
Introducing Adobe Acrobat 5.0

Adobe's invaluable cross-platform file-viewing tool has taken a new turn with version 5. A number of new features are introduced, including the facility to export PDF files into other formats, such as text or RTF.

By Robert Schifreen

At the end of March, Adobe announced version 5 of Acrobat, its tool for cross-platform file viewing and much more. If you ever look at the CD-ROM which accompanies your copies of PCSA, you'll know all about Acrobat, as this is the tool that we use to create the electronic versions of printed articles.

At the heart of Acrobat is the concept of the Portable Document File, or PDF. This file format is loosely based on PostScript. To create a PDF file, you print a document to disk using a PostScript printer driver (you don't need to own a PostScript printer). You then use the Acrobat compiler, known as Distiller, to convert the .PS file into .PDF. To view the PDF file onscreen, you use the PDF viewer application. The file will look just as it would have done if printed from the originating application, with all necessary fonts being embedded in the PDF file. In fact, the PDF files on your CD-ROM are distilled from the same PostScript files that we send to our typesetting company which produces the printed pages. So you can be sure that the files on the CD are an exact replica of the printed version.

Viewer Availability

The reason for the success of Acrobat is that the viewer application (which also lets you fill in forms) is free of charge and available on many platforms, including Windows, DOS, Mac, native Java, Linux and Solaris. Adobe says that more than 200 million copies are currently in circulation. It is only the programs to create and manage PDF files that you need to pay for. And if you don't want to pay for these, there are some freeware and shareware programs that will do the job for you. Ghostscript is the most well known, and there are others too. And whichever program you use to create your PDF files, you can use the top-quality Adobe viewer to display and print them.

To make the process as simple as possible, the current versions of Acrobat allow you to create PDF files directly from within applications such as MS Office, without the need to print to disk or run the Distiller app manually. In recent years, Adobe has enhanced Acrobat and PDF beyond being simply a tool for viewing printouts onscreen. You can scan existing paper documents and convert them into PDF files, and Acrobat will OCR the image so that you can search for text within scanned pages. You can create and distribute forms for people to fill in. You can apply security settings to PDF files, to prevent people from printing PDF files or copying the text into another format.

And now version 5 has arrived. For the company that simply uses PDF to distribute files to staff, customers or printers, there is little in the way of must-have new features. There is, after all, not a lot that you can add to a file format conversion tool once you've ensured that it works quickly and is bug-free. The improvements in version 5 are mostly to do with workflow, and also an attempt to grab for Adobe a significant chunk of the e-book market. There are those who think that paper as a method for distributing information and literature is a dying medium, and that we'll soon all be downloading electronic books into custom reader hardware. PDF is an obvious contender to be the standard file format for such devices, but Adobe has not really pursued that market. Until now.

So What's New?

Acrobat 5 allows you to share and distribute individual components of a PDF file,

rather than the entire file. In the past, the major complaint by users of Acrobat has been that it is impossible to convert PDF files to plain text, RTF, or indeed any other format. Various third-party tools to provide the feature were launched (see the excellent www.pdfzone.com for links to many), but there was no official Adobe solution. As more and more companies started using PDF as the official method for supplying product manuals, product data sheets and so on, being unable to easily export the text was a problem.

Acrobat 5 changes all this. You can now export a PDF file as RTF or a text file, and you can also export individual graphics from a PDF file as TIFF or JPG without having to resort to a specialist tool or a screen-grab utility. Although this will be welcome news for users, it does completely change the whole focus of Acrobat as being a tool for converting files into a standard non-editable format and ensuring that they stay there. You can now use PDF as a transitional format, safe in the knowledge that once text or graphics are in PDF format you can still recover the components if you need to re-load them into the originating application for major editing work. In addition to being able to export graphics from within PDF files, such as tables and illustrations on a page, you can also export an entire PDF file. Each page is exported as a single image, in TIFF or JPG or PNG format. Or, you can export in .PS or .EPS format, which will be useful if you want to have the file professionally printed or typeset.

