

Quark XPress 8

Once the darling of designers everywhere, QuarkXPress has been lately languishing in the shadow of Adobe's InDesign. Version 8, however, offers some pretty seductive tools and features, but will they be enough to win back the hearts of creative pros? We find out.



Words Keith Martin

'The customer is always

right' is a concept that almost any professional would agree with, at least in principle. Yet for many, many years, it seemed that Quark was ploughing a different furrow, following the maxim that 'the customer will always follow'. It wasn't until the advent of Adobe InDesign, plus some years for the threat to sink in, that change became apparent at Quark.

QuarkXPress 7 marked a sea change for the company; this is when it was clearly starting to

listen to its customers and trying to produce something that suited their evolved needs better than previous versions.

It was Intel-native well before Adobe managed this with InDesign, and clever features such as Composition Zones allowed multi-user editing of layouts – albeit with some acrobatic hoop-jumping required. As well as rethinking the features in the application itself, access to support became dramatically better, with free email and telephone help

offered to registered users. However, despite all of these improvements, the spotlight remained largely on InDesign.

At this point, we should point out that XPress is still a major force in the publishing world, and it remains enormously important for design, production and printing companies of all sizes. Quark's real concern, from where we sit, isn't simply the number of users who have moved to InDesign, it's also the number of people who still use XPress today but feel they will

probably have to switch to Adobe's offering eventually.

With this in mind, the two big questions in everyone's heads are whether the newly announced XPress 8 is good enough and whether it has come soon enough to stop the slide.

We've taken a long, hard look at what's about to be launched, and we've drawn our conclusions. Before you jump to the end of this article to see what those might be, though, read through our findings and see what you think.

INTERFACE

According to Denise Duffy, Quark's European PR specialist, one of the main things the company decided to concentrate on with the development of XPress 8 was how to enhance usability and efficiency for regular design and production needs. It was important that this version 'improved the everyday user experience'. The first and most obvious outcome of these efforts is a dramatically refined interface, with a streamlined and seriously pared-down Tools palette, a refined window design, effective palette window grouping abilities, and that long-desired workflow enhancement, support for drag-and-drop importing and exporting.

Organising the various palettes to our own liking is something most of us do, so it's good to see both a new form of multi-palette dock and the ability to save palette arrangements for later recall. In the beta version we tested, we weren't able to add floating windows to the main group of palettes, but this should be something that's fixed by the time the final release is made available.

TOOLS

Following Adobe's lead, XPress now uses single-key shortcuts for selecting tools. Creative Suite users will recognise some (such as V for the selection tool and T for text content selection), and the few others are reasonably logical. For the tools that contain a pop-out menu of options (shown by an almost invisible triangle in the tool icon), hitting the shortcut key repeatedly will cycle through the available tools. Just as with this feature in InDesign, you'll need to make sure you're not editing a text box at the time, but other than that standard point, this is a great example of a small feature that will make a big difference to an experienced designer's workflow.

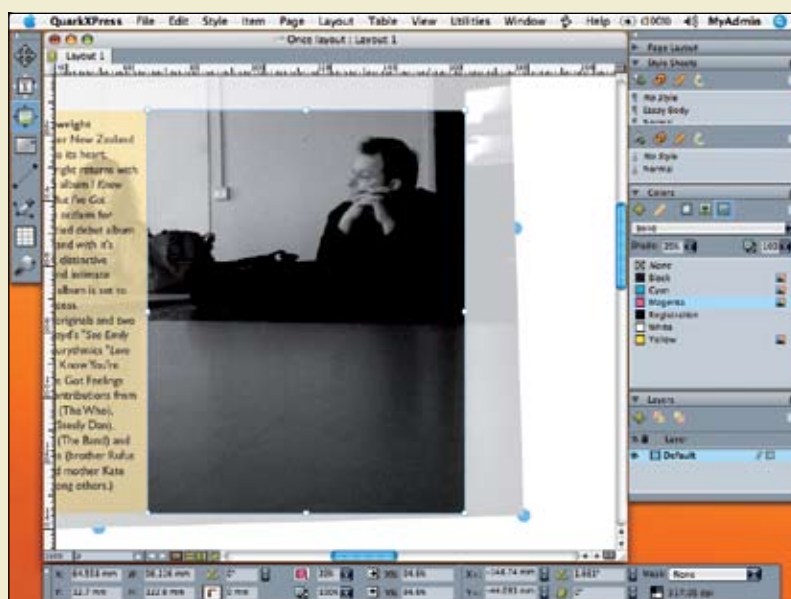
There are now eight icons in the Tools palette; six fewer than before. The Content Selection tool is also effectively split into two: one for type and one for graphics. These both create new boxes if they're not used on existing ones. They're joined by a tool for drawing generic rectangles, ovals, starbursts or composition zone boxes, which is a logical grouping of tools that accounts for much of the slimming down of this palette.

