

Acrobat 8 and Content 2.0

by now you've probably heard about the upcoming transformation of the web—so-called Web 2.0. Though it depends on whom you ask, Web 2.0 emphasizes the central importance of data, making the web an application platform, with netizens collaborating to create and deliver rich data. Web 2.0 is standards-based, aiming to deliver structured, targeted data anywhere and anytime to myriad devices via surprising “mash-up” combinations of formerly distinct technologies. Many of these are also goals of SGML and XML, using disciplined structures to repurpose and reuse documents. Since content is data, Web 2.0 portends a content transformation that we might call “Content 2.0,” with XML driving many of the changes. I'll explore the meaning and implications of Content 2.0 throughout this year.

Like its web counterpart, Content 2.0 is emerging in rapid fits and starts. There will be an evolution of electronic formats (and extinctions) via marketplace natural selection. Fundamental structural change is occurring in office documents, containers of 80% of all information. This happened first with ODF in OpenOffice and StarOffice 8, and now through OpenXML in Microsoft's Office 2007. WordPerfect has announced support for both ODF and OpenXML. ODF and OpenXML are based on openly available definitions of XML, and thus they provide unprecedented opportunities for analysis, reuse, and delivery.

Adobe's Acrobat 8 is also consistent with many Content 2.0 directions. From its original release as “electronic paper” in 1993 through version 7, Adobe added Acrobat features like full-text search and Forms design and fill-in. With each new feature, Acrobat's footprint grew. Adobe soon realized that by giving away the reader, it laid the groundwork for widespread purchase of complementary value-added products. With well over 500 million cross-platform Adobe readers downloaded, Adobe is leveraging its installed base yet again in Acrobat 8, by working with Flash players, resident on 98% of web-enabled desktops.

Acrobat 8 provides a key Web 2.0 feature: collaboration. Users have the option of sharing contents about PDF files on servers or via rich web-based collaboration. Acrobat 8 users can initiate shared reviews of PDF files, so reviewers can see each

other's comments and post new ones interactively to a server, separate from the PDF file. The required server is not additional software, simply the infrastructure you already have, such as a network folder or a shared workspace on a SharePoint server. Alternatively, online users can collaborate at bargain rates, about \$39/month for 15 participants on an Adobe-hosted site. The service is called Adobe Acrobat Connect, formerly Macromedia's Breeze web conferencing, now integrated with Acrobat.

Acrobat 8 Professional also lets you combine documents from diverse applications with different binary formats into a single PDF file. Images, presentations, web pages, and more can all be combined into a single, polished, Adobe PDF file with a continuous page flow. You can even assemble disparate files into a single PDF package and full-text search within the package.

Yet remember the growing PDF footprint. Acrobat is a tool I rely on daily, but I remember what is said about T-Rex, Stegosaurus, and their peers. Once giant kings of the planet, they morphed into small, agile birds. Smaller alternatives to PDF are already arising in the digital ecosphere. One is FlashPaper, a flash-based medium with a small footprint, now also from Adobe. Another emerging alternative is Microsoft's XML Paper Specification, XPS. XPS is based on XML, and (like PDF) is openly specified. And still another alternative is FreeSVG from Texterity. FreeSVG imports PDFs and produces web-friendly files based on the W3C XML standard for Scaleable Vector Graphics. Curiously, FreeSVG depends on Adobe's SVG viewer—which Adobe will no longer provide or support after Jan. 1, 2008. Of these three alternatives, FreeSVG arguably exemplifies best the standards-based nature of Content 2.0, yet for now depends on an SVG viewer facing an end-of-life in less than a year. Yet right after releasing Acrobat 8, Adobe announced MARS, a radical plan to transform PDF yet again as a compressed bundle of XML files similar to those in OpenOffice and Office 2007. The new PDF will also support SVG.

Faced with these emerging choices, how do you guarantee

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your content remains accessible over the long term? I prefer collaboratively-developed standards, yet admit I am hooked on Acrobat. In an increasingly fragmented Content 2.0 universe however, watching the evolution of electronic document formats is a prudent approach. ■

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