

PDF toolsets evolve, PDF workflow matures

PDF Creation Software
Adobe Acrobat 5
CreoScitex Synapse
Agfa Apogee Create

by Lerrick Starr

You'd think it would be hard to improve on a relatively mature product, but up until its most recent release *Adobe Acrobat* still had a few things left to fix.

However it appears that with *Acrobat 5*, Adobe has finally repaired its well-documented problem with fonts—specifically, the fact that on many fonts internal flags which should have allowed embedding in a PDF were being misinterpreted, leading to font substitutions and lots of problems for film and plate people.

Adobe has also added collaborative tools that allow multiple users to simultaneously comment on a PDF file resident in a commonly shared folder—super for content creators looking to get a buy-in on a concept by multiple stakeholders.

Now let's look at the revisions to *Distiller*. The most obvious changes are under the General tabs where under Settings> Job Options we now find a compatibility setting for PDF 1.4. Using v1.4 gives us some nice PostScript 3 features, including access to DeviceN color space, a place in which to put our spot-to-spot blends. Still, it's worth noting that the default setting for Press-destined PDFs remains PDF 1.3. That's because the number of RIPs and workflows capable of understanding PDF 1.4 is still quite small.

An Auto-Rotate Pages setting has also been added, and the default page size settings have been moved elsewhere. The Compression dialog box reveals a manual threshold setting under which images are not downsampled even if they are higher than 300 dpi but lower than this number. The Monochrome Images section now in-

cludes an Anti-Alias option, letting you choose the number of bits (levels of gray) available to the anti-aliasing algorithm.

The Color tab is a completely new story. Added is a Settings File with predetermined characteristics—when you choose “None”, everything's much the same as *Acrobat 4*; but if you choose one of the eight others—including U.S. Prepress De-

faults—you get a twenty percent dot gain for grayscale, and CMYK is pegged at U.S. Web Coated (SWOP) v2. Workflow choices range from ColorSync to Web Graphics defaults. Yes, the European and Japanese prepress defaults are there as well (how come they can get away with 15% gain?).

Big changes show up under Advanced settings, where there are toggles for Illustrator Overprint Mode, Convert Gradients to Smooth Shades, and the missing ASCII Format that was formerly under the General tab in *Acrobat 4*.

ACROBAT GETS A MAKEOVER

In *Acrobat 5* they've shuffled a few things around and given us a few more options. They've moved the Export PS or EPS function to the File>Save dialogue; now you can choose to save your PDFs as one of six file types other than PDF, including TIFF and JPG, PS and EPS, PNG and Rich Text formats, and making *Acrobat* a kind of clearing house of file formats.

When you look at File>Export, all that's left to export are Comments, Form Data and Extract Images As—and then (unexpectedly) TIF, JPG and PNG. Using this option you can batch extract every image in your PDF file for any purpose (although for me the images were inverted when I opened them up in *Photoshop 5.5* and required a Command-I to get them looking right).

You can also embed movies or sound clips and have your PDF perform actions. (although these are unwise moves unless you are planning to blow off your current prepress service provider). Other than that,

Acrobat 5 brings welcome improvements to the PDF workflow.

BATTLE OF THE PDF GIANTS

I confess to being a fan of Agfa's *Apogee Create* ever since *Normalizer* was pulled out of Pilot and made into a standalone product. The reasons for this love affair are simple. *Create* embeds fonts as it is asked; it can preflight the PDFs it makes and apply *Enfocus PitStop* Action lists to correct problems; and *Create Normalizer* is accessible as an AppleTalk printer that shows up in the Chooser like any other, as well as functioning as a desktop spooler. *Create* is preferentially hot folder driven (with unique settings applied to each). The only thing you can't do is drag-and-drop a PostScript file onto its icon and get a PDF.

And it was much faster than *Acrobat 4*, shaving valuable minutes off really big jobs. Sometimes it succeeded in making a PDF that *Acrobat* just couldn't manage.

Normalizer is packed with its own set of special commands and operators to help deal with blends, bleeds and other bugaboos inherent in the earlier versions of *Acrobat*. Although Agfa charges US\$1000 for it, *Create* usurped *Acrobat's* position in my day-to-day workflow.

AND NOW SYNAPSE

In May, CreoScitex released its new PDF conversion tool, *Synapse 1.0* (check www.creoscitex.com/products/workflow/synapse/download/synapse.asp).

Gotta hand it to these Canucks. Their literature describes *Synapse* as a simple way to produce “known good” PDFs. But what I see is a very clever way to manage *Acrobat Distiller* by adding a dash of automation and a hefty handful of plug-ins that work in concert with *Enfocus PitStop* actions to detect and correct many common problems in prepress-bound PDFs. To do so *Synapse* gives you new ways to print to *Distiller*, including a desktop printer, drag-and-drop onto a hot folder, and a *Synapse* ‘apple’ for your desktop.

Synapse also installs XTensions in *QuarkXPress* (*Synapse* and *Prinerly Print*

XT) which virtually tame Quark's PostScript creation difficulties. This is a quick fix for the undesirable spot color-to-CMYK conversion endemic to XPress output. *Synapse* also limits the choices you can make in XPress, adding default values for page size and cropmark offset, and effectively making it foolproof. But in contrast to *Create*, *Synapse* uses your version of *Acrobat Distiller* as part of its solution.

