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Rob Halliday: Be quick on the draw with Drafty for lighting, sound and video design



Photo: Shutterstock.



Rob Halliday

Rob Halliday is a lighting designer and programmer

Get the word out: someone's made us a new tool. It's called Drafty. It lives on the internet. And if you make drawings as part of your work in lighting, sound or video, it may well let you do so more quickly – and for a fraction of the cost – than the software you're using now.

Both are important considerations. Drawings are the lifeblood of what we do, the tool designers use to communicate their intent to the crew, which has to make it all work (usually because the designer is still desperately trying to finish off his or her previous job). But producing them has become expensive, the cost of pen, drafting skin and some stencils replaced by computers, printers and CAD software (of course you can still draw by hand, but Royal Mail will never match email for letting you work right up to a deadline).

CAD packages have come and gone over the years. Our industry standards are now (arguably) Wysiwyg, with its powerful lighting visualisation tools, and AutoCAD and Vectorworks, both big, generic packages from the architectural/construction world but which offer bolt-on tools for lighting. None are cheap: £625 for a basic version of Wysiwyg; \$1,865 for Vectorworks Spotlight, plus ongoing upgrade fees if you want to stay current. You get a better deal as a student, but eventually you'll want to issue plans without 'education edition' blazoned across the bottom.

For what most people on most shows need most of the time, all of these are spectacularly overspecified. And hard to learn.

Drafty was designed for lighting people, by lighting people, though it also encompasses signal flow and rack drawings for sound and video. What this means is that, first, the language you see on screen is familiar, and second it often does the right thing without you having to think about it. It automatically layers the venue, the scenery, the positions and the lights. It understands that lights sit on bars and knows how to number them. It understands ladders and booms, and that if you mirror boom 1L, its opposite should be called boom 1R. And while you're drawing it's quietly making lists – rigging, equipment, colour. Edit the list and the change appears straight back in the drawing.

Remarkably, it does all of this in a web browser, with the documents stored online; don't panic, as long as you have a drawing open you can keep working on it even at your production desk with its poor internet connection. More remarkably, it does all this for a fair price: £21/month for Pro mode with everything, £14/month for lighting, less if you pay annually. And that's always getting the current version.

Of course, cheap and easy is still not much good if the results are rubbish. Drafty has limitations, and you wouldn't want to use it on complex shows where the drawing needs to indicate subtle details. But the drawings it produces are neat, clear and elegant while being quick and easy to generate. For many shows, it will do better than just fine. Take a look at drafty-app.com

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