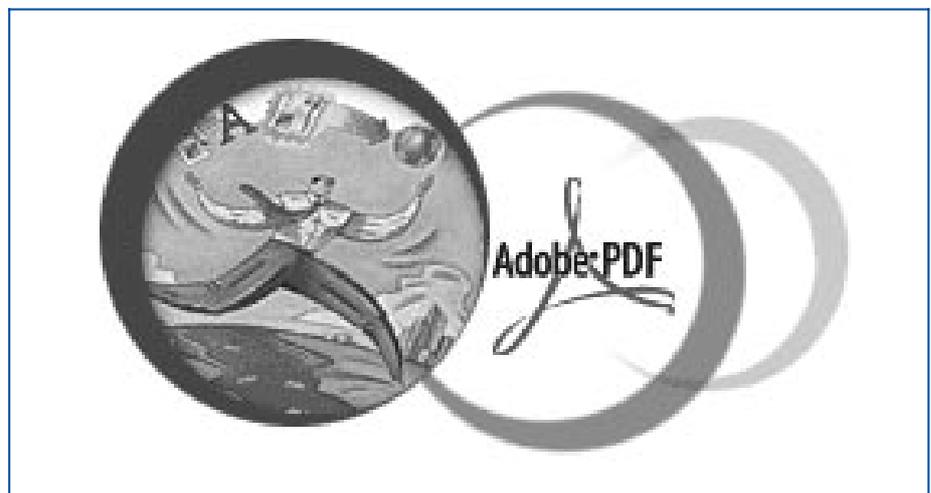
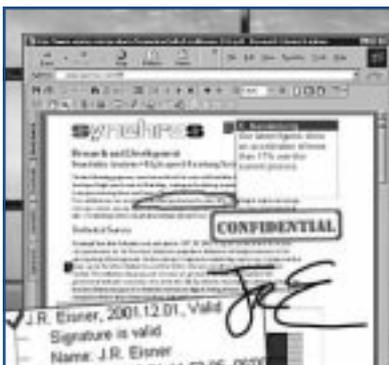
Protection

One area where Acrobat has traditionally been weak is in protection. When you create a PDF file you can password-protect the ability to open it, print it, or copy and select text. However, the level of granularity is fairly large, and there are many things that you can't prevent users from doing to PDF files in version 4. Also, the 40-bit encryption system in the current version was recently cracked. Version 5 adds a new optional 128-bit encryption facility, which will make it much harder for anyone to develop a program to bypass the security measures on PDF files. Support for digital signatures has also been improved, making it easier to sign PDF files in order that the content can be verified as intact by the recipient. You can now exchange keys via email from within Acrobat itself, rather than having to use a separate tool.

One notable omission is the ability to set a timeout date on a PDF file, after which it will refuse to open. This is something that Adobe was considering adding, but appears not to have done so. Although there are third-party tools to implement this, they are mostly trivial to break by simply changing the system date on the target PC. This is because the terms of the free reader software are such that plug-ins cannot write to disk, and thus creating a more robust add-on that would work with the free reader is not permitted.

Workflow

One area in which Acrobat 5 offers real new facilities over release 4 is in workflow automation. With version 5, multiple users can add comments to a PDF file, in order



to speed the document review process. You can do this from within the reader or by opening a PDF file within a Web browser from a server. Acrobat 5 supports the WebDAV standard (WebDistributed Authoring and Versioning) for this. The number of Acrobat features available when viewing PDF files from within a Web browser, rather than shelling out from the browser to the standalone reader, has been increased. The forms feature has been improved, and you can now create forms that are filled in via a Web server and linked to a central database. Support for XML makes it easier to integrate forms with back-end database systems. Also new to Acrobat 5 is a spelling checker, for checking PDF files or form field entries.

Users With Disabilities

New to Acrobat 5 is support for users with various disabilities. There's a high-contrast colour scheme to assist those with sight problems, and driver support for third-party hardware that can read text aloud. The program is fully driveable from the keyboard, for those that have difficulty with mice - and this means it will work with specialist keyboards too.

Output

Acrobat 5 can tile printed output across multiple pages. This is useful for proof-reading large-format pages such as billboard posters. No longer will you have to tick the "shrink to fit page" box and then stare at the printed page with a magnifying glass. You can also choose to print just the odd or even pages of a PDF file, and rotate and centre pages.

Improved Usability

Acrobat 4 introduced the Web Capture feature, which captures a single Web page or an entire site (or anything in between) into a single PDF file with all links intact. This feature has been enhanced to support CSS and JavaScript. There's also improved support for Microsoft Office - Acrobat 5 installs a toolbar button within Office which allows you to quickly convert the current document to PDF format and, optionally, email it to someone. Acrobat also sports new Commenting and Editing toolbars, to make the program easier to navigate. At last, batch processing is supported; you can now print a directory full of PDF files with a single command, rather than having to open each one separately. Ironically, batch printing has been supported via the Unix version of Acrobat Reader for some time, but never under Windows. Batch processing also supports saving as RTF, generating thumbnails, printing just the first page of each file, and adding security.

PDF Consultant

The new PDF Consultant tool, included in Acrobat 5, helps to analyse the space usage in a PDF file, repair damaged files, and remove unwanted elements. You can write your own additional functions for PDF Consultant, or buy them from third parties.



