

growing UP with powerpoint

The history of PowerPoint is in many ways the history of electronic presentations. Our Creative Techniques columnist Jim Endicott was there at the beginning. In this look back, he recounts the evolutionary road PowerPoint has taken, from its infancy as a basic slide-creation program to its current status as the presentation software champion of the world.

by Jim Endicott

Twelve years ago, I found myself in the middle of the computer-graphics revolution — although I didn't know it at the time. . . .

I was the production manager for the Seattle office of Genigraphics Corp., a national service bureau with 22 offices. We weren't the largest location of the 22, but we happened to be in Microsoft's backyard, which gave us some cachet among our peers. Little did we know what impact Microsoft would ultimately have on our business when it unveiled the industry's first viable presentation-graphics software, a hitherto obscure little program called PowerPoint.

In those early days of presentation graphics, a business presenter's choices were pretty straightforward: You would crank out your presentation on a typewriter with a 12-point head and either make overheads on the office photocopier or bring your rough input to a service bureau to be recreated on huge computer-design stations. The former was economical but ugly, and the latter could cost you and your business a small fortune — Genigraphics charged \$240 an hour for console-create time in 1988. Color computer-generated presentation output was out of reach for most small businesses and barely tolerated by the larger ones, who frequently paid rush fees of 150 to 200 percent to make their tight deadlines. It wasn't unusual for a simple title slide to cost hundreds of dollars.

Forethought — but no malice

In the mid-1980s, while Genigraphics was busy developing bigger and more sophisticated computer design stations, two software developers in a small California-based company called Forethought Inc. were quietly developing the personal computer's first presentation-graphics software, PowerPoint 1.0. Their early efforts went relatively unrewarded. A number of venture-capital firms declined to invest, on the grounds that the market was already full of products that could create overheads. But Bob Gaskins, Forethought's owner and the program's co-developer, was not to be dissuaded. After two years (1986–87) of negotiating, he sold the company and his fledgling software solution to Microsoft for a cool \$14 million.

It didn't take Microsoft long to leverage the acquisition. By September 1987, it released its PowerPoint 1.0, forever changing the world of presentation graphics. Although this PowerPoint 1.0, available in black-and-white for the Apple Macintosh, featured only the most basic drawing tools, it quickly took off. Sales in the first year topped \$1 million as the program jockeyed for position on Macintosh desktops around the English-speaking world. Meanwhile, back at PowerPoint's new home, the Microsoft Graphics Business Unit (GBU) in Menlo Park, Calif., product managers, including Kathy Harris,

were on a crusade.

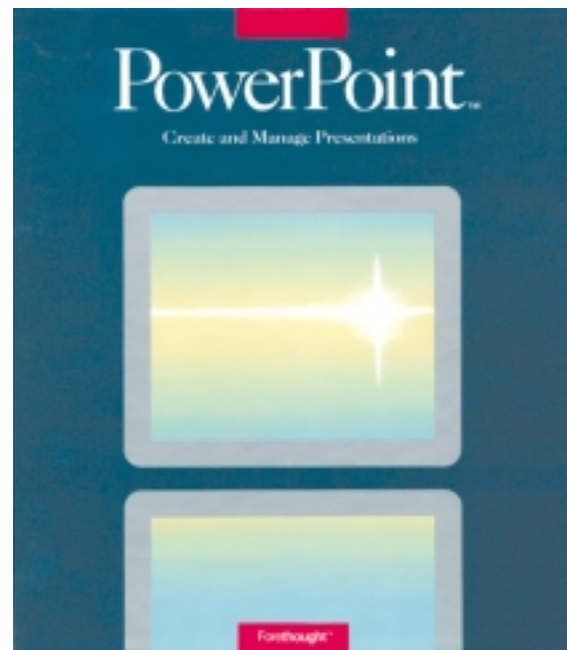
"We weren't too worried about sales," Harris says. "We knew we were solving a huge user need and the sales would follow." Because of the scrutiny most development teams endured, she and her staff were thankful that they were a thousand miles down the coast from Microsoft's headquarters in Redmond, Wash. "We were pretty much

left alone while Redmond was preoccupied with Word and Excel. It was great!"

The Genigraphics years

Because Genigraphics knew more about business presentation graphics than anyone else at the time, Microsoft forged an alliance with us that provided the software giant with some much-needed graphics know-how to accel-

then



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erate PowerPoint's product development. The precrafted templates we created helped graphically challenged business presenters put together relatively good-looking presentations without much effort. But once the idea of do-it-yourself presentations started catching on, it represented a direct threat to Genigraphics' main business, as well as that of anyone else who made a living providing 35mm slides and overheads for corporate America.

