

Tech Tussles

Scramble for scripters

Screenwriting apps face new competish

By ROBYN WEISMAN

Once upon a time, screenwriting was a labor-intensive vocation. And that labor was hardly confined to the age-old challenges of storytelling.

"Just the sheer physical pain-in-the-ass quality of typing out a script in script format, with all the tabs, indents, caps and all that, probably kept 90% of people from writing a screenplay because the whole thing was so hard," said writer and former "Cheers" show-runner Rob Long.

Screenwriting programs like Final Draft and Write Brothers' Movie Magic helped change all that. Write Brothers veep Chris Huntley, who co-developed and sold the first scripting software nearly 30 years ago, said laughingly of the woes of script formatting, "We're in business because of page breaks."

Over the past few decades, Write Brothers' Movie Magic Screenwriter has been the Pepsi to

Final Draft's Coke in the screenwriting software aisle. With the exception of the niche occupied by Celtx, an open-source, all-in-one screenwriting and production package, the two companies have all but dominated the field.

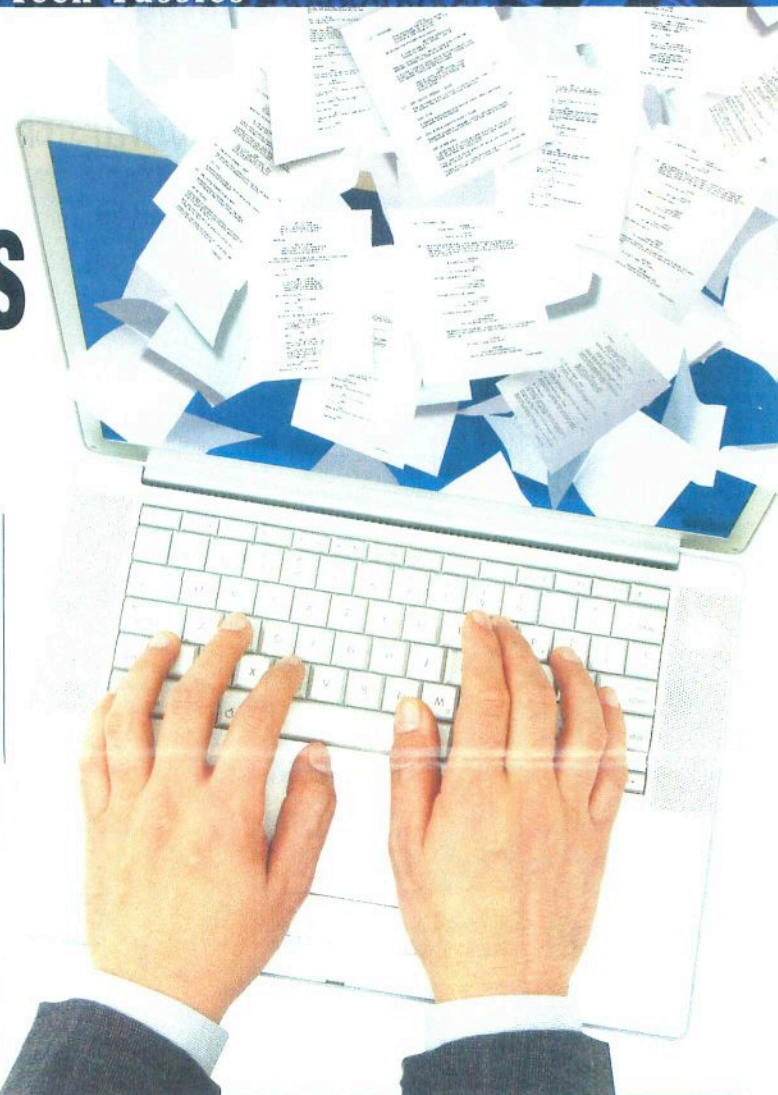
Recently, however, Scripts Pro, ScriptWrite, Million Dollar Screenwriting and Scripped.com have popped up. And while none appear ready to overturn the big boys anytime soon, they could develop into significant competition down the road.

Some of these programs are free or subscription browser-based apps, many of which come with ready-made writer communities, virtual collaboration and instant messaging. Others are mobile apps that leverage the iPad's unique format for intensive scriptwriting and allow iPhone users to make quick edits and jot down quick scenes.

But while many of these new-school applications are ostensibly geared toward students, aspiring



Huntley



Security questioned as content moves to cloud

Screenwriters who use Web-based software and cloud storage face a new fear in their trade: security.

Write Brothers veep Chris Huntley, for one, is skeptical that studios will adopt widespread online exchanges of information until military-grade protections are put in place.

"The WikiLeaks material was not something its originators wished to share with the world, so just imagine a studio freaking out about having its budgets, scripts and deal memos floating around," Huntley said.

While Huntley understands the utility of the virtual collaborative aspects that most of the Web-based apps offer, he

thinks putting scripts and story ideas online is problematic. "The younger writers aren't concerned about the privacy issue until it bites them in the behind," he said. "Once they have their stuff stolen, they'll understand why people are private about their work."