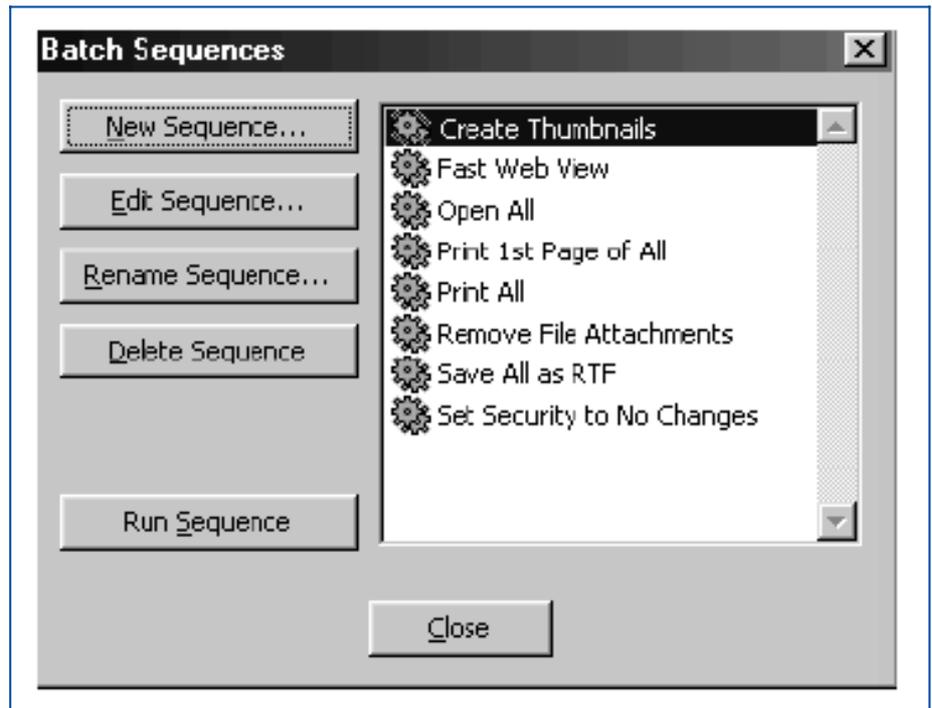
Percentage	Bytes	Description
0.0%	0	Thumbnails
14.8%	86805	Images
1.0%	5708	Bookmarks
26.7%	156451	Content Streams
1.6%	95843	Fonts
12.8%	74821	Structure Info
0.0%	0	Forms
16.7%	99926	Comments
11.7%	69963	Named Destinations
9.4%	552741	Cross Reference Table
5.1%	299669	Unknown
100.0%	596808	Total
	596808	File Size in Bytes

Rollouts

Acrobat 5 includes some new features to aid the rollout of the full program, or just the reader, across a networked company. It will work with many well-known network deployment suites, and includes the ability to notify users if an update is available and ask them whether or not they'd like to install it. System administrators can configure the installer to determine which features of Acrobat are installed on users' machines and which are not. For example, you could use this feature to ensure that comments added to PDF files are stored on the correct network server for the department or branch office to which the program is installed. There is also increased support for use of the program in lockdown desktop environments, where users don't have full admin rights for their own PCs. Support is also included for Windows 2000 Terminal Services - you can view and print PDF files in such an environment.

Compatibility

Acrobat v5 uses a new revision of the PDF file specification (v1.4). Acrobat Reader



v4 will open PDF 1.4 files created by Acrobat 5, though there are two cases that will cause problems. If the PDF file has been secured with new 128-bit encryption, Acrobat 4 will not open it. And PDF files created by Adobe Illustrator 9 or Photoshop 6, or any other programs that support transparency, will also not open in Acrobat Reader v4. Ideally, then, you should upgrade your reader to version 5; however, it is not necessarily urgent or essential that you do this.

Availability

Acrobat 5 costs around US\$250, or around US\$100 if you're upgrading from a previous version. This gets you everything you need in order to produce PDF files from a single Windows or Mac machine. Further information on versions in non-English languages is at www.adobe.com/acrobat.

Conclusion

Version 5 of Acrobat is a major departure for Adobe. Although there are few major new features, the whole PDF philosophy has changed. No longer is PDF just a format for safely sharing information in such a way that the file can't be changed by the recipient. Now, assuming you permit it via the security settings, recipients of PDF files can do much more than ever before. Using features which go under the name of "repurposing", you can extract text or images from PDF files and put them back into their originating applications, or any other application.

Acrobat 5 is, like previous versions, a highly useful tool. However, the product is rapidly hitting the "where do we go from here?" buffers. Version 3 was perfectly adequate for most people's needs, and version 4 did not really change that. With release 5, this seems even more so. Although the new features are handy, this is not a must-have upgrade unless you fall into a certain small number of categories of Acrobat users. If you simply bought Acrobat for the original purpose for which it was designed - ie, being able to send PDF versions of documents to people - then you will gain little by upgrading. It remains to be seen where Adobe takes Acrobat in years to come. Microsoft Office hit this problem with the 95 version, but MS relentlessly issues upgrades every year in order to generate yet more cash. Whether Adobe can continue to milk Acrobat, especially as the reader is freeware and the PDF file format is in the public domain, will be fascinating to watch.

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