Boxes no longer have to be either graphic or text containers; instead, in a blindingly sensible move, the rectangle tool creates items set to a content type of 'none' so they can contain whatever you choose to put in them. When you give a box some kind of content, that fixes its content type. However, as before, it can be converted or reassigned to 'none'.

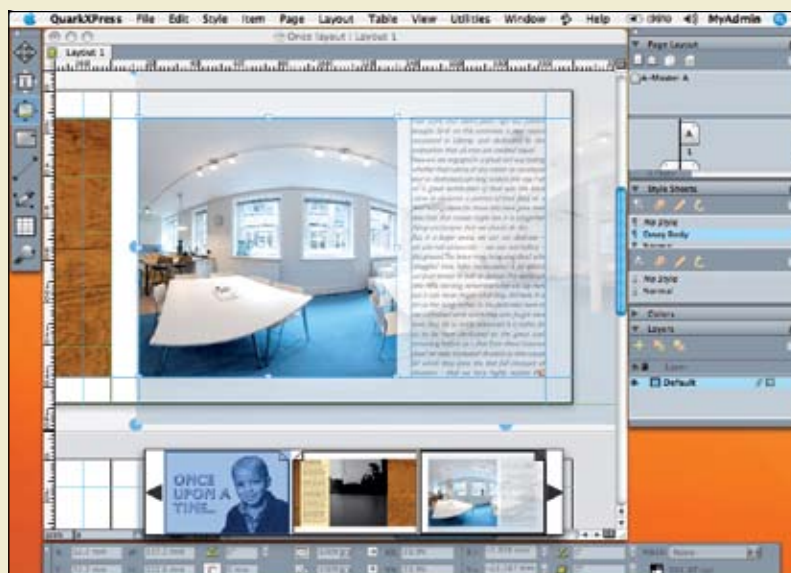
TYPOGRAPHY

One of the features of InDesign that grabbed the attention of type-aware designers early on was the ability to set hanging punctuation, where quotes and similar punctuation characters could be set to 'hang'

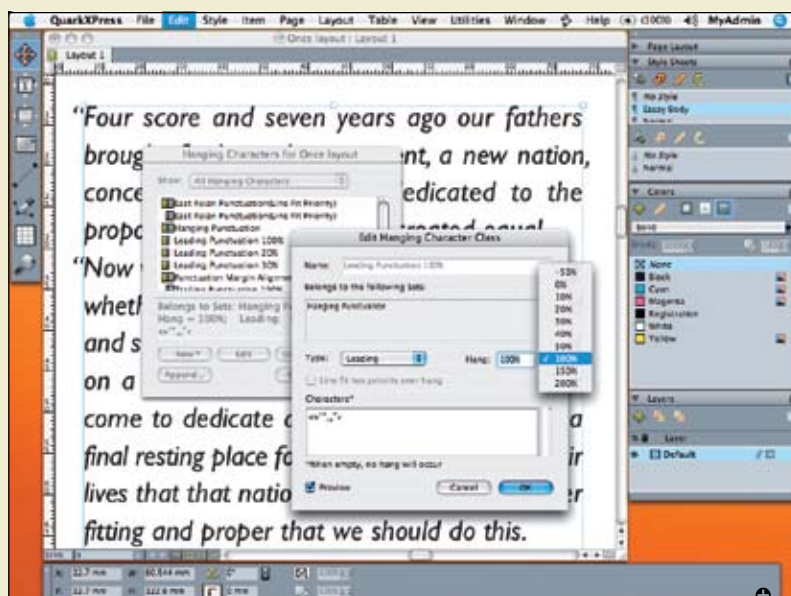
► Hanging punctuation, or any specific characters for that matter, outside of a text frame to provide better optical alignment is handled with Hanging Characters classes and sets.

