6 PDF Prepress in OS X: Pushing the right buttons

by Lerrick Starr

Adobe Acrobat's much-anticipated version 6 is here, incorporating both long-awaited prepress components and a new interface. Now color separations can be viewed and output. Now transparency can be flattened and the results previewed. Now preflight checks that include PDF/X criteria can be run, expediting perfect prepress output. Printers marks, guides, measuring tools, and other new functions make this release the most prepress-capable ever — that is, if you ante up for the Professional version.

Setting aside the teething problems, Acrobat 6 — especially on the Mac — represents a major upgrade. It's faster, it uses Mac/PC TrueType fonts interchangeably, and the addition of native preflighting is a huge advance.

Users have been differentiated according to two target groups, each with its own version; for content creators and corporate users there's the dumbed-down Standard version; for high-end types needing all the octane they can get, the Professional version.

START-STOP START IN BETA TESTING

Adobe sent me a beta of Acrobat Professional for an advance peek, but unfortunately, things stalled right away.

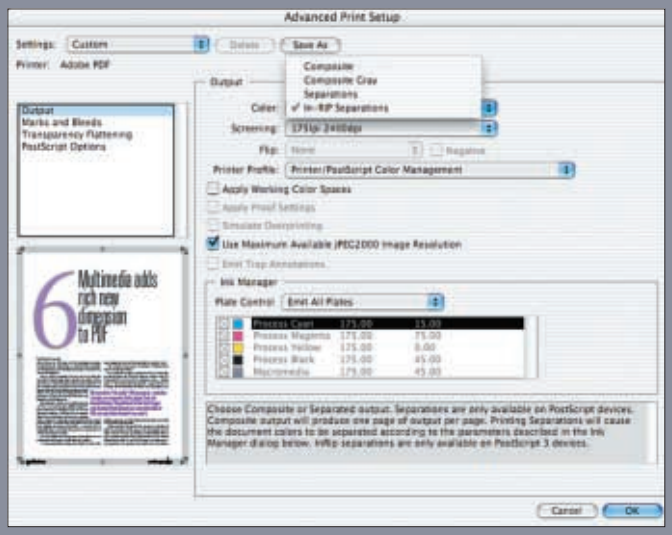
I keep two Macs and a PC up and running, so I popped the Acrobat 6 CD into my OS 9.2 system — not compatible. Turning to Windows 98 running on my Pentium — again, not compatible. There will never be a Pro version for OS 9 (a blessing in disguise) but the Standard version will run in Win 98.

Third time was lucky on my Titanium PowerBook running OS 10.2.6 — drag-and-drop installation, and bingo! It came up the first time I launched it and ran nicely for a time. But it didn't survive the first crash.

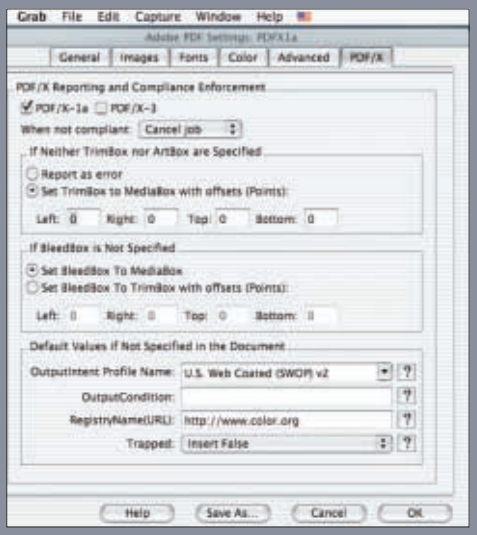
A second beta ran much better. Distiller appeared to be a little bit flaky, requiring an application restart from time to time, and the Acrobat interface suffered from test suite clutter. I performed the majority of my testing with this version, and it was impressive. As for its shortcomings — beta is beta. I expect the unexpected.

