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Reviews

Adobe Acrobat 4.0

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EMedia, September 1999
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Since its market introduction in the early '90s, Adobe Acrobat has become the digital paper standard for documents stored and delivered on optical or magnetic media and the Web, and has become the front-runner in four major electronic document applications: distributing electronic documents via the Web or CD-ROM, as well as desktop and commercial printing. Now you can add to that list budding support for workflow, easier creation of enriched Portable Document Format (PDF) structures, and enhanced support for the Web.

What do you find when you first run Acrobat 4.0? For openers, you see a slick new interface, evolved from version 3.0, bigger yet efficiently delivering all that Acrobat has to offer. In version 4.0, Adobe has added value primarily by building on its successful past, bundling technologies and tools from Adobe development partners who sold these tools separately. Adobe has also laid the architectural groundwork for future expansion and integration with other Adobe products through a consistent plug-in architecture and an upgrade to Acrobat's core architecture. The result after more than a two-year wait is a product significantly upgraded from its predecessor, well worth buying or upgrading (although initially all features are available only on Windows platforms). The Mac version is not as functionally rich, and the UNIX version is planned, but not deliverable as of this writing. Currently, Acrobat Reader is available for the two major platforms, but Reader's search plug-in--the formerly free companion product for distributing your indexed collections to others--was also in development as of early May. Acrobat 4.0 is also not as compatible with its 3.0x predecessor as you might expect. With those caveats, I am still an Acrobat fan and 4.0 is still one of those tools you must have if you're involved with any type of digital publishing or

Adobe Acrobat 4.0

synopsis: Acrobat 4.0 is the latest upgrade of Adobe's popular Portable Document Format (PDF) creation tool. Based on Adobe's new 1.3 architecture, Acrobat 4.0 converts documents into a PDF file while preserving their original appearance, in turn making them distributable for viewing and printing on any computer. As of late May, only the Windows version was available with all of its functionality intact; the Mac version is missing key features and the UNIX version is in the planning stages and not yet deliverable. Central to this version is its increased ease of use, new third-party plug-ins and technologies, enhanced prepress and service bureau capabilities, and expanded forms capabilities. Despite some minimal flaws (including a missing Reader search plug-in), 4.0 is still one of those tools you must have if you're involved with any type of digital publishing or document information management.

price: \$249 street; \$99 to upgrade from 2.0 or 3.0

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document information management.

the fruits of Adobe's labor

Many of the product's major new features are built on the new 1.3 architecture. (Acrobat 3.0 was released in November 1996 with a 1.2 architecture.) Central to this version is its increased ease of use, featuring a tool bar for easy access to both new and familiar Acrobat features, floating palettes with bookmarks and other structures for enhanced display and navigation, conversion to PDF of popular document formats, predefined job options in Distiller, and flexible external object attachment. The upgrade also incorporates new third-party plug-ins and technologies, plus annotation tools, digital signatures, Web capturing, email integration, and batch processing; enhanced prepress and service bureau capabilities, including color profiles and support for PostScript 3.0; and expanded forms capabilities.

For a street price of about \$249, you'll get the following collection of products and applications:

- The functionality of what was formerly known as Exchange plus PDFwriter--the quick print driver that produces PDF files. This is the core product from which most of the plug-ins are available, including the full-text search plug-in companion to Catalog.
- Acrobat Catalog, the application producing full-text indices of PDF document collections. Upgraded to 32-bit for faster indexing speeds, Catalog is functionally the same as in version 3.0.
- Acrobat Distiller, which converts one or more PostScript files to PDF. Conceptually the same utility as in 3.0, Distiller gives users visually faithful renditions of the printed originals, with controls over font embedding and compression schemes for graphics. In 4.0, Distiller supports PostScript 3.0 and comes with presets for optimized delivery to screens, printers, and service bureaus. It also features a fully integrated helper application (Distiller Assistant).
- Adobe PostScript Printer Driver (AdobePS 4.2) for Windows 95, which provides features not found in the standard PostScript driver (like watermark printing and support for image color matching).
- Acrobat Reader (the freely distributed PDF viewer), minus the full-text search plug-in (as of this writing).
- QuickTime 3.0.2 Movie Player and browser plug-in.
- A PDF version of the user manual and assorted tutorials, including a seven-minute AVI movie.