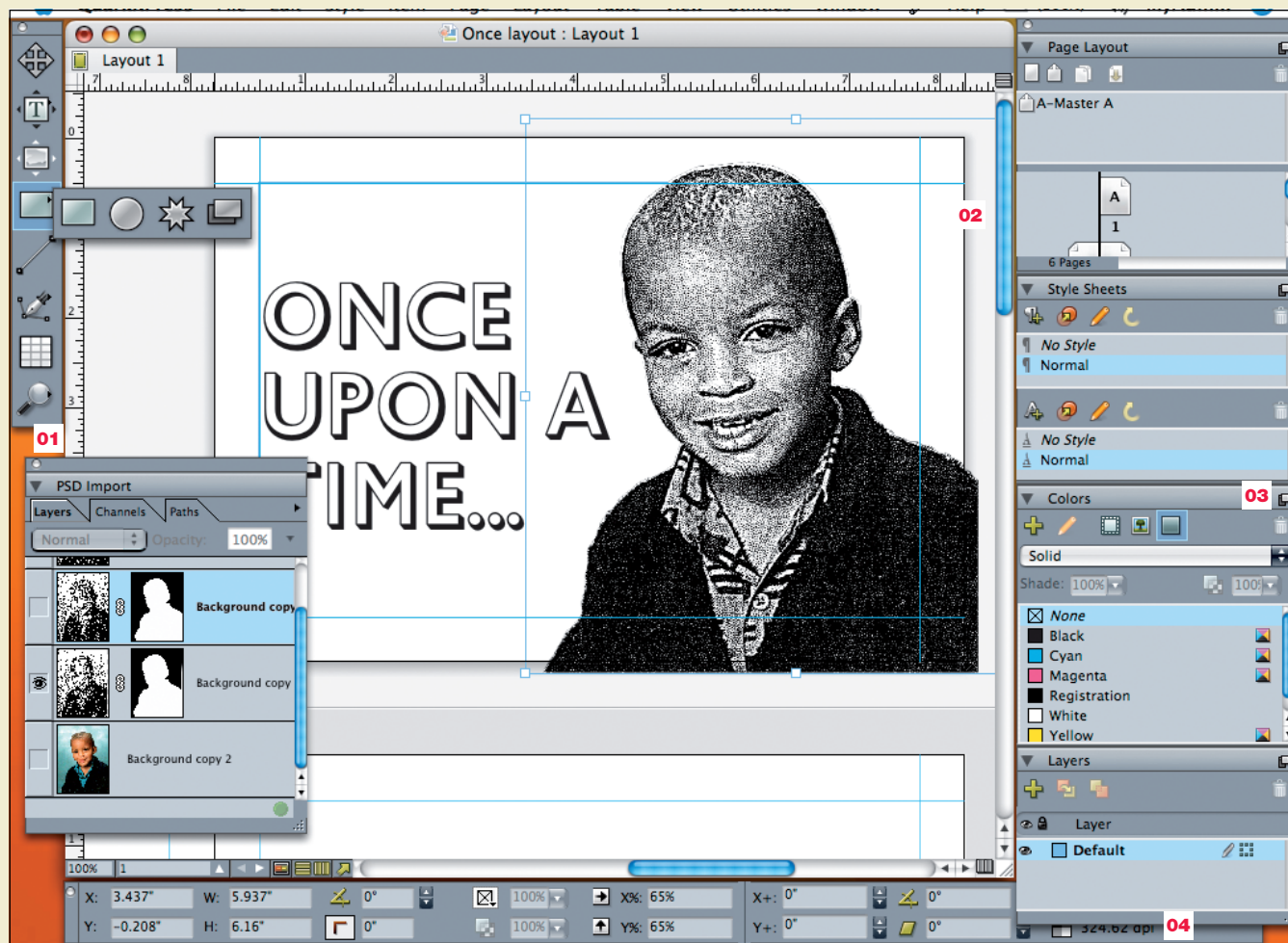


▲ Dealing with image content within frames is now simpler and more flexible. The Picture Content tool reveals resize and rotate handles and a dimmed preview of the whole image.



▲ The page icons that are shown when navigating between pages in a document can be enlarged with the arrow keys to show custom thumbnail previews.





▲ Importing layered Photoshop images works as it did before. Now it's joined by support for native Illustrator file import, although without access to Illustrator layers.

partly off the edge of a column of text in order to create optically even line ends. XPress 8 trumps this with the new 'hanging character' feature. Rather than just working with certain punctuation characters, a designer can specify ranges of characters – any at all – to be hung, and can set that up as a form of style that can be applied to text.

There are predefined defaults, but any characters that a designer wants to set as hanging can be listed in a custom hanging character class, which also defines details such as applicable typeface and the amount of 'hang' these will have. If different characters require different offset values these can be dealt with in separate classes. Finally, by grouping classes into sets, it becomes simplicity itself to apply whole class collections to text at once. This feature offers an enormous amount of fine typographic control, but the average designer will need to put some serious thought into how they implement it. It's impressive, but going beyond the basics here isn't exactly simple.