In May 1988, Microsoft announced a major upgrade to PowerPoint: version 2.0. Then still available only in Macintosh format, PowerPoint 2.0 provided some much-needed enhancements that made presentation graphics more practical for the business presenter. Instead of a palette of 256 colors, the digital possibilities extended to 16.8 million colors plus "custom" colors and templates. Such features as a spell-checker, BRING TO FRONT, SEND TO BACK, FIND and REPLACE joined the list of menu options. Presenters could now import files from such Postscript-based applications as Adobe Illustrator and Aldus Freehand, although not as easily as they could import native PICT and PICT II files. Business presenters were beginning to get their first taste of the wonderful world of computer graphics.

Promises, promises

Jumping the gun a bit, PowerPoint 2.0 proudly boasted that presenters could easily have Genigraphics turn their files into beautiful color 35mm slides. Unfortunately, the technology did not yet exist to directly image the files. Instead, to fulfill this promise, several hundred "Geni" artists on \$50,000

design stations were re-creating every presentation slide, using the printed template guides provided in the PowerPoint box. This was no small annoyance to these highly paid artists. Macs were rolled into every Genigraphics service center to help facilitate a fast-approaching commitment to provide direct imaging of PowerPoint files for anyone who wanted them. For many artists in the network, it was the first time they had ever seen a Macintosh computer.

Meanwhile, the Genigraphics folks worked feverishly on a software solution that could do what the PowerPoint package promised — create 35mm slides from PowerPoint files. "We camped out 24 hours a day for nearly two years to get the Genigraphics print driver, imaging and communication software ready," says Rosemary Aboud, the product-development manager who led Genigraphics' software development efforts.

In 1989, Genigraphics did indeed deliver on its direct-imaging promise. "Now professional-quality [35mm] images, created faster and easier in PowerPoint than in any other software package, are just a phone call away," proclaimed Bob Gaskins, now head of GBU. Next, the team had to start over to create the Windows version.

PowerPoint 2.0 — this time for Windows

In May 1990, Microsoft announced the release of PowerPoint version 2.0 for Windows. Sales climbed to more than \$10 million in the first year as presenters discovered the joys of saving an entire presentation in a single file. Other new features included built-in charting capabilities, a broader collection of clip art, the ability to



For the first time, near-perfect cross-platform compatibility became a reality.

import outlines from Microsoft Word, alignment grids and better drawing controls.

As Windows-based computers increasingly took over the business world, April 1992's PowerPoint 3.0 release for Windows (referred to at Microsoft as "the project from Hell") featured dramatic interface changes meant to provide business presenters with a more friendly experience. Object linking and embedding, or OLE, created a seamless environment for copying and pasting components from Word, Excel and other applications directly into PowerPoint. Now users could click on an icon embedded into PowerPoint to launch and display other applications. As third-party developers began creating OLE-compliant software, a new world

of objects (not to mention sound and video) opened up for PowerPoint presenters. Many business users, however, didn't understand the difference between linking and embedding — it wasn't clear what actually resided inside PowerPoint, and what needed to be brought along from an outside application into PowerPoint.

At this point, Microsoft introduced 22 TrueType fonts to simplify the idea of embedded fonts. These were "manufactured" by Windows, shipped with the Windows operating system, and scaled up or down as needed onscreen or at the printer. Life became simpler for the business presenter, at least until a host of third-party TrueType fonts entered the marketplace. This new breed of TrueType font could be used only on the presenter's own desktop, which created great confu-

sion. If you created a presentation using one of these fonts, when you saved the file, you learned that its font was "license-restricted" — a frustration even today.

fascination with charting began to grow — although not at the same furious pace as Microsoft's — with the introduction of 84 pre-designed chart types. To

Macintosh version of PowerPoint 3.0 entered the scene, with most of the same features and claims of greater cross-platform compatibility. Although such elements as

time, PowerPoint enjoyed nearly 4 million users worldwide, doubling its installed base in less than a year. Bolstered by Microsoft Office sales that led its competition 7 to 1, PowerPoint's dominance on desktops was quickly becoming insurmountable. PowerPoint 4.0 introduced new features to help business presenters further adapt to the world of presentation graphics. A Macintosh version of PowerPoint 4.0 was introduced in September 1994 — the last release Mac users would see for the next 40 months.