In the middle of writing this report, the final release arrived. So I installed it — and that's where the problems began. As I ran my own ripper tests, Distiller became unstable, and I was forced to reinstall. Dragging and dropping the OS X installation files the first five times, it became apparent that removing the Acrobat 6

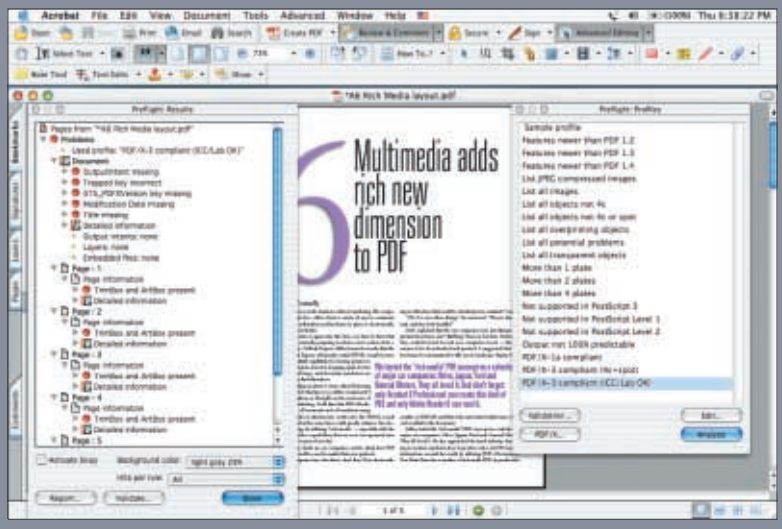
PDF prepress expanded for preflight, separations and PDF/X



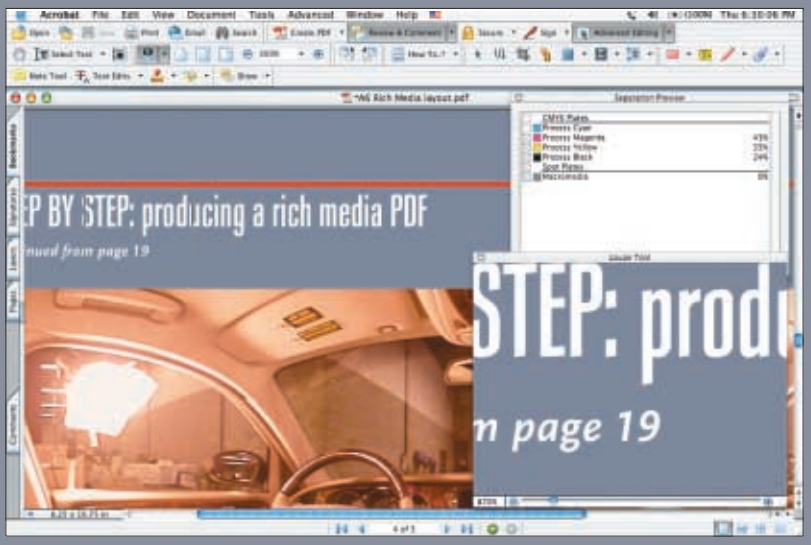
For prepress pros, the good stuff is under *ADVANCED PRINT SETUP* — separations, marks, flattening settings and PostScript options.



Here's the new *PDF/X TAB* with various options. PDF/X variations can be created during distilling and then digitally certified!



Note the *STOCK PREFLIGHT PROFILES* on the right and the results of an analysis on the left, reported in a complex but thorough manner.



Using the Separations Preview in conjunction with the new *LOOP TOOL*, magnification up to 6400% is possible.

folder didn't remove everything. After the first install, it stopped asking for a serial number and knew my name. By then I was wishing that I was in front of a PC, where there's a place in Control panels that lets you uninstall software, including invisible files. But more on this later.