The type menu is now a Wysiwyg display of the fonts that are listed, and even with a fairly full set of active fonts, this was rendered reasonably quickly. When dealing with more quirky faces, holding down the Shift key toggles this option on and off, as does a simple preferences checkbox.

01 The new tool palette is much simpler than before and groups tools logically.

02 Pages are shown with a soft-edged shadow rather than the old, cut-out effect.

03 Palettes can be grouped together and moved around as one, and their positions can be saved and recalled.

04 The current effective pixel resolution of selected images is shown in the Measurements palette.

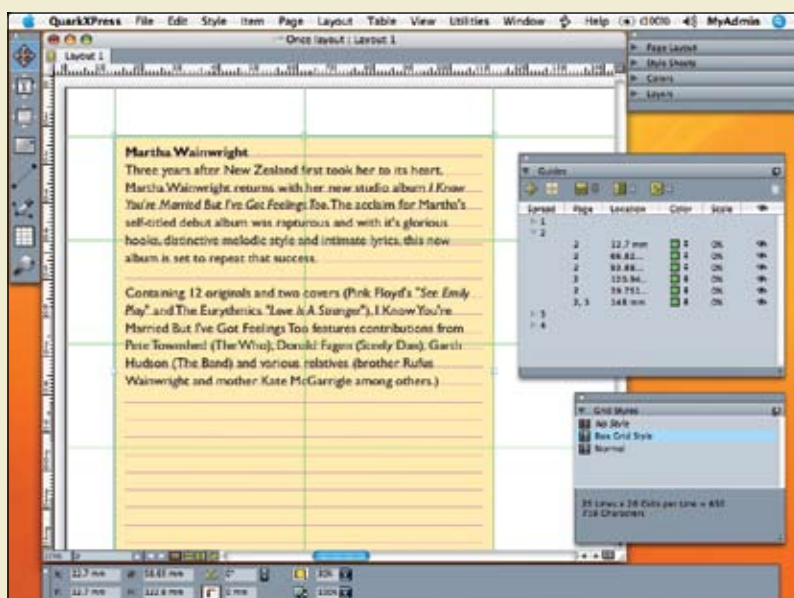
COMPATIBILITY

Every designer who has access to more than a shoestring budget will have a copy of Photoshop handy, and most of them will have Illustrator as well. This is a basic fact of life in the creative industry, so it's very good news to find that XPress now plays well with native Illustrator as well as native Photoshop documents. Moreover, because XPress 8 is now happy to deal with drag-and-drop import, you can use Adobe Bridge to manage content and add items to your layouts. Taking advantage of this is a wise move, and it will definitely be of great benefit to most users.

