



Merlin Project

The making of

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There is usually a long story behind a successful product. This applies for Merlin and my first visions about it in 2003.

But first things first. Back in 2002, founding ProjectWizards, I decided to switch to Mac OS X. It was a relatively new operating system based on NeXTSTEP, which Apple bought and developed further. The excellent quality that Apple machines had, and still have, was one of the main reasons for switching. With MS Office X, we had a good basic software package for daily work. And even though Word, Excel and PowerPoint on Mac were always a step behind their Windows versions, they contained the functions we needed. Last but not least they offered a relatively good compatibility to Windows files. All this was necessary for our job at ProjectWizards; Project management. And here is where the drama starts.

We tried at first FastTrack Schedule by AEC. It was the only Mac OS X application for project management available, with all limitations and problems of a classic OS 9 application. The software had some inconsistencies making its professional use by ProjectWizards impossible.

The next step wasn't any easier. Virtual machines were not performing well on PowerPC based Macs, so MS Project on MacOS X was not an option. We had tested Windows machines with terminal server, accessed by "remote desktop". But this was not really a better solution either.

We were looking for alternatives. Someone in the company started to [ab]use MS Excel as a project management tool. In the beginning I found this to be a good idea, and followed willingly. Some weeks later we had scripted a great amount of data sheets with innumerable charts. It was fine for separate projects but made our overview on all running projects smaller day by day. When colleagues began again to do their job manually, bypassing the scripts and their automations, it became clear to me that we needed yet again another, better solution.

So I gave in and started some research. I wanted to follow a structured approach and finally find out what commercial project management software was available for Mac OS X as I was convinced about the benefits of this operating system. I witnessed how a virus managed to paralyze a worldwide operating company (the "ILOVEYOU" virus on the 4th May 2000, Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loveletter>). This should never happen to us. We were protected as long as we were working on Macs, so this should not change.

The result of the market research was very interesting. Only four programs providing some kind of project management tools were listed. We distinguished two possible candidates after testing for a while. Unfortunately we found some issues, and difficulties in their usage, so we addressed our software feature requests to their support and hoped for quick implementation with no success. I also wrote an email to each software development company and offered a partnership.

I was happy to invest money, but I knew that the second part of my offer was even more valuable: our know-how. I wanted to start a know-how transfer to create, in cooperation with a software developer, the "world's best project management software". We were not

software developers back then. Surprising enough, both software developers refused our proposed partnership. I could not understand their reasons, but even if I could, this would not change anything.

Meanwhile the need for a real project management solution grew and grew. Due to the absence of a proper software tool, avoidable errors started to happen. The problem became existential. A quick financial check showed that investing into our own software product would probably be a cheaper solution, project management errors towards our customers could eventually become far more expensive.

It was decided, we would get someone to write a piece of software just for us. As mentioned before, we were not developers so could not do it on our own. The creation of a first concept was quickly completed. Our own partners and customers helped us on its definition. My intention was to refinance the project through the sale of software licenses to selected customers. I was even thinking, that with a bit of luck, our own license could even be free. Pretty naive...

In 2003 I found on "gebe.net" names and addresses of some Cocoa developers. It was very important to me, that if we are to create new software for Mac OS X, we should use the most modern Apple technology possible. In early 2004 it seemed as if we had found a partner for the development. I was about to give my okay for the start as a late job application came in. This developer was living in Frankfurt. I already had plans to visit Frankfurt for other reasons so I thought it would not harm to check out the new applicant. I could not really judge the quality of his qualifications, I was an informed user but not senior developer.

It was important for me to be able to communicate with him. I wanted to get a feeling about his perception. I needed to find out whether he was motivated enough not only to fulfill my plans, but also to see beyond them, to have a view for the bigger picture and to want to put in his own views and ideas as well. When making decisions on such a scale it always helps to have a "gut feeling". The first job applicant was very good, but my "connection" to the applicant from Frankfurt was simply better. So, at the last minute, the decision to hire the other developer was revised and Frank Illenberger became freelance developer of Merlin.

The product name Merlin was defined even before the first code line was written. We were ProjectWizards; our software simply had to bear a name of a magician. We have many names from the Arthurian legend in use, so the decision was not very far-fetched.

Exactly like the legendary figure Merlin, Arthur's magician advisor, should our Merlin be a wizard and advisor for project management. There was no necessity in finding a good name considering marketing aspects. Merlin was meant to be sold only to selected partners. Pretty naive...

Frank Illenberger and I held our first kick-off-meeting on April 9th 2004 in Frankfurt. We had talked about the concept, answered questions and mentioned ideas. Frank intended to work two days per week on programming Merlin. We defined a vague target date, as none of us had ever worked on a similar project. At that time Frank had experience on only small programs. Have I mentioned how naive we both were?

Anyway, thanks to Frank's analytical and meticulous way of working, Merlin's development took form really quickly. Small and major crises got handled as they appeared.

July 2004 was a watershed event. Apple sent me an invitation to the Apple Expo in Paris. I should present Merlin. Fine, I thought, I would be delighted, but how did Apple come to know about Merlin's existence? Our Merlin project team had grown meanwhile to 20 persons. Some more involved than others. All of them had signed an NDA but one of them had definitely "blabbed".

So I flew to Paris to hold a Merlin presentation. Michel Suter greeted me with "I have no more than 20 minutes time". I started my well-prepared presentation. Michel interrupted me after ten minutes and asked with enthusiasm for the scheduled release date. I tried to explain that we are not planning to release Merlin. His reaction was pretty direct: "I would deserve to get beaten if I would not make such a great program available to all Mac users". Okay, the message was clear enough. During my flight back to Germany I setup a business plan. The decision was taken: Merlin should be available for the public. The rest, as they say, is history... I do not regret my decision, not for a moment.

Merlin 1.0 was released on November 9th 2004. It was the starting point of the currently most successful project management software. So it seems, we managed to do more things the right way than wrong.