Midway through testing, one of my constants changed — something that seemed innocuous enough at the time. I connected my PowerBook to the Internet through a high speed cable router. After that, things destabilized. After a reinstall and another unsuccessful launch, a recollection of something seen during beta testing prompted me to disconnect it from the network. Suddenly Acrobat was resurrected. I relaunched it dozens of times, connected and disconnected from the Internet, and made the following observations:

1. Acrobat runs with no problem on a network without an Internet connection.
2. If Acrobat detects an Internet connection, it polls an Adobe web server to determine its status. It appears that the web server tells Acrobat whether or not it has permission to launch, or, as I suspect was the case with my situation, Acrobat detected my Internet connection but couldn't pass its signal through my gateway and defaulted to no-launch. Big Brother really is watching!

NOW IT WORKS FINE, BUT I NEED HELP

The new Acrobat interface is fresh and uncluttered. To achieve this look, many of the familiar tools are hidden in unfamiliar places. New tools and functions buried down deep add to the confusion.

I turned to Help>Complete Acrobat 6 Help for guidance, but the default Help window size was too small to read comfortably on my T-Book. When I resized it, I could read the text, but now it obscured the PDF. This window can't be hidden, and it's missing the yellow button, so it can't be docked. Applying Hide <Command-H>, Acrobat disappeared completely. Nor could it be tucked behind the open PDF. I had to close the Help window in order to work on the PDF, and then reopen it when my memory ultimately failed me.

The Help search function itself was unimpressive. It took far too long to generate 'hits' on a search topic, and they were often either too extensive or missing altogether.

In response to my troubles, Adobe advised me to print out the pages I needed. But I can't understand why they couldn't do a better job of implementation. At least activate the Hide button so I don't lose my place every time I close the window. Isn't that SOP for OS X?

There's also a mysterious option under Help called Detect and Repair. Detect and repair what? Every time I ran it, I got a message saying, "Missing components were repaired" — but it said that *every single time*. Turning to Help was no help! I couldn't find a word of explanation.

While testing the text edit functions, I highlighted text and went looking for a place to toggle to another font. In Acrobat 5, I could go to Tools>TouchUp Text>Text Attributes. However, searching through the v6 dropdowns, I couldn't find Text Attributes anywhere. It took fifteen minutes to discover that there's a lot hidden in contextual menus, which can only be accessed with an inconvenient two-handed move. To find Properties in the pop-up dialogue, I had to Control-click the selected text (of course, relying on Help for guidance delayed the process). This isn't a problem in Windowsland, where the two- and three-button mouse lives.

The TouchUp Properties dialogue is clearer and more informative. There you can see the licensing restrictions of the font you're trying to edit, which is an important bit of information. Fonts licensed for viewing and printing cannot be edited if they're embedded in a PDF. To edit text, you have to go to Advanced> Use Local Fonts and make the font active on your system. No font, no editing.

COLOR SEPARATIONS MADE EASY

Color separations can be output directly in Acrobat. RGB to CMYK conversion using a printer profile is automatic — choose from Composite, Composite Gray and In-RIP Separations. All colors in the PDF show up in the Ink Manager (Print>Advanced button); by default, spot colors appear with a black X in the output checkbox. A click on the color converts it to CMYK, and another click de-selects it.

Curiously, the available default screenings for the Adobe PDF printer include only 100 lpi@1200 dpi, 175 lpi@2400 dpi, 200 lpi@3600 or 4000 dpi, and four others under 71 lpi; not found are the useful 133 lpi@1800 dpi or 150 lpi@2400 lpi. Perhaps Adobe is intuiting a future where 175 lpi is the minimum for press work.

By double-clicking on a color name, a pop-up screen affords the opportunity to customize the output by editing screen frequency and angle. Unfortunately, saving it as a printer setting doesn't retain these values, since they originate in Acrobat PDF printer's PPD (printer description file).