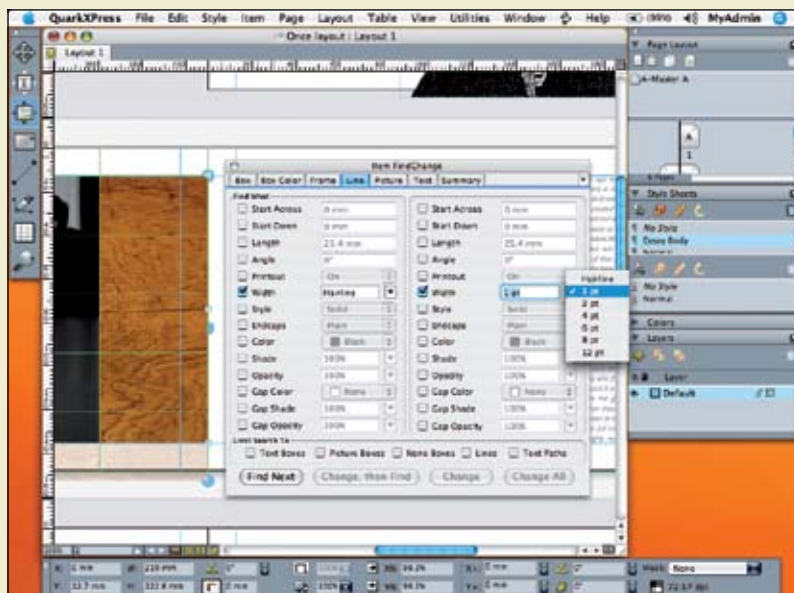
Support for native Photoshop file import isn't new to XPress 8, as even access to individual layers in a Photoshop image has been with us since version 7, and remains surprisingly absent in InDesign. The native Illustrator import doesn't offer layer control, but that's generally less crucial with that format. The on-screen quality of line art in these files isn't particularly great unless the Full Resolution Preview is turned on, but it's fine for general design and production work. The better preview option takes longer to render, so it isn't something you're likely to enable for everything. InDesign tends to render imported vector graphics a little better, but the difference wasn't huge.

- Scaling, cropping and rotating graphics has been a basic of DTP since the very beginning. And until now, that's how it has felt through every version of XPress – like something from an earlier, simpler age. Fortunately, the guys at Quark have finally given it a rethink: object handles are a little larger, and when using the Picture Selection tool, you get a dimmed preview of the parts of the image that lie outside the picture box's crop. Chunky selection handles are also shown when picture content is selected, so you can scale and rotate images directly, independently of their containing frames.

As images are scaled up or down, there's a live resolution feedback in the Measurements palette showing the pixel-per-inch scale for the current dimension. The beta version we tested here listed this as dpi rather than ppi, a common confusion, but it's certainly highly useful feedback and great to see it presented so clearly.



▲ Setting up grids and guides is far more sophisticated than it was in the past, with per-object grids, including custom baselines, and a palette dedicated to managing guides.



▲ The Item Find/Change feature has been available as a commercial add-on in the past, but now this powerful and useful tool is built into the core application.

GRIDS AND GUIDES

As anyone in the magazine or book publishing industry can tell you, a good grid breathes life into a design, especially where layout structures must be repeated across many pages and editions. The grid features in XPress all the way through to version 7 are best described as rudimentary. InDesign's Create Guides dialog box, simple and flawed though it may be, was always far better. This obviously made an impression, as the new grids and guides features here are jaw-droppingly powerful and comprehensive.

