

Parcel Publishing in an Agile World.

A WebWorks.com White Paper.

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Overview

This white paper discusses the concept of Parcel Publishing and how it can help reduce the impact of adopting the agile process on content development.

Parcel Publishing Concept

Traditional publishing tools have a single pipeline that moves the source content to the deliverable format. In most cases this means that once a system has been defined, it becomes locked and can only be used for that specific route. Adding new output formats or making adjustments to meet new requirements means starting from scratch and developing parallel processes. This effect is magnified in tools and processes that combine the content authoring and publishing in one environment. While this approach may be the most efficient to meet one single defined need, or solve one single problem, it is not scalable and can soon lead to development dead ends and an inability to meet new customer requirements. In an agile development environment this can cause real problems.

ePublisher is unique in that it uses the concept of Parcel Publishing to deliver unmatched flexibility and scalability.

Parcel Publishing uses a series of pipelines with well-defined start and end points that break the publishing process down into a series of discrete segments.

The result is that you can use different routes through the pipelines to solve different problems, or simply add in new pipelines that connect to existing ones to meet new needs.

From a practical standpoint this means that ePublisher is scalable and flexible and allows you to go from multiple inputs, or even combine them, into multiple outputs. The pipeline method also means that you can perform checks and balances on each parcel enabling you to fine tune your output further and provide high quality consistent output.

For instance within WebWorks own Agile development environment, we use the concept of parcel Publishing to manage discrete packages of information. Each development environment for the various editing tools we support, and other variables, are housed on a series of virtual machines. When it comes time to produce a new documentation set for a new product release we use ePublisher as an ad-hoc configuration manager to assemble the required parcels before publication.

The assembled documentation set can then be shipped as an integral part of the product deliverable.

Design / Capture / Apply

In a previous white paper (*Publishing in an Agile World* - WW_WP0509) we discussed the issue of how you keep the deliverables to the customer up-to-date when the product is constantly evolving. As is the case when publishing documentation for a product developed using Agile methodologies.

At WebWorks.com we believe the answer is to separate the development of content from the publishing process. By keeping content development separate from publishing, you can capture and author content in the editing tools you are used to using. Ideally, you would use tools that support a structured content model. For the actual publishing, you would use a different tool or platform. That way you don't have to re-author format-specific setup each time the content changes during the development cycle.

Using this publishing production line approach along with clearly defined pipelines means that way new content can easily be "poured" into one end of the production line and the desired output(s) quickly produced, reviewed and tested with minimal to zero impact on overall production time.

In WebWorks ePublisher the process is broken down into three distinct stages on the production line.

1. **DESIGN** the output. Using ePublisher Pro you can very quickly design how you want the end deliverable format (or formats) to look even before you have content. Just set up the styles or structure tags you are going to use, import these into ePublisher Pro and apply the business and presentation rules you want.
2. **CAPTURE** the design by saving the ePublisher Project as Stationery. Saving the project out to Stationery frees up the designers using ePublisher Pro to keep fine-tuning the project deliverables during the sprint process. Any changes made can be quickly applied to the Stationery and it will automatically sync to the updated version the next time it is run.
3. **APPLY** the publishing process. Using ePublisher Express anyone can quickly and easily publish a piece of content against the pre-configured output design stored in the Stationery.

Many of our customers who work in an Agile development environment use ePublisher's ability to output to wiki formats during the sprint-driven content development phase. This allows them to deliver the content to a central wiki where the Agile team can review and comment easily without needing access to specialized editing tools. Once the project nears a final build stage they can use

the same Stationery to output to the final delivery format(s) needed, such as an embedded help system, online help, PDF, print or even a mobile device.