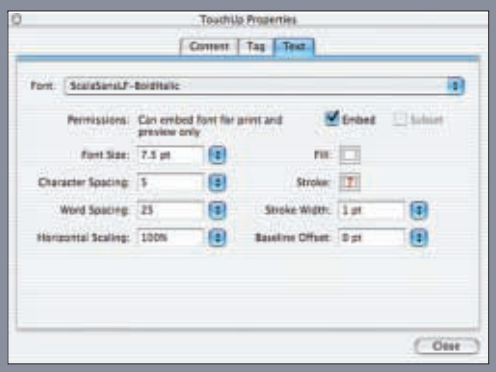
Custom Acrobat-generated marks and bleeds, transparency flattening settings, and PostScript options may all be applied. As a test, I thought it would be a neat idea to add marks to an existing PDF. I applied them, printed PostScript and dumped it into Distiller. But Distiller reported that the Helvetica font used by Acrobat could not be embedded in the PDF due to licensing restrictions! Needless to say, when the file was opened, the text accompanying the marks appeared only as bullets.

And unfortunately, there is no provision for remapping colors or doing anything else interesting with color adjustments except converting named spot colors to their CMYK equivalents.

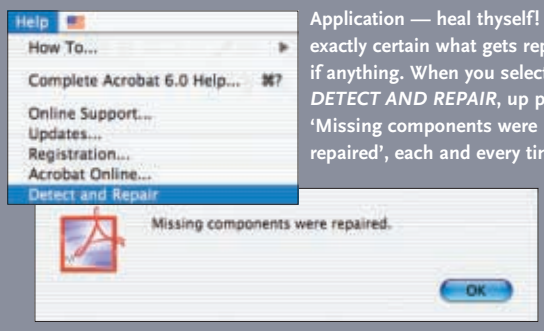
NEW PLUG-INS MANAGER — BUT OS 9 PLUG-INS A NO GO

In earlier versions of Acrobat, the installation of a plug-in required nothing more than dropping it into the appropriate Plug-ins fold-

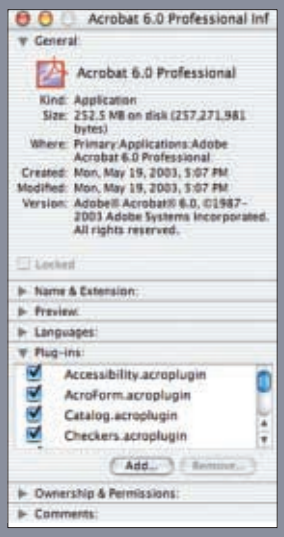
New features take some user readjustment



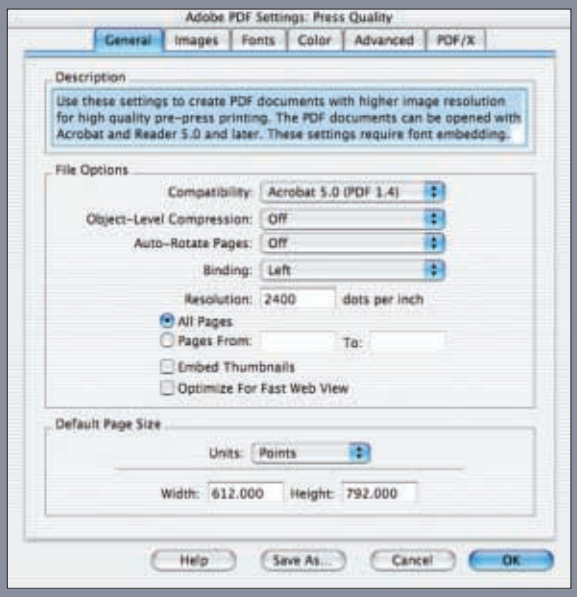
To change an object's *ATTRIBUTES*, you must Control-click to access its properties.



Application — heal thyself! I'm not exactly certain what gets repaired, if anything. When you select *DETECT AND REPAIR*, up pops 'Missing components were repaired', each and every time.



Access the *PLUG-INS MANAGER* by Command-I (info) on the application icon. Only add plug-ins once, even when they don't show up right away. They'll be there later after an application restart when they get their chance to register with Acrobat.