For some time CreoScitex has provided access to a set of free plug-ins on its site. These were billed as "enhancements" to *Distiller*—plug-ins (startup files, really) that affected the way *Distiller* interpreted its PostScript file input. Once installed, hairlines could no longer be invisibly thin, custom blends produced in *QuarkXPress* became easier to manage, and a wealth of patches for *FreeHand*, *InDesign*, and *FrameMaker* became available. A big part of *Synapse* is this same package of enhancements, bundled and installed in your *Distiller* application.

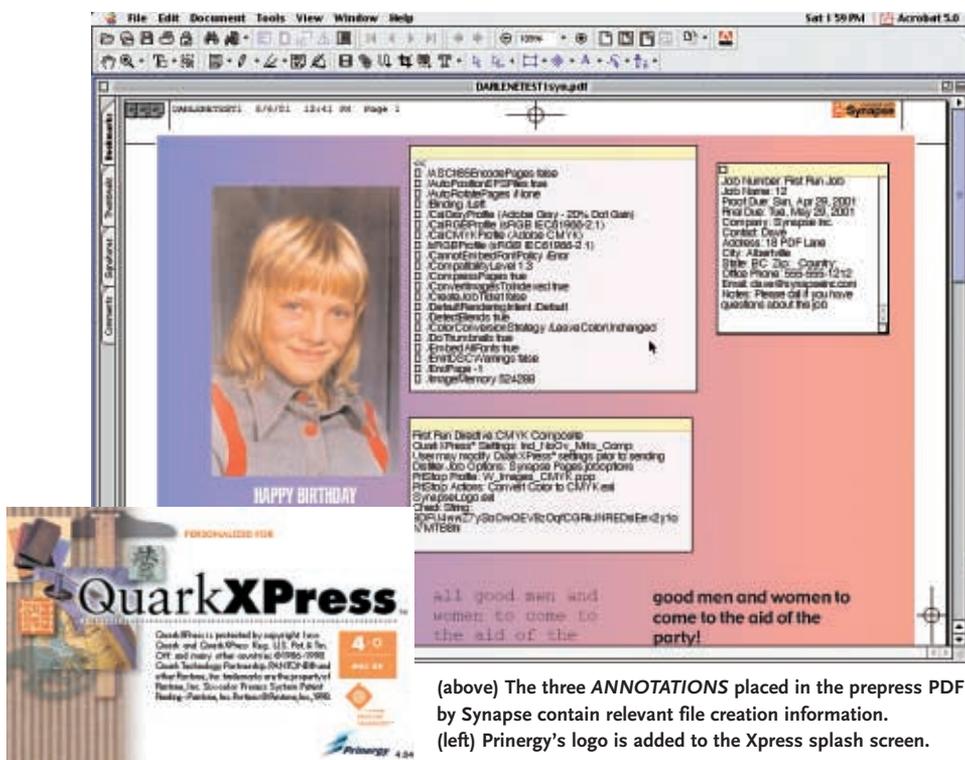
Particularly noticeable is the Prinergy (CreoScitex's PDF workflow) logo that now floats in the *QuarkXPress* splash screen every time you open the application, and a floating CreoScitex launchpad that hovers in the corner of your XPress

document, beckoning you to punch it and create the PDF of your dreams.

DIRECTIVE DRIVEN

Synapse comes with a number of default "Directives", bearing labels like

"Synapse Spots: CMYK + Spots Comp", and "CMYK + Spots Thin Sep". The first sets *Distiller* for a composite CMYK job that may contain spot colors. The second provides a separated CMYK file including spot colors with low res images in place and ready for



(above) The three ANNOTATIONS placed in the prepress PDF by *Synapse* contain relevant file creation information. (left) Prinergy's logo is added to the Xpress splash screen.

OPI. The drawback in this is that there are only twelve variations supplied, and you can't build your own. You'll need the *Pro* version of *Synapse* to create what's called a Vendor Set consisting of custom directives—but it costs another \$400 to obtain this privilege.

The interesting part is that *Acrobat Distiller* has always provided the opportunity to exchange Job Options files. These are custom settings that any print shop can define for its workflow. They can be sent by e-mail to inexperienced users, becoming accessible just by placing them in *Acrobat Distiller's* Settings folder.

Now CreoScitex has found a way to charge for what *Acrobat* includes free.

One thing I did come to appreciate: every PDF created using *Synapse* had three "Annotations" added to the top left corner. Open the first and you find a list of the settings and *PitStop* actions used to create the PDF. The second contains file-specific info showing the XPress settings selected by the Directive. The last contains creator information.

There's no mistaking the PDF creator; a *Synapse* logo is added to the margin

when marks are turned on. The branding never ends—even at US\$895 for *Synapse* (or US\$1295 for *Synapse Pro*).

TESTING—1, 2, 3

I happened to have a 233MB PostScript file laying around, so I used it to test *Acrobat Distiller*, *Distiller* with *Synapse* and *Agfa Create*. Memory settings for *Acrobat 5* and *Create* were set to minimums of 96,000KB and maximums of 256,000.

The PS file was handed off to *Acrobat 5 Distiller* first; total run time from start to finish was 5:55. Next, the same file went to *Acrobat* through *Synapse*—total time: 6:05. *Agfa Create* got the file last, and chewed it up in 3:45, a considerable speed advantage no matter how you measure it.

Originally championed by *Agfa*, PDF is now part of every major workflow. In practice, the use of PDF files has streamlined prepress production significantly. One thing seems clear. PDF has finally achieved mainstream status in the world of commercial print.

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The PLUG-INS added to Adobe *Distiller* by *CreoScitex's Synapse* are startup files that correct for some known problems, including hairline rules.