A leading DITA and XSL expert describes some of the benefits of using Miramo compared with XSL:FO.

Design page masters (specify margins, header & footer areas, etc.)

The PDF2 plugin includes already-defined page masters but there is no visual representation of them. You have to adjust XSL to change the margins or the header/footer regions. No side regions are defined so if you want to, say, put a colored bar along the outside edge of the page, that's a fairly complex task. If you want to define a new master page, that's also fairly complex and involves about 3 or 4 different XSL files.

With Miramo, the page masters are visually represented so you only have to reposition the body or header/footer frames to change their position and dimensions. Putting a colored bar along the outside edge of the page is as easy as drawing the rectangle and positioning it. You can add any number of background text frames anywhere, and even rotate them. Defining a new page master can be as easy as copying and renaming an existing page master.

I'd say the time savings here is *at least* a day for basic page master definition and more if you're adding page masters or defining side regions, etc.

Create variables for map metadata

With PDF2, if you want to include map metadata on the cover page or in headers/footers, you usually need to define a variable that grabs the content of the various map metadata elements you want to use. Then you need to call that variable within the XSL for your cover page and headers/footers. If there are a lot of variable to define, this can take several hours.

With Miramo, there are many, many metadata variables already defined and all you need to do is place them on the cover page or in the headers/footers. Even if a variable isn't already defined, there is some kind of black magic at work where you can just create a new variable whose name matches the name of the element and voila, it works without any extra definition from you.

This is about a half-day savings.

Build headers & footers from metadata, boilerplate text, etc.

With PDF2, this also involves several files, defining parameters, etc. The way the PDF2 plugin is set up, it's extra work if you actually just want to use the same header/footer on all pages. Also extra work if you want a multi-line header or footer. And of course, it's all XSL, so you have to run multiple test builds and tweak until you get it just right.

With Miramo, again there is a visual representation so you can simply add the text or variables or images you want in the footer and position them however you want. You can actually tab, which is a simple thing that saves a ton of time. And once you get the header/footer the way you want, you can copy the whole frame to multiple page masters, so you don't have to duplicate the effort. Oh, and the very common use case of putting a total page count in the footer ("Page 5 of 233") is not part of the OOB PDF2 plugin. You have to either roll your own or use Jarno's online PDF plugin generator and grab his code that does this.

I'd say a day of time savings here

Build cover page

This can be an incredible time sink in PDF2, especially if the cover page is very design-intensive. You have to use a block-container to precisely position each block of text, and honestly I have no idea what kind of measurement is used because my most carefully measured coordinates (in, mm, pt, pc, whatever) never put the block where I want it. This is another case for running multiple builds and tweaking until it's correct…or close enough for government work [humorous emoji].

With Miramo, the cover page is right in front of you and you can just visually position each element of the page exactly where you want it. You can resize images and see the result without having to guess (or run multiple builds to test and refine). Also, there is a built-in mechanism for including an image referenced in the map as the cover page image. This is of course possible in PDF2, but not using the OOB PDF2 plugin. You have to either roll your own or use Jarno's online PDF plugin generator and grab his code that does this.

This is at least a day time savings and probably two.

Accommodate special design requirements

As an example of this, my colleague A estimates that she spent 100 cups of coffee on a special FO plugin, getting the customer's outline styling (multiple numbering sequences, indents, etc.) just right. By applying our patented conversion system, we calculated that 100 cups of coffee =~ 1 week. On the other hand, it's dead easy to set up and apply different numbering sequences to ParaDefs. (There are already quite a few numbering sequences pre-defined in the template.) Some XSL is required to then automatically apply the correct ParaDef to the text based on its nesting level. It was maybe an hour to set up the same thing in Miramo, if that. Or you need drop shadows on tables? It's just a box tick! Every.Single.Customer has some kind of special legacy design requirement like this and they really add up.

Over the life of a plugin, I'd say this could amount to days and days. Weeks, even.

Identify the attribute set being used for troubleshooting

The PDF2 XSL is incredibly nested. Sometimes it's very hard to find the attribute set that actually affects the thing you're trying to format. You have to do things like add a color or some other obvious trait and run builds until the color appears where you expect it to and then you know that's the right attribute set. This can be very tedious.

In Miramo, having the "showProperties" option is, IMO, worth the price of admission all by itself. You can see right away what ParaDef, FontDef, TableDef, PageDef, etc, is in play for a given block or page.

Hard to gauge the time savings on this. During initial development, it probably adds up to a day or two and over the life of a plugin, days and days.

Ongoing maintenance and updates

With PDF2, if you paid a consultant to do the development, you have to continue paying them for changes and fixes. PDF plugins tend to be fairly dynamic, especially as the content model changes and evolves. So this is an ongoing expense and subject to the consultant's availability. Or someone on the team can invest a lot of time to learn XSL and XSL-FO. That's an investment as well and unless there is someone on the team with a natural bent towards those things, it's unlikely to be really successful. (Oh, the messes I have cleaned up!)

OTOH, anyone who's familiar with DTP apps like FrameMaker or InDesign can transition to Miramo quite easily. Like literally, they can fire up Designer and start working productively in an hour or two. Even if some XSL is still required on the back end, that can be put aside and dealt with later while the main design can progress quickly. Once the initial plugin is up and running, ongoing tweaks can be handled by the doc team pretty easily.

It's hard to overstate the time and cost savings here. I mean, not having to pay a consultant thousands of [monetary units] for the initial design is just the start. And not having to re-engage them every time you need to make a change is a huge savings as well, not to mention the time you save without the back and forth, miscommunication, approvals, re-dos, etc.