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## Extensis QX-Tools 4 review

XPress 3 was around for a long time and the XTension developers took advantage of the technology and the many features that were not inherent in the programme and produced some really great suites of XTensions. The foremost of these being A Lowly Apprentice Production (ALAP)'s two volume XPert Tools and Extensis's QX-Tools.

With the arrival of XPress 4 the usefulness of these XTensions was pretty much obliterated with character style sheets, a decent printing set up and the other improvements built in. The hardest hit seems to be XPert Tools. Between the improvements in 4 and the freebies mentioned in the last issue there doesn't seem to be many reasons to fork out for the two volumes, even though they are very well implemented. Extensis has moved quickly to update its QX-Tools to take advantage of XPress's new features. QX-Tools 2 was a great value package for XPress 3.3 offering really useful features in one installation. With version 4 they have divided it into two parts, a bitmap part (QX-Filters) and a vector part (QX-Tools 4). We are going to look at the recently released QX-Tools 4.

The installer for QX-Tools offers the options of complete or custom install. I would go for the complete install in this case and remove the pieces you don't need later. A large monitor is really necessary with this XTension. Apart from adding new palettes it also adds a new menu to the menu bar. This makes the palettes easily accessible if you do not have the space to keep them open. The palettes are tabbed and dockable but if you want to keep them readily available you still need monitor space for at least three. Nowadays a second monitor for palettes is the best solution and easily affordable.

## odgy imports

The big selling point of this release is QX-VectorEdit. This allows EPS, PostScript and PDF files to be opened as XPress files for editing. It does quite a good job of converting vector images and even embedded TIFF files are reproduced but it is not so successful with type. On the files I tried text was on a path and the path was split into several parts, even in the middle of a word. It also does not warn of missing fonts. As the strength of XPress is its typographic control it seems a little pointless. Most graphic professionals have either Adobe Illustrator or Macromedia Freehand which do a much better job of opening these files and allow them to be exported into many other formats. The other disadvantage is the new document can't be opened by someone who is still using XPress 3.3. The beauty of PDFs is their size (or lack of). For example, when creating design guideline manuals, it would be much more useful if it was possible for a PDF file to be imported as a graphic into a picture box instead of having to make a huge EPS of an XPress page. (LATE NEWS: In the last issue I mentioned the alpha release PDF Filter from Quark. It has now moved on to beta which allows the import of PDFs into picture boxes, although at this stage it will only print low-res and the export doesn't work any better but things are improving. It can be downloaded from the Quark website.)

The rest of the suite is made up of QX-Viewer, QX-Layers, QX-ItemStyles, QX-FindChange and five sections of what used to be QX-FineTune. QX-Viewer acts pretty much as the Navigator panel in Adobe Photoshop allowing zooming and navigation throughout the document. QX-ItemStyles lets you create style sheets for objects within a document and across documents. I'm not sure how useful or time saving this is or in what context it would help in real world production. Properly set up master pages and text style sheets are always an advisable way to work. This is also true for QX-FineTune. While these offer a comprehensive range of palette based tweaks for character, paragraph and rule styles generally it is better to set up proper style sheets in the first place. Most power users tend to use keyboard short cuts to do their tweaking and are unlikely to change in a hurry. QX-Object is slightly more useful as it allows the changing of the attributes (except colour) of a picture or text box without going through various menus and palettes. QX-FindChange allows you to search and replace any object and specification, as in FreeHand. For example if you want to change all boxes with a black fill to a red fill.

## different scale

This brings us to the more useful parts of the suite, QX-Layers and QX-Scaler. QX-Layers allows the use of layers in XPress as in all other graphics programmes, and works in a similar manner. Layers can be moved and hidden and make document management much easier than cycling through send to back and bring to front. Finally QX-Scaler offers a more robust scaling tool than that built into XPress 4, which does not work that well often causing text to reflow. The number of options available ensures complete control of every aspect of the scaling. It is even possible to enter a final dimension rather than a percentage and has its own independent undo. For me this is not really a worthwhile upgrade. QX-Tools 2 was much better value with the filters and effects for shadows etc built in. The only thing that has been added is the QX-VectorEdit which doesn't even work particularly well, at the expense of the filters. A demo can be downloaded from <http://www.extensis.com> if you want to try for yourself. Personally, I find alap's XPert Tools better implemented and the two volumes can now be found bundled at a very competitive price, if you are not already using them. I will look at XPert Tools next time, as it has been upgraded for compatibility with V4.

X rating: xxx

Pros: Scaling tool, layers. Tabbed palettes

Cons: VectorEdit doesn't import text properly, only works with XPress 4.03, fewer XTensions in suite than QX-Tools 2


## All boxed up

XPress is a great programme for all sorts of page layout tasks from magazines to small ads. One thing it does not really excel at is forms. There are countless work arounds for producing easily editable forms. This time I want to concentrate on creating data boxes, in particular those used for entering credit card numbers and the like.