Version 1.3 of the Acrobat architecture provides a base for hierarchical structures such as XML, enhanced embedding of non-PDF files in an Acrobat PDF file, and new capabilities such as digital signatures. Adobe is building a common set of APIs and DLLs for sharing across Adobe applications, and in time, will result in better support and smaller installations.

searching the Web the inexpensive way ... offline

If you are a serious Web researcher, you'll love the new Web Capture feature. Similar to Verity's CD-Web Publisher, Acrobat's Web Capture lets you produce a comprehensive PDF rendition of some or all of a Web site, with active links. Acrobat can download HTML pages, JPEG and GIF graphics (including the first frame of an animated GIF), text files, image maps, and password-secured areas from a site. (Note: Web capture is not available on the Mac version of Acrobat at this time, but is planned.) After you've captured

some of a Web site, you can always re-invoke Web Capture and cherry-pick items of interest and add them to the PDF file. Full-text index the result with Catalog and you'll easily create rich information Web collections for offline searching and reference.

perking up your PDFs

Besides Distiller enhancements, you can now simply drag-and-drop many popular file formats such as JPEG graphics to Acrobat for conversion to PDF. Particularly impressive here is PDFMaker for Microsoft Word 97, PowerPoint 97, and Excel 97. Although a similar add-on has been available from Adobe previously, PDFMaker is now packaged as part of the standard Acrobat release. This powerful tool eliminates the need to handcraft links and bookmarks (including links to URLs) and builds them automatically from supported native document structures. Recycling PDF files is also improved in version 4.0, since Acrobat now extends copying beyond rich text and graphics to include tables from Acrobat to RTF-aware applications.

Do you want to assure that PDF documents are annotated, reviewed, and explicitly approved throughout a work process? Supplementing version 3.0's notes tool is an array of highlighting and other visual annotation devices, including stamps like "draft." Voice-annotation is now a built-in capability too, thanks to the 1.3 architecture's ability to embed nearly arbitrary objects (such as attached spreadsheets).

If you'd like to see what's changed between two versions of a document, use Adobe's new "Compare Pages" command, which highlights the changes between two documents, page by page. If you want to assure that changes to PDF renditions of documents have been approved, use Acrobat's Digital signatures, which allow users to indicate whether approval has been granted. Users can even see the sequence of approvals, check the authenticity of signatures, and view earlier signed versions of documents.

Forms are often an integral part of work processes, and Acrobat has enhanced its forms support too. In 4.0, JavaScript processing enables users to increase a form's intelligence, perhaps by adding date-range checking. Acrobat comes with an electronic specification titled "Acrobat Forms JavaScript Object Specification" as a starting point. If the publishing workflow includes service bureaus, Acrobat's enhanced color support (including the International Color Consortium's color profiles) extends that workflow through service bureaus. With Acrobat's new prepress dialog box, users can bypass color management systems to preserve original CMYK and gray values if the PDF file is to be used to make color plates for printing. Acrobat also has a batch processing facility, so you can apply various security, optimization, and other features to entire folders of PDF files.

searching for the search plug-in

One of Acrobat's most popular features is its ability to index collections of PDF files for full-text searching using Verity's search plug-in. This remains one of Acrobat's most compelling applications, and Adobe has enhanced it even further by making Catalog a 32-bit application for faster indices production and bug fixes. However, the search subsystem (including Index Management) has not been functionally enhanced in years. Therefore, you must still maintain each indexed collection of files on the same medium (an index can't scan files on a CD-ROM and ZIP or LAN content, for example).

Acrobat Reader 4.0 is still the freely distributed Adobe product for viewing PDF files created in Acrobat 4.0, and Reader (sans search plug-in) is also included on the Acrobat 4.0 CD-ROM. In Acrobat 3.0, both Reader and its search plug-in were free--contributing greatly to Acrobat's widespread adoption and popularity among CD-ROM publishers. A visit to Adobe's site for the free Reader download might lead you to momentary panic, however. The Web download of Reader no longer includes search--the Verity full-text companion to Catalog. According to Adobe product managers, the Reader (with search plug-in) will be available in Q3 1999--probably by the time you read this. In late May, company representatives speculated that users might possibly have to purchase a separate Reader CD-ROM (priced at around \$20), so check the Adobe site for

details. When you eventually get Reader and the search plug-in, you'll be permitted to distribute freely on CD-ROM any indexed PDF collections you develop.

flipping over Acrobat

It's probably inevitable that as a product grows and matures, it becomes more complex to develop and learn, and more difficult to support (by Adobe, as well as by organizations using Acrobat). Acrobat 4.0 is certainly more complex, and organizations will need time to learn and master its new feature set. Indeed, the missing Reader search plug-in will initially delay the upgrading by organizations to Acrobat 4.0 (if they need the plug-in for distributing their information on CD-ROM). At the same time, Adobe has built a great architectural foundation to provide SGML or XML layers in Acrobat, an enhancement which could provide more focused searching. It's too bad that Adobe products (such as FrameMaker+SGML) have not yet exploited this, though it's an obvious direction to expect them to take next.

Finally, a warning: compatibility with the classic Acrobat 3.0 isn't complete. Be careful which new features you exploit unless you know your consumers have all moved up to version 4.0. For example, yellow highlight annotations are viewable by version 3.0 users, but embedded sound annotations are not accessible. I suggest keeping Acrobat 3.0 installed for compatibility testing until you're completely familiar with 4.0. On the whole, though, Acrobat 4.0 is indeed a powerful tool and a great value for anyone managing electronic documents. Just be careful to manage its continued growth.

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