Both Scripped.com and Screenwriting Pro say they have effective security in place. Scripped.com CEO Sunil Rajaraman said his site's cloud server is backed up "religiously."

"We've never had a security issue in the two years we've been running," he said.

Screenwriting Pro founder Jesse Douma said that his app uses financial services-level security to protect its clients'

files. "Nothing is completely secure," he adds. "If someone emails a script to a writing partner, that actually puts the file at greater risk than using an online system."

Celtx CEO Mark Kennedy believes that cloud storage is far better at providing secure backup and exchange than traditional methods. "You don't have to worry about your hard drive crashing or your laptop getting stolen," he said.

Yet Kennedy understands and respects his customers' reluctance to relinquish control over their media. "Our original concept was to have a pure Web-based approach, but people feel a sense of security working on a desktop and doing their own backup," he said.

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scribblers and hobbyists, industry folks have taken notice. Scripped.com's backers include multihyphenate Edward Burns and "Die Hard" scribe Steven de Souza, while iOS apps ScriptWrite and Scripts Pro each have their industry backers.

"Apps like ScriptWrite are the direction screenwriting is going, just as the typewriter replaced pen and paper, and software replaced the typewriter," said Dana Brunetti, producer of "The Social Network."

Should Final Draft and Movie Magic be getting ready for battle? Huntley didn't sound too concerned, saying he's seen similar scenarios two or three times before. "You've got a couple of products that are dominant, there's a lull, and then a whole spate of new products show up that are pretty much in the same space, last five, six years and then die out because they're not in it for the long run," he said.

Yet Huntley acknowledged that Write Brothers is working on an iOS app of its own. Meanwhile, Final Draft announced in April that it would develop an iPad app as well as a cloud-based service, Final Draft Connect, that will let users store their projects online and collaborate in real time. According to Final Draft marketing veep Meredith Cornelius, FD Connect should launch in 2012 in tandem with Version 9 of the desktop software.

While both companies have the resources to push their plans forward, those steps may not be enough to prevent an all-out battle of the software apps.

Brand loyalties

When Million Dollar Screenwriting founder Chris Soth sold his first script, "Firestorm," for six figures right out of USC, he switched from a Microsoft Word template to Final Draft because the latter had versioning capabilities necessary for pushing the script through production. He doesn't see himself moving to anything else, simply because he is comfortable with Final Draft.

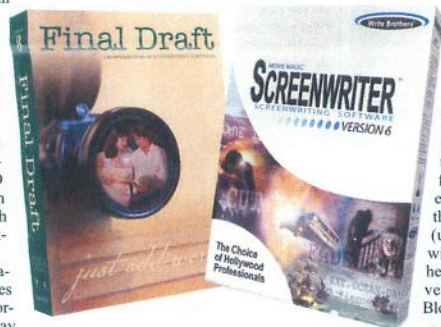
However, Soth believes the upcoming generation of students and aspiring writers are not automatic locks to follow suit. "That kid is going to stay with the first thing he learned, and if the first screenplay he writes is in the cloud with Web-based software, he probably won't use anything else, especially if he can work anywhere on any computer or iPad," Soth said.

Outfits including Scripped.com, Screenwriting Pro, ScriptBuddy and Adobe Story are counting on this new audience.

"These enthusiasts aren't ready to commit \$200 or more to their hobby, and online applications like ours cover this market," said Jesse Douma, founder of Screenwriting Pro and president of the Writer's Store, which sells Final Draft, Movie Magic and other desktop-based scripting software. "Meanwhile, students who used to have to buy Final Draft or Movie Magic to take a semester screenwriting course for their film major can now use Celtx for free."

Douma said the Writer's Store started developing Screenwriting Pro as a sort of insurance policy for its business. "If the market does end up being more of a developer-to-user relationship with less of a middleman, then we need to be a part of that, and the best way to do that was to develop our own application," he said.

"The danger for companies that produce only desktop applications, or are too far off from having a true online application, is that they run the risk of allowing younger writers, a certain number of whom will make it in Hollywood, to be branded with another tool or method of working," Douma added.



Scripped.com CEO Sunil Rajaraman said he has no interest in poaching business from Final Draft or Movie Magic. "Those products are for working industry professionals, (while) our software provides everything a writer needs to format scripts to industry standards. We are building a new audience that doesn't need all the bells and whistles and is comfortable using the Internet to collaborate," he said.

Rajaraman seconded Soth's belief that people tend to stick to their chosen software. "We don't get a lot of 'My status has been elevated, so I'm switching software.' As our writers grow, we'll continue to build features to accommodate their needs," he said.

The latest Final Draft

Final Draft is in many ways the Microsoft of screenwriting software. Its XML-based .fdx file format is akin to Microsoft Word's

.doc and .docx, and a major selling point for both Web-based and mobile apps is the ability to import and export scripts into this format.