If you experience *DISTILLER CRASHES* or odd behaviour when distilling, turn off both Object-Level Compression and Optimize For Fast Web View. This cured my problems.

er. However, in OS X, a Plug-ins Manager must be used that is accessible only after you Info the Acrobat icon. Expand the Plug-ins section and a list of native Acrobat plug-ins appears. Plug-ins can be added and removed at will.

But one note of caution: after loading a plug-in, it does *not* appear on the list. I discovered this after several attempts to add QuiteABoxOfTricks from Quite Software (*www.quite.com*). Acrobat must be restarted to let new plug-ins register themselves and be viewed in the list or removed. Starting Acrobat with three copies of QuiteABoxOfTricks on board initiated quite-a-battle-royal between the duplicate Quite plug-ins.

A big headache for Mac-based prepress is the lack of compatibility with Acrobat plug-ins that worked in earlier versions — and continue to work in Windows — most notably Enfocus PitStop, a hard-working and effective PDF preflight and correction tool.

Whose problem is it? Adobe's or the plug-in manufacturer? For the time being, it's our problem. We'll just have to wait until OS X versions appear. But browsing around, I found that Quite's QuiteABoxOfTricks and QuiteImposing plug-ins are available in beta. I trust that all the rest will convert in the next few months.

TRANSPARENCY FLATTENING AND 'SAVE AS'

There isn't much to say about the new Transparency Flattener Preview (a tool which has been available in Illustrator since version 9), except — it's about time. At last, all transparency issues in a PDF can be eliminated with the click of a button — and while you're at it, you can find out just how badly the job would have been reproduced if it had gone out untouched. Used in combination with the new Loop tool, you can enlarge any portion of the file up to 6400% and really see the traps in a PDF. But don't forget to toggle on the Advanced>Overprint Preview or everything will be visually knocked out.

I have been asked more than once to generate an editable document from a supplied PDF. This would not normally be considered a prepress function, but being able to extract an editable Microsoft Word document from any PDF is a big bonus.

The new built-in Word converter does a less-than-perfect job, often splitting a single page into two or three component pages. Nevertheless, Word is Word, and the converter can only get better. Acrobat 6 can also save as text, XML, JPG2000 and HTML, along with the former options.

PREFLIGHT AND SEPARATION PREVIEW

Adobe has done a good job of integrating PDF preflighting tools from Callas Software. Go to Document>Preflight, and click on Edit; twenty-one prebuilt profiles are listed. The most important ones are the bottom three related to PDF/X compliancy. If you analyze the PDF, the resulting report details all its deficiencies.

Highlight the PDF/X-1a profile and click the Edit button. Up pops a three-panel dialogue where the profiles can be reviewed, as well as the rules that compose each profile and the conditions to be tested. Conceptually, the process is very simple, and double-clicking on the rules or conditions produces another dialogue in which you can perform detailed customization. Unfortunately, anticipating all the tests you would like to make is a pretty complex exercise, and there aren't enough examples in the stock profiles to ease the workload.

Unlike some other preflight software, Acrobat only tests for conditions and then reports on them. For instance, one cannot program a preflight profile which would check for rules less than .5 pt and then correct the underweight ones. Somehow I was expecting more — but what's there is still a good thing!

To preview the CMYK separations that Acrobat will generate (a function previously available using the Quite Revealing plug-in), go to Advanced>Separation Preview and open the dialogue. A digital readout of ink coverage at the cursor point is a handy tool.

DISTILLER DOESN'T LET ME DOWN — UNTIL I USE IT

I had put off getting around to a detailed investigation of Acrobat Distiller, an app that may be regarded as lower profile. Not unreasonable, considering the allure of Acrobat's host of new toys.

In general, there was a lot to like about the new Distiller. It's faster. The interface is more pleasant. And an extra tab in Distiller>Settings>Edit Adobe PDF Settings, headed "PDF/X", contains a variety of settings (including PDF/X-1a or PDF/X-3 compliance) plus options for adjusting the Trim/Art/Bleed boxes. To conform with either PDF/X specification you must choose an output intent (e.g. Generic CMYK Profile) and set the Trapped