Focusing Talent

Using the Design/Capture/Apply model means that you can focus your team's talents where the talent can be best utilized. By separating the content creation from the publishing process, you don't need everyone on the agile team to become specialists in the publishing program just so you can deliver documentation with each iteration. Team members can stay using the content development tools they are used to, and even use different tools across the team. No need for retraining or working in unfamiliar environments. Your engineers can continue to work in MS Word or XML tools, while your Technical Writers and Information Architects can work in specialist tools such as FrameMaker or to industry schemas such as DITA.

Build based on Styles

One of the great challenges in integrating the publishing process into an Agile development environment, is that technical publications and software development have mismatched rhythms, in that both the speed of development and the build (publishing) process traditionally have different trigger points. They are in effect like two different sized gear wheels both trying to drive the engine at the same speed.

This often results in one of two different scenarios:

- That one process is force fitted on to the other; typically the software development process is force fit on to the publications process. The impact is that as the velocity of development is increased to meet short iteration cycles the quality of the technical content decreases. In extreme cases the publications process may stumble so much to keep up that it is seen as unnecessary and is dropped entirely.

- The two processes soon get out of sync as the publishing process design is held back until a critical mass of content has been developed to test it. This in turn can slow the whole project down and impact deliverable schedules.

By using the Design / Capture / Apply model, the publication output and process can be developed from a list of basic styles, (or in the case of a DITA-XML environment, tags and DITA maps), before a single word of content has been written.

Once you have the publishing process designed, and captured using WebWorks ePublisher, you can then save that that process as ePublisher Stationery. This can then be handed off to the developers to use as part of the iterative build and test process.

The process can be fine-tuned and tested early in the iteration process and once stable can be applied to any content produced as the project progresses. This way interim builds of the published documentation can be kept in sync with software builds at each iteration. The two gears are now the same size, and spinning at the same number of revolutions.

Measuring Quality

How do you measure the quality of your documentation in an Agile environment?
Answer, through report generation.

ePublisher is not just about converting your content from one format to another. While automating the publishing process by separating it from the authoring process is one of our key objectives, another is helping you develop the most efficient high quality output possible. To do this we generate reports on what ePublisher is doing and the status of your documentation at every stage of the production pipeline.

Using these reports you can easily find, and correct errors, as well as continue to fine-tune your process to ensure that you deliver the best content in the most efficient manner possible.

ePublisher reporting falls into two categories

- Interactive generation reporting via a scrolling log in the ePublisher user interface during the publishing process. Check for errors, warnings and step by step progress in real time.
- Automated reports that include feedback on any potential issues with links, styles, topics or accessibility compliance. Double clicking on any reported error will open the source document in the editing environment of choice, right at the point where the error originated, allowing for a quick fix to be made, without having to search the whole content stream.

For each report you can configure the levels and values that you want to generate a message, a warning or an error. You can also configure certain values that you may want to ignore. This will enable you to fine tune the reporting process so you can focus on particular areas of interest.

Using the ePublisher logs and reporting features can help you develop and fine tune high quality deliverables and ensure that you can deliver your content, your way, every time.

About ePublisher

ePublisher enables cost-effective processes for efficiently writing, presenting, and deploying online and print publications. Through the use of its three components, organizations can leverage existing authoring tools and content management systems and meet organization-wide publishing needs without incurring expensive training or software deployment initiatives. Its open system architecture, based on industry-standard XSL, enables a large degree of flexibility, customizability, and migration investment protection. ePublisher will save your group time and seamlessly fit into your writing workflow, giving your writers more time to do what they do best - write.

About WebWorks.com

WebWorks.com, a brand of Quadralay Corporation, is the leading provider of comprehensive online publishing and help system delivery solutions. Its products and services constitute the definitive single source for all your ePublishing needs. We specialize in content conversion software that outputs Web, online help, wiki, and electronic publication formats. Our ePublisher Platform can automate the conversion of source documents in popular authoring formats such as DITA-XML, FrameMaker or Word and convert them to multiple end-user formats such as wikis, mobile devices, WebWorks Help, HTML, CHM, and PDF. Our conversion system is based on XSL so that output formats can be customized or even developed from scratch..

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