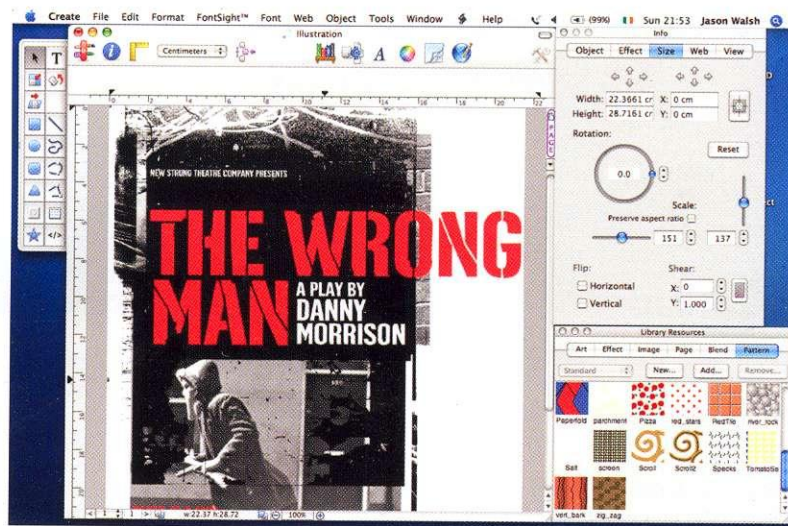
Strange as it may sound there are still large corporations and government departments in the United States using archaic mainframes for data processing – occasionally even punch-card computers – simply because it's much easier to keep using the old system than it is to replace it with a modern one. Ireland never really had much in the way of computers until the PC revolution so there aren't too many aging mainframes still in use, but it's not unusual to find legacy DOS or Unix applications running.

Apple, the traditional provider of hardware systems in the design world, does offer legacy support but it's also unafraid of using its position as sole Macintosh platform designer to implement change with the iron fist of a dictator: 68K to PowerPC, Mac OS to Mac OS X, and soon, PowerPC to Intel.

Happily Jobs and Co. usually wrap their iron fist in a velvet glove. The switch from 68K to PowerPC saw compatibility preserved through invisible emulation and so-called 'fat applications' which contained code for both 68K and PowerPC-based Macs. The move to Mac OS X saw the introduction of the 'Classic' runtime environment for older Mac software.

The impending switch from the PowerPC to Intel will be exactly the same experience as the switch from 68K to PowerPC a decade ago. Dynamic and invisible emulation of the PowerPC will be provided by Transitive's Rosetta software and

'Our software is down to the wire – Imaginator can do stuff much quicker than Photoshop. These aren't lowest common denominator applications.'



Apple are bringing the back 'fat' binaries which were used in the 90s by both Apple and Steve Jobs's other outfit, NeXT Computer.

For developers then, some headaches, but users will barely notice the change. But still, who wants to run applications in emulation when you can do the same work with faster native applications?

We've been here before – so we have to go back. Will Quark release a Mac-Intel native version of XPress anytime prior to 2010?

While we all sat waiting for the first Mac OS X-compatible edition of Quark and even InDesign one small company in New Mexico had already produced a complete design and layout solution for the new operating system. And they already have a Mac-Intel version ready to release as soon as Apple starts selling the hardware.

The company is Stone Design and the product, Stone Studio.

Of course, the reason why Stone was prepared for the 2001 release of Mac OS X was that he had already been developing it for thirteen years:

'Today Studio is the culmination of seventeen years of work. I was a

NeXTSTEP developer working with Steve [Jobs, founder of Apple and NeXT],' explains Andrew Stone, founder of Stone Design.

Stone, 49, is a former architect. 'I was a hippy, running on solar. We left raves back in San Francisco in '92, Jon Barlow and I. Legendary parties. We were developing for NeXT then. NeXT had the CIA and NSA for clients and they came to our parties,' he laughs.

Being a dedicated NeXT developer had certain advantages when Apple released Mac OS X. Not only was Mac OS X actually a new edition of NeXTSTEP, but NeXT and now Apple, have pioneered the commercial use of several groundbreaking technologies such as Display PostScript, Display PDF, Objective C and Cocoa/Openstep.

Knowledge of these technologies may mean that a Windows edition of software like Stone Studio is unlikely, but it allows the developer to concentrate on sucking the juice out the best bits of programming: application design and feature development while leaving lots of the heavy lifting to the operating system – no more re-invent-

ing the wheel just to work with type.

This means that things are typically faster with software like Stone's than they are with bloat monsters from the likes of Adobe.

'Our software is down to the wire – Imaginator can do stuff much quicker than Photoshop. These aren't lowest common denominator applications,' says Stone.

Despite this, it is hard to get a foot in the door when it comes to users – how many designers do you know that don't use at least two applications from the holy trinity, Quark XPress, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator?

'I'm trying to grow our user-base organically. We have a different model from most software companies. By giving free upgrades for life we develop a community.'

'A capitalist could look at open-source software and say 'How can I make money doing this?', well, we have a middle ground. 'Think Different' is fine,' says Stone, referring to Apple's famous marketing slogan, 'but you have to go farther – be different,' he explains.

Stone dismisses the concerns of the Church of Adobe trinitarians: 'Stone Studio has almost all of the functions of Adobe Creative Suite 2. Kerning, ligatures, the swashbuckling features of obscure fonts – they are all supported. Create alone has the capabilities of Photoshop, GoLive, InDesign, Illustrator and Streamline.'