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PowerPoint 3.0 and 4.0 — life gets easier

In PowerPoint 3.0, such features as the addition of 24 commonly used shapes, new free-form drawing tools, and the ability to rotate objects and PICKUP AND APPLY object characteristics became available. The business world's

make life a bit easier for Microsoft Office users, charting packages and color palettes began to take on a common look among Word, Excel and PowerPoint. So if you learned such a function in one application, you knew it in all three.

In October 1992, the

bitmap images and sounds did not convert well, the promise of true cross-platform compatibility was a few steps closer, because a separate conversion utility was no longer required.

February 1994 brought the introduction of PowerPoint 4.0 for Windows. By this

PowerPoint 95 — let the animation begin

Back at Genigraphics, our vast network of offices was reduced to fewer than 10

locations, as business presenters abandoned expensive service-bureau support and took control of the presentation process from their own desktops. Genigraphics eventually entered Chapter 11, but was briefly rescued in 1994 by electronic projector manufacturer In Focus Systems. This relationship only lasted a few years, however;

Genigraphics was eventually resold in an ongoing attempt to figure out how to leverage the presence of SEND TO GENIGRAPHICS in the PowerPoint FILE menu on 10 million desktops.

PowerPoint 95, introduced in August 1995, was based on a whole new code, Visual C++. Further enhancements in PowerPoint included more customization of menu choices, Visual Basic support, mul-

tiples UNDO commands and a more user-friendly, customizable interface.

Something else began to happen with PowerPoint 95's introduction: People started realizing that projecting their presentations electronically onto a screen was a viable option — one that also allowed them to make last-

tively high price tags.

Still, PowerPoint's new animation engine allowed people to move objects onscreen — a seductive new possibility for the Walt Disney wannabes among presenters. Integrated digital sound and video also became easier. Unfortunately, the ability to include sound effects and movement with

to connect with more audience senses, but they also turned many serious business presentations into circus sideshows.

PowerPoint 97 and 2000 — leveraging the Web

PowerPoint 97 became available with Office 97 in January 1997. In this version,

People started realizing that electronic presentations allowed them to make last-minute changes.

minute changes. Electronic projectors were becoming more common, but they still had low resolutions and rela-

the click of a mouse became both a blessing and curse. On the one hand, the capabilities allowed business presenters

the animation engine took some dramatic leaps forward. CUSTOM SHOWS allowed the presenter to define unique

paths through the same set of presentation slides, while RECORD NARRATION and an embedded media player acknowledged presenters' increased interest in leveraging digital media. Saving presentations as HTML was possible, allowing people to post presentations on the Web. The PRESENTATION CONFERENCE and MEETING MINDER recognized the collaboration potential of PowerPoint and made sharing over networks much easier. Long overdue, PowerPoint 98 for the Macintosh was introduced in January 1998 and mirrored the functionality of its Windows PowerPoint 97 counterpart. For the first time, near-perfect cross-platform compatibility became a reality.

PowerPoint 2000 came to market in March 1999 to address the growing desire to repurpose presentation content between laptops and the Web. This "round-tripping" of the code enabled users to save and open the same file in either HTML or the native binary format. Other important application functionality, such as animation and charting, went relatively unchanged. PowerPoint 2000 introduced ease-of-use features that helped the presenter standardize such often-overlooked areas as capitalization inconsistency, formatting mistakes and differences in projector/computer resolution.

Growing up together

PowerPoint has come a long way since 1987, but so have

presenters. Electronic presentations, for better or worse, are a fact of life in corporate America today, due largely to PowerPoint's pervasiveness. Those of us who use this tool of the trade on a regular basis have had a lot to learn and have experienced some confusion along the way. But we are not alone.

In the early days of the Office Suite, Microsoft itself was uncertain of PowerPoint's potential. PowerPoint was constantly underplayed in relation to its Office big brothers, Word and Excel. "At the time, it was a very sophisticated 'Buy two, get one free' promotion," says Kathy Harris, a former PowerPoint product manager.

Now, PowerPoint has a distinct identity and businesses are beginning to understand

the stakes associated with creating mediocre presentations. You can mess up a Word document and suffer only slight embarrassment.

However, a poorly crafted presentation can cost your company millions of dollars and a few promising careers.

The evolution of PowerPoint in many respects has mirrored our own. Early on, we weren't very sophisticated in the way we presented, but we didn't think we needed to be.

Here's hoping we all know better now. ■

Jim Endicott is owner and manager of Distinction, a business-communications consultancy in Newberg, Ore. He frequently writes for Presentations.