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Acrobat Scores Again... In a Changing Game

ROBERT J. BOERI

For nearly 10 years, Adobe Acrobat's Portable Document Format (PDF) has remained the undisputed standard for visually-faithful electronic renditions of print documents. Developers build extensions to Acrobat; users easily distribute PDF files to Windows, MAC, and UNIX systems via email, Web, and CD. Adobe continues to add new features, in a product that lists for as little as \$299 (not to mention over a half-billion downloads of free Reader to date!). This has made Acrobat a mission-critical tool for millions of users, including yours truly. With such momentum, what more could Adobe do? Not rest on its laurels. The rules of the game can and do change, turning yesterday's winning strategies into failures. For example, Acrobat's original read-only electronic renditions became—in the words of an Adobe Acrobat marketing executive—a “roach motel.” Documents got in but couldn't get out. Acrobat's WYSIWYG strategy made PDF files static in a world that increasingly values interaction. Further, in a wireless-Web world with many different screen sizes, WYSIWYG becomes less meaningful. Few screens have the dimensions of printed pages.

Given this conundrum of strengths becoming vulnerabilities, what does Acrobat 6 offer to keep us interested in it as a mission-critical tool? In version 6, Adobe is leveraging its membership in the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the XML standards body, by moving Acrobat deeper into the corporate IT infrastructure. Adobe is building on key W3C XML standards related to security, look-and-feel, and document structures. This architecture will enable the integration of Acrobat with enterprise data and business processes, from document creation and intelligent forms to collaboration.

The Acrobat 6 family now comes in three successively lower-priced editions: Acrobat 6 Professional (\$499 list), Acrobat 6 Standard, Acrobat Elements (an OEM version), and—free as usual—Adobe Reader (Adobe's new name for the familiar Acrobat Reader.) The professional edition is geared towards business professionals, offering all the power of Acrobat 6 Standard plus easier generation of PDF files from professional tools like Autodesk AutoCAD. This edition provides enhanced commenting tools for collaboratively reviewing PDF files. Adobe has also increased the integration with Microsoft Office, letting you import comments

from PDF files into MS Word 2002. I found Adobe's re-tuned interface took some getting used to, but the learning curve was brief and in general the changes made good sense. Full-text indexing is faster and somewhat more capable since Adobe Acrobat has changed full-text search systems. However, be aware that Acrobat 6 full-text indexes will not work with earlier versions of Acrobat although Acrobat 6 will work with earlier versions of indexes. If you're distributing version 6 indexed CDs, recipients must use version 6 products. This could limit rollout to companies slow to upgrade.

Adobe's new XML-based Form Designer, a product taking advantage of Adobe's XML architecture to create fill-in forms, adds intelligence and back-end database integration to PDF files. This capability elevates Acrobat to a new level of enterprise importance. Adobe partnered with IBM to deliver integrated solutions based on Adobe PDF Forms and IBM's DB2 Content Manager. Form Designer also positions Adobe squarely against Microsoft's Office 2003 InfoPath, a Word-like product with many features enabling users to create, fill out, and distribute completed forms.

Just as InfoPath may offer alternatives to Acrobat for deploying forms, a new breed of Acrobat competition is emerging for delivering WYSIWYG Web content. This option is based on the XML Scalable Vector Graphic (SVG) standard. Vendors like matterCast and Texterity argue that delivering SVG-based WYSIWYG content has some inherent advantages over Acrobat for Web delivery. SVG lets you deliver the same presentation quality as PDF, but with faster access to pages. SVG also provides a technical foundation for making this content interactive and dynamic, like dynamic HTML,

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but without the WYSIWYG restrictions of HTML. Lastly, since SVG is based on XML, it offers all the other advantages of content-based XML including the ability to transform, customize, and precisely search content. I tried matterCast's demo of its PDF conversion facility, which uses Adobe's SVG browser plug-in and converts to SVG from a PDF file. The converted document (with a variety of fonts, graphics, and grayscale figures) was excellent.

Without question, Acrobat's carefully developed WYSIWYG format, and its options for collaboration and secure delivery, will remain hard to beat for a long time to come. PDF files are easily created and delivered, and Acrobat's use of XML provides even greater value from a corporate commitment to PDF files. But SVG provides an alternative for Web-based delivery of PDF files. Given criticisms of Acrobat from users and usability experts such as Jakob Nielsen, I expect Adobe will follow suit and begin offering Acrobat support for SVG delivery. And then the WYSIWYG ballgame will have some new players. ☐

ROBERT J. BOERI (bboeri@ieee.org) is a knowledge management analyst for a Boston-area biopharmaceutical firm.
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