'If you need the high-end PDF functionality, drop the files into PStill,' he suggests.

Which is all very well, but who hasn't had 'trouble at mill' when using non-standard application to produce PDFs? Can a PStill-generated PDF really be the same as its Acrobat Distiller cousin?

'It's the same as Acrobat at RIP – absolutely. It's a workflow app, it doesn't edit – do your editing in your favourite programme and bring the files into PStill when you're done. PStill can handle colour management, CMYK and ICC mapping, spot colours, PDF security, suppress images for proofing, extract text and so on and it's all drag-and-drop,' he says.

'It costs \$69 – a tenth of the cost of Acrobat – so I don't see why even Acrobat users wouldn't add PStill to their quiver of arrows,' says Stone.

Of course, Adobe's PDF handling is dubious to say the least. As many designers and printers can attest, InDesign PDFs regularly fail at RIP.

'I get endless amusement at Adobe's producing horrible PDF code. InDesign CS is broken so that you are forced to use Distiller. Illustrator is the same. Well, PStill can even fix InDesign's broken PDFs. Hundreds of newspapers in Europe use PStill.'

'Quark and Adobe rely on the bloat-

ed IT budgets of large corporations. It's a matter of scale. Some people say, 'This market's too small or that market's no good', well, if I got a tenth of the Mac market I'd be happy. In fact I'd have to change my lifestyle – upwards. A tenth of a percent is a lot – do the numbers.'

Stone's logic runs contrary to that of the rest of the software industry where the basic idea is to squeeze every last Euro from each and every possible customer.

'We're devoted to our users,' says Stone. 'If you don't piss people off they do the marketing you need,' he said.

Stone's strategy is to keep developing the application and allow its feature-set and price talk to early adopters and have these bleeding-edge people promote the suite by sharing their experiences with friends and colleagues.

Whom, exactly, is the target market for Stone Studio?

'Independent designers first – after all, with a PDF workflow you can use any software you like – then Mac power users. We can't really go after where Adobe has their sales force anyway and there are people that are too locked in to Adobe's user interface.'

'If people are married to Adobe then probably our products aren't for them,' he admits.

One stone at a time

So how did Stone Design come into being?

'In 1985 I got my first Mac – a Macintosh 512. In '87 I started doing HyperCard development. I was an architect and builder at that time. All of the skills I developed in architecture school applied to software development – wiring and plumbing in a house compares to the 'wiring' and 'plumbing' in a programme too. We use the same metaphors: software architecture,' says Stone.

'Anyway, with HyperCard end-users were offered a way to program simply for the first time.'

'Then when NeXT came to town they took me out to dinner and asked, 'Why don't you become a NeXT developer?'

'The catch was I had to buy a \$10,000 computer and a \$2,000 printer plus spend another \$2,000 to go to NeXT's developer camp,' laughs Stone.

'Three months of development later my first NeXTSTEP application was ready: TextArt.'

'These days we're still small – we have two software engineers, an artist and one financial person,' explains Stone. 'How can a small shop do this? We're using Apple's Cocoa future technologies!' he, literally exclaims.

'Really good software has a clear vision. The problem with Adobe's software is that it's too big – a mess.'

Stone is a clear enthusiast for the Cocoa technology. Adherence to Apple's Cocoa standards means that Stone Design is able to develop and ship applications with greater speed than its competitors: 'Last fall I asked myself can I, if I work full-on, deliver something that does the bulk of Photoshop's work? Can it be faster and easier to use?'

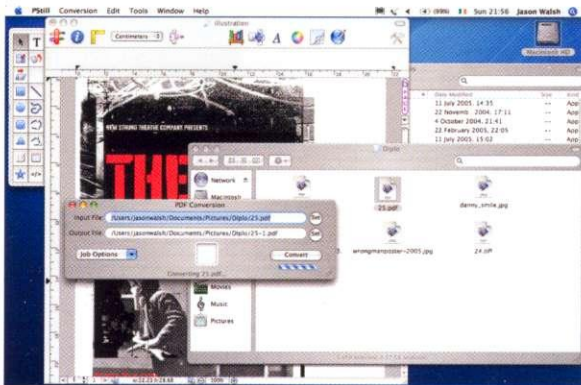
The answer appears to be yes. The result of Stone's work was Imaginator, an application which leverage's a new graphics technology in Mac OS X called Core Image.

Despite the reluctance of Quark and Adobe to catch-up, other developers of note are delivering Cocoa applications such as Delicious Monster, the Omni Group and Softmagic.

'Softmagic – MLayout, yeah. They use our licencing software. They're very different to us but they're doing excellent things in the newspaper space,' says Stone.

Still, Stone's enthusiasm does beg the question, why aren't the major developers delivering Cocoa applications?

'There's a reluctance to use Apple's core technologies. 'Not invented here' syndrome. Well, if our competitors aren't going to take advantage of it, we will,' says Stone. ■



About Stone Studio

Stone Studio is a suite of interoperable design applications for Mac OS X. All will work with Mac OS X 10.2 or higher except Imaginator which requires Mac OS X 10.4 (Tiger).

The main application is Create, an integrated layout and vector illustration programme. Imaginator is bitmap editor in the mould of Photoshop, though with a rather different user-interface. Also included are Stamp in Stone, a watermarking application, Pack Up and Go, a data compression solution and PStill, a complete PDF creation utility.

Other applications and utilities include FontSight, Global Warmth, Slice and Dice, Photo to Web, GIF Fun, Preference Commander and Time Equals Money.

Stone Studio Stone Design - \$299
<http://stone.com>