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## The Paige Compositor

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# The Paige Compositor

**Die Linotype-Schriftsetzmaschine revolutionierte die gesamte Druckbranche. Doch ihr Erfinder Ottmar Mergenthaler hatte in James Paige einen Wettbewerber mit einem bekannten Fürsprecher – Mark Twain. Mergenthaler gewann und Twain verlor sein Vermögen.**

From Gutenberg down through the 19th century, *typesetters* all had to pick up, then position, one letter at a time. It was slow, intense work. In the early 1800s it became clear that that would have to change. The new fast presses were driving the output of printed material skyward. In the 1820s *inventors* began looking for ways to mechanize typesetting. In 1884 Ottmar Mergenthaler finally *emerged* from a pack of *competitors* with his Linotype machine. Linotype operators set type five times faster than hand typesetters could.

Historian Judith Lee tells about Mergenthaler's most fascinating competitor. James Paige patented the Paige Compositor in 1872. Five years later he joined with the Farnham Company, and they turned to their best-known investor, Mark Twain, for *support*. Twain was *intrigued* by Paige's machine and began putting money into its *development*. By 1882 Paige had a functioning compositor.

On the surface, Paige was *coming up roses*, but he'd made two *subtle* mistakes in his design. The first was his *compulsion* to keep *improving* it. He wasn't ready with a production version until 1887. By then, Linotype machines had been on the market for three years. That didn't worry Paige. He was certain he had the better machine. His Compositor could set type sixty percent faster than the Linotype. How could he lose?

Mark Twain had long since become a true believer in Paige's Compositor. By now he'd *assumed* the major financial responsibility in exchange for a percentage of *anticipated* profits.

Then Paige's second mistake surfaced. The Compositor was a temperamental racehorse. The Linotype was a *steady* workhorse. Paige had designed his machine to function like a human being. He'd *consciously* copied human hand motions. Mergenthaler had made his Linotype without reference to human function. He understood that machines can move in ways that humans cannot. So his Linotype was simpler, cheaper, easier to *maintain*, and

	likely
	flop
* see list	*see list
designers	
surfaced	
rivals	core useful
help	
fascinated	
design	
successful	
fine	
obsession	
upgrading	
accepted	
expected	
sturdy	
knowingly	
service	

less *liable* to break down. Machine tolerances weren't as tight.

With 18,000 parts, Paige's Compositor was far more complicated. Of course it priced itself out of the market. It took until 1894 for the competitive *failure* of the Compositor to become complete. After that, Paige died penniless in a poorhouse and Mark Twain went bankrupt. Twain later observed that he'd learned two things from the *experience* – not to invest when you can't afford to, and not to invest when you can.

The last surviving Compositor is housed in the Mark Twain Memorial in Hartford, Connecticut. It's a beautiful machine, but it reminds us that good designs have to do more than carry out a function. They have to be robust and uncomplicated. Good designs find that solid simplicity which is at the *root* of anything *worthwhile*. ■

*Prof. Dr. John Lienhard, University of Houston*

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<i>anticipate, to</i>	<i>erwarten, vorhersehen</i>
<i>assume, to</i>	<i>übernehmen, eingehen</i>
<i>come up roses, to</i>	<i>erfolgreich verlaufen</i>
<i>competitor</i>	<i>Wettbewerber</i>
<i>compulsion</i>	<i>Zwang</i>
<i>consciously</i>	<i>absichtlich, bewusst</i>
<i>development</i>	<i>Entwicklung</i>
<i>emerge, to</i>	<i>hervortreten, auftauchen</i>
<i>experience</i>	<i>Erlebnis</i>
<i>failure</i>	<i>Fehlschlag, Erfolglosigkeit</i>
<i>improve, to</i>	<i>verbessern</i>
<i>intrigued</i>	<i>fasziniert</i>
<i>inventor</i>	<i>Erfinder</i>
<i>liable to, to be</i>	<i>Gefahr laufen etw. zu tun</i>
<i>maintain, to</i>	<i>warten, pflegen</i>
<i>root</i>	<i>Wurzel</i>
<i>steady</i>	<i>stetig, beständig</i>
<i>subtle</i>	<i>fein, zart</i>
<i>support</i>	<i>Unterstützung</i>
<i>typesetter</i>	<i>Schriftsetzer</i>
<i>worthwhile</i>	<i>erstrebenswert</i>