Grids are set using grid styles, in the manner of type or object styles, and are applied either directly to master pages or to individual frames. These are set up using font sizes and other metrics as the source for the grid. This may be a new approach to many designers, but it's actually an excellent approach to grid construction. If you're a baseline grid user, the baseline position options in this allow far more control, and they can be read from the metrics of any font.

A senior product manager at Quark referred to these as 'a kind of super baseline grid', which is a pretty good description.

The Guides palette is for the more old-school approach, where traditional guides are listed. These can be set en masse or dragged out from the rulers in the normal way. Each page has its guides listed in this palette, and you can edit them, hide them and delete them one by one from there. Even if you don't get on with the high-powered grids, you're bound to find this really rather useful.

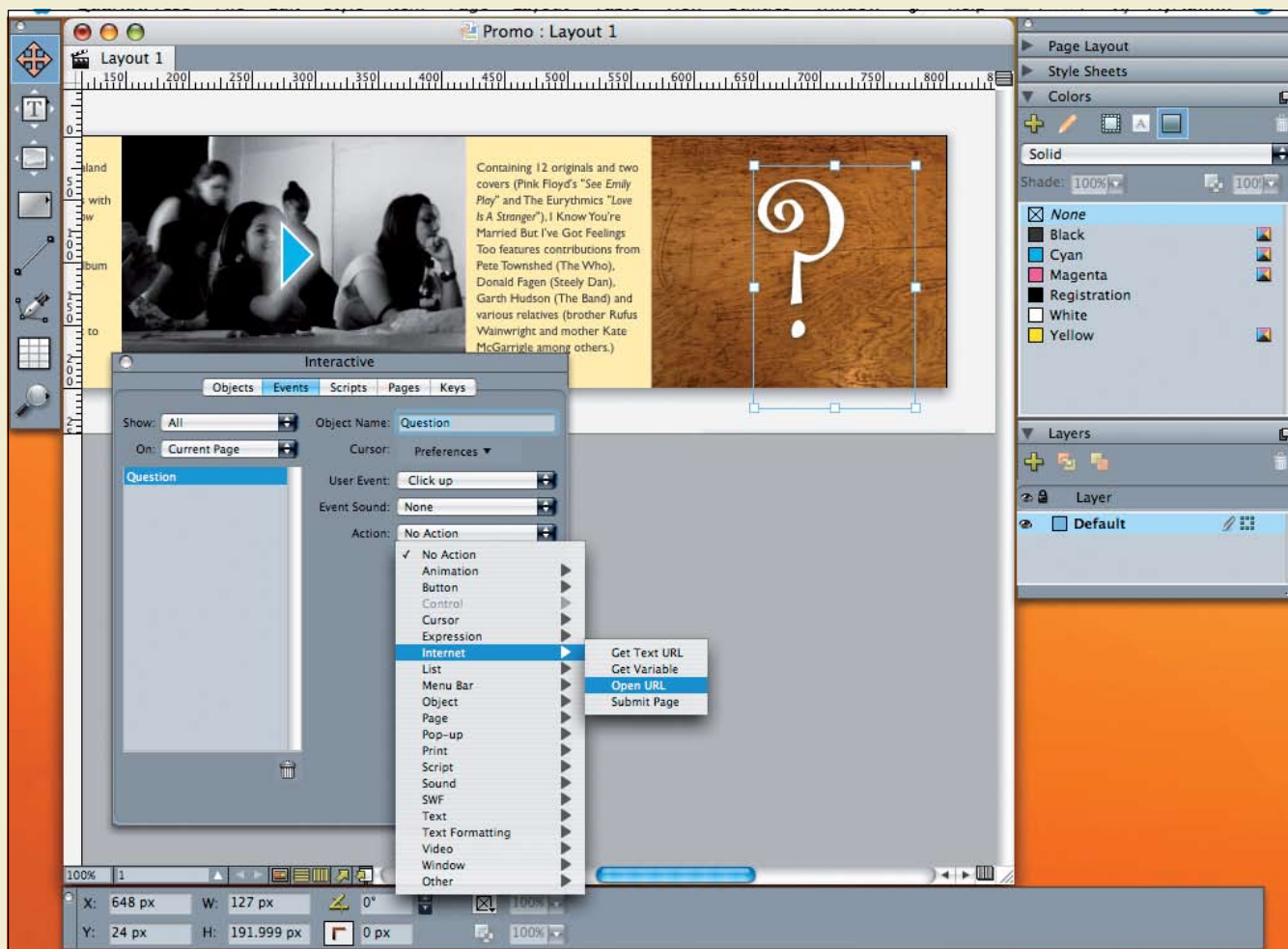
INTERACTIVE DESIGNER

Quark's Interactive Designer, once a commercial add-on Xtension, is now built into the core application. This means that as well as the traditional print layout and more recent web layout abilities that we all expect, XPress is also a rather effective tool for creating rich Flash-format SWF output. In many ways, Interactive Designer is just the same as before, but it can now make full use of any regular XPress feature in its Flash-based output. It won't threaten Flash's dominance, but it offers a large percentage of Flash's functionality in a manner that takes just a small percentage of the effort. Flash programmers won't be swayed, but mainstream designers will appreciate the sophisticated layout-orientated tools and environment this brings to interactive SWF creation.

The Item Find/Change feature is another that was previously available as an add-on Xtension. This allows items to be found according to a wide list of parameters – width, location, fill, and many dozens of fine-grained attributes – and to have those things changed automatically as well if you want. Bringing this in as a core feature is a smart move, as this is a genuinely useful set of features that will make a big difference to busy production experts.

PASSPORT-FREE

Anyone who works with multiple-language documents – and, indeed, anyone who has struggled with opening a QuarkXPress Passport document in a



▲ Quark's Interactive Designer is now built in to the application, so every XPress user will have sophisticated Flash SWF design tools at their command.