There are innumerable ways of presenting forms depending on corporate guidelines and designers' whims. If you are in complete control of the design you can make it work in very simple ways. Most forms require black or solid colour rules of a specific weight with white boxes on a tinted background. Unfortunately these are the most difficult to produce.

There are a couple of XTensions that can do the job for you. FormsX (available from XChange International - <http://www.xchangeuk.com>) is a full blown professional XTension with a matching price. At nearly £2000 you will want to set a lot of forms to justify it. Another more affordable XTension called Combs comes from Durrant Software (<http://www.durrant.co.uk> or

phone 01603 766 550 in the UK). This allows you complete control of all aspects of the process. It even supplies a free distributable XTension that allows other XPress users to view and print your work. At around £150 it is probably a worthwhile investment if you do at least one form a month. If, however, your software budget has been blown out buying XPress 4 here are some tips to try.

In XPress it was always possible to paste inline text and graphics boxes, which meant it was easy to create tick boxes and even data boxes but with little precise control over the spacing. Pasting in a white box with the appropriate border was fine but the vertical dividers posed a problem. Getting the dividers to the right spec and spacing (using the Space/align - ) wasn't too hard either but keeping them aligned was another matter. Taking the worst scenario mentioned above (tint background, solid rules, white fill) it is possible to use a new feature in XPress 4 that allows rules to be pasted into text as boxes are.

Start with vertical rule to the height required (say 12pt) with a weight of .25pt (the safest minimum). Copy and paste it into the text line, aligned to the baseline, repeating as many times as necessary (17 rules for 16 spaces, for example). If the boxes have to fill a column width set the line to force justified, if not, track them to the necessary width (120 should make a square

with 12 pt verticals) Using the Rules style (⌘ shift N) set the 'Rule Above' width to the height of the vertical rule (12pt), colour - white (or any other if you choose), offset should be 0 mm (not %) it will also need a left inset of .35mm (this is because XPress leaves a slight inset with inline objects). If the box is the whole column width then a similar right indent should be set, if not you will need to calculate this amount. XPress allows you to do basic calculations in measurement boxes. For example, enter the column width then minus the length of the rule (e.g. 100mm-12pt\*16) a little trial and error and using the 'Apply' button or ⌘-A should do it. Next set the 'Rule Below' to the same weight as the verticals (.25pt) in black (or your chosen colour) the offset to 0 mm and the insets as the 'Rule Above'. This leaves the top rule to close the box. This will have to be specified with the previous line/para as a 'Rule Below' with the same specs as the 'Rule Below' for the previous line but the offset will be determined by the para format. Once everything is set it is a good idea to make them into style sheets for future use. The advantage of this method is that the verticals can be changed to variable lengths and weights.

The disadvantage is that it is not so easy, but not impossible, to have two of these data boxes on the same line. If you are not under such rigid constraints it is certainly easier. With a one colour print job you can use the same method described above, but instead of using the 'Rule Above' to make the white fill it can be used as the top rule of the box, using the same specs as the 'Rule Below' but with an offset to match the vertical rule height (12pt). If you are working with a tinted background but don't require solid rules just paste in boxes and tighten up the tracking. The same can be done with Zapf Dingbats (short cut - ⌘ shift Z then n) adjusting the point size and tracking to suit. Using Dingbats with an outline is not really to be recommended as it can cause problems with high-end output. It is also possible to create boxes using the new feature in XPress 4 that allows editing of Dashes and Stripes, but it is quite complicated and doesn't give the necessary accuracy and control.

One final tip when setting forms. If you want a tick box to line up flush with the right hand side of a column it is almost impossible to do by setting a normal right hand tab. Make the last tab a forced tab (option tab) and it will line up perfectly with the right margin.

Everybody has their own methods of working but hopefully these tips will make a horrible job just a little bit easier to control when your client starts changing things at the last moment. Next time we'll look at some of the often overlooked basics that make XPress easier to use.

## Immedia (half) upgrade

It looks like Quark is finally preparing to ship an upgrade to Immedia, its multimedia/web design XTension. Version 1.5 will resolve many of the niggling bugs of version 1. These include the ability to use 16 or 24 bit colour with colour palettes that are variable between pages rather than fixed to one palette of 256 colours for the project. Leading specifications will be maintained in text boxes when projects are exported.

In addition it will support QuickTime 3. More scripts and actions and better handling of them, with the ability to use passwords and other interactivity including the ability to send email from within a project. There will also be improved, optimised export of finished projects, especially across platforms. On the Web side projects can be exported with an HTML description for search engines.

These are all welcome improvements but they come at a price. Quark will be asking around £130 for an upgrade from version 1. This is a bit steep for an incremental upgrade that addresses many bugs that should not have been in the first release. A full review will be done when it is released towards the end of the year.

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