



The Drafty workspace is simple and clean, but it provides enough tools to quickly lay out lighting plots, audio and video signal flow, and more.

## Drafty for the Stage Crafty

By Richard Cadena

In a world where a multi-million-dollar research ship came inches away from being named *Boaty McBoatface*, a computer-aided drafting program named Drafty makes perfect sense. When the UK's Natural Environment Research Council recently called for online voting to name the ship, *Boaty McBoatface* received the highest number of votes. The ship is a polar research vessel that features a helipad, onboard laboratories, and cost \$288 million. Drafty, on the other hand, is a production design software application with features that are almost as impressive, that is easy to use, but is much more affordable.

Drafty is an AutoCAD-like (or AutoCAD Lite-like) application with far fewer tools than many CAD programs, which makes it much quicker to learn and easier to use. It's not a 3-D program and it doesn't have a visualizer, but it does allow you to design lighting plots, audio systems, and video systems and document them well enough to handle the vast

majority of small and medium-sized shows, perhaps even some larger shows as well.

AutoCAD was a game-changer in the 1980s when it first came out, but the high cost and steep learning curve limited its use to a few privileged designers, usually those who had the financial support of a large architectural or engineering firm. Today, there are several competing specialized CAD programs targeted for the live event production industry, but Drafty is one of the few to adopt a subscription model, much like Microsoft Office, and Adobe Creative Suite.

The subscription model makes a lot of sense given the high cost of lighting and production design software. Competing programs can cost anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, and some require an annual subscription fee after an initial purchase. These higher prices are probably justifiable given the complexity of some of these applications, high cost of development, and chal-

lenges of keeping the doors open in a small software-development company. For a large lighting design firm or a very busy freelance lighting designer, these programs pay for themselves if they are used a lot. But for the freelance professional who needs a CAD program to design the occasional project, it's a lot harder to justify. That's where Drafty shines.

Drafty charges as little as \$14.99 per month, or \$149.99 per year, for the A/V version, or as much as \$29.99 per month, or \$299.99 per year, for the Pro version. There is also an LX version, which is \$19.99 per month or \$199.99 per year. The difference is in the available features, primarily the audio, video, and lighting tools as well as the database manager. The LX version has no audio or video tools, while the A/V version has no lighting tools. Neither has access to the database manager. For that you need the Pro version, which has everything the other two versions have plus scenic elements and advanced selection tools.

If you're like me and you are not sitting before a computer on a daily basis working on a lighting plot, then you probably have to relearn the lighting design software each time you want to use it. (How do you 3-D rotate that lighting symbol again?) Because of the simplicity of Drafty, the learning curve (not to mention the relearning curve) is very low, and you can spit out a lighting plot or signal flow diagram in a relatively short amount of time. (See illustrations.)

It has all the normal features you would expect to help speed the process of laying out a plot, like duplicate (including the quantity and spacing in inches or feet), mirror, move, align, space, etc. It manages layers for you, and it handles numbering and channel assignments pretty well. It also manages paperwork well, albeit simply, with the database manager. The database is dynamically linked to the plot so you can make changes in either environment. The software also makes it easy to keep your plot, sections, elevations, and signal flow diagrams in one place because it includes several "plates" where each of these are kept.

The symbol library is somewhat limited, but will probably grow quickly. (A press release was recently issued saying that Drafty has partnered with Team Sound, creators of the Go Box MIDI controller for QLab, which will be delivering audio CAD symbols for Drafty software. A more recent press release broke the news that Field Template will provide the extensive SoftSymbol library for Drafty.) Also, it's easy to find a similar-looking symbol, rename it, and adjust the information like the wattage and beam angle. There is also a library of audio gear, projectors, furniture, soft goods, and more.

I lean more toward using a keyboard over a mouse, and I like using simple math to lay out fixtures and objects. This app fits that approach very well. It has text boxes where you can enter placement or spacing in feet or inches relative to

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## TECHNICAL FOCUS: SOFTWARE

the centerline or relative to its current position. The Align X, Align Y, and Space X tools also allow you to rearrange objects in a logical way. If you like using a mouse over a keyboard and hate math, you can use the GUI to place or reposition objects, although the cursor seems a bit sluggish. But the crosshairs always indicate the current position of the cursor, so you always know where you are in the X-Y plane.

The software comes with a border and legend based on your log-in information and the objects you place in the drawing. You have an option to add your logo, and with very little effort, the drawing looks professional.

I used the Pro version, trying it on a MacBook Pro Retina display using Safari version 9.1 and Chrome version 50.0.2661.102 (64-bit). I also tried it on my home-built desktop PC and my Surface Book laptop using the same version of Chrome. The software has some rough edges and there were a few times when I wished it had some feature or other that would have saved time. For example, I would have liked to be able to assign unit numbers to fixtures by selecting them with a mouse, pen, or touch screen. Instead, you have to select a unit, assign the number, select the next, and so on.

But after using the program for a couple of hours over a period of a couple of days, I was able to rough in a small plot with unit numbers, channel assignments, and more, literally while I was on hold with the airline. Once I got on the plane and I was without Wi-Fi, I was able to continue working, although some features, like printing and importing PDFs and images, were unavailable. But I can see how an entire show could be documented offline and all of the paperwork exported or printed out later. With a little polish, this program could become my new favorite time-saving documentation tool.

The software is relatively new, and some minor bugs are to be expected. But it's off to a great start and, given a chance, I believe the developers will squash the bugs and add new features in time. I like the look and feel of the program, and I especially like the pricing model. I think it will resonate with a lot of people in the industry.

Drafty isn't for the Willie Williams or the Roy Bennetts of the world. It's probably not the best solution to plot the Eurovision Song Contest, the 2016 Olympic Opening Ceremonies, or the Super Bowl Halftime Show. But for the vast majority of shows, it's a great tool for designing lighting plots, audio systems, and video systems. 📞