regular version of XPress – will be delighted about this next bit of news: QuarkXPress Passport is no more. Every copy of XPress 8 will have full multilingual type setting and handling abilities as standard. Those working with double-byte-character languages such as Japanese, Korean and so on will still need to extend their copy to XPress Plus. This isn't Passport by another name: it simply reveals a range of complex controls for controlling type in certain extreme ways, including rich vertical alignment features.

Documents made or edited with QuarkXPress Plus are completely compatible with the regular XPress 8, including any Plus-specific elements, although those can't be adjusted in the regular version simply because the rather esoteric (to most people) controls aren't there to clutter things up.

SPEED

Finally, there's performance. It isn't fair to make definitive judgements about speed with pre-release software, but the beta version of XPress 8 that we tested did feel fairly snappy. The hardware requirements weren't finalised while we were testing, but it seems like it will run on a decent variety of machines without dragging its heels. This has always been one of this product's claims to fame, and it seems set to remain so.

BACK IN THE RACE

Okay, that's our summary of what XPress 8 is going to provide. We can't for the moment give a truly in-depth report, but this should give you a good idea of what's on offer and how it will affect you. Using this version proved to be surprisingly compelling. Sure, there aren't quite as many new features crammed into this release as there were in the previous version, but what has been added makes a lot of sense and what was there already now feels much better organised.

This release has changed XPress from being something of a 20th century throwback to a forward-looking 21st century product. It has come late, in many people's eyes, but it's a remarkable comeback. Even if you're an InDesign CS3 user, the powerful grids and guides management in XPress 8 is so far in advance of the competition, and the built-in Interactive Designer makes Flash-based SWF creation so much a standard design process, that you may feel a definite pull. We didn't expect to feel like this, but XPress 8 seems like a product that will get people excited about DTP once more.

Only time will tell which way the market will go or, indeed, if any one product will ever dominate today's print design and publishing world in the way XPress did in the 1990s. However, one thing's certain: this race just got interesting again.