But Final Draft lacks the hubris of Microsoft circa Windows 95. Instead, it is implementing a multipronged strategy to address the changes in the marketplace. Cornelius said that Final Draft has hired a third-party developer to design a "lite" version of the software that screenwriters can use to take notes and make simple edits, while its inhouse engineers build a feature-rich app that will compare favorably to its desktop version. The company is even planning to set up a new cloud-based system that would finally end the need to authorize copies of the desktop software, a gripe screenwriters have had since its inception.

Final Draft has also teamed with technology partners such as story development application Scrivener so that Final Draft users can leverage Scrivener's strengths before exporting into Final Draft. This modular approach allows Final Draft to focus on its strengths while giving Scrivener the sort of marketing leverage it wouldn't have on its own.

Scrivener creator Keith Blount has been pleased with the partnership. "I didn't expect to hear back (from Final Draft), because Scrivener is a niche program while Final Draft is the industry standard. To my surprise, they set up a telephone conference and helped me support their file format. They seemed eager to ensure that their users could use (us) in conjunction with other products to help in the script development process," Blount said.

Mobile stealth apps

Final Draft and Movie Magic's biggest competitors may well be the mobile screenwriting apps being developed for the iPad. For example, Filter Apps' ScriptWrite and Inkless Ideas' Scripts Pro are easy to use and provide import/export compatibility with the Final Draft .fdx format, as well as compatibility with Celtx and .txt files for Movie Magic, so that users can easily switch between desktop apps without having to buy a new app for each desktop equivalent.

"We can interface with everybody, and because we're small we can respond quickly to our customers," said Filter Apps co-founder Tony Jacobsen. "And we're cheap. In fact, you can buy ScriptWrite, Scripts Pro and Celtx and spend a total of about \$21," which is less expensive than Final Draft, Movie Magic or subscription-based Web apps.

Christmas chill: CafeFX closes

By DAVID S. COHEN

The California visual effects industry got a big lump of coal for Christmas with the news that the highly regarded studio CafeFX has permanently closed.

CafeFX had been on hiatus for more than six months as it attempted to find new investors and relaunch.

"The industry has just really, really changed," topper Jeff Barnes told *Daily Variety*. "We took a hard look at it and said this doesn't make any sense anymore for how CafeFX has been, even with new investors."

Part of the problem, says Barnes, was that CafeFX "got to be exactly the wrong size." Noting that *Asylum* and the *Orphanage* were also mid-sized California vfx studios that closed, Barnes said, "Being a California-only company right now is not a good business model if you're over 100 people."

Barnes called for new business models and new compensation models "to help compensate the (vfx) studios for what has become very important to the motion picture industry."

Barnes says he'll focus on the company's impending sale of its computers and other gear, skedded for around Jan. 18, and he hasn't decided what he'll do next. He said he hopes to stay in visual effects "if somebody will have me. I love the business."

"True Grit" marks the Coen brothers' fourth movie with visual effects studio Luma Pictures. Luma produced 360 vfx shots for "True Grit," many of them realistic elements that become "invisible effects" ... The Senate Visual Effects contributed 225 effects shots to "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader." Key sequences with work by the Senate include Coriak's Library and the Ramandu's Island scenes. ... Grid Prods. hired Vicon House of Moves for stunt motion capture on "Tron: Legacy" ... NEC Display Solutions is giving away \$100,000 worth of NEC productions in a series of contests, \$25,000 each for its education, health care, theater and small-to-medium-business programs ... Panasonic is shipping the new AJ-HPX3100, which the company calls its most compact and lowest-priced 2/3" 1080p 3-CCD camcorder. ... Software company Auryn has released its "Auryn Ink" app for iPad, which simulates watercolor painting.

Scripts Pro developer Stephen Levinson said he'll be curious to see how Final Draft goes about pricing its iPad app and whether it will work as a standalone app, because the company would then risk cannibalizing its desktop app. "Their desktop software runs about \$200, and I can't see them selling their iPad version at, say, \$150 because my app and others sell for so much less. Yet I can't see them selling it for \$5.99 or something in that general range (either)," he said.

A viable replacement?

In the meantime, Levinson believes that an iPad-based solution such as his could really take off on movie sets, which could make Final Draft irrelevant if it doesn't move fast enough with its mobile app. "If a director wants to make changes, he doesn't have to send copies of scripts to everyone. He can push the updates to everyone, including the writers and actors," Levinson said. "And a device that can communicate via Bluetooth

can instantly connect all devices at once, (whereas) it takes time to upload and download updates through cloud-based services."

And although Levinson's app is relatively simple for now, he plans to add additional features as iOS matures as a platform. Levinson said that one of his customers, "Community" creator Dan Harmon, wants Levinson to layer on advanced functions like indexing, character descriptions and notecards, so that Harmon and other professional scribes can use it as their primary writing app at a fraction of the cost.

But despite all these advances, "Cheers" alum Long is dubious that this increased choice will make a huge difference for working writers.

"It isn't really (the fault of the software), because they're about writing a script from page to screen, but ultimately what I'm looking for is something that can do the impossible, which is to make writers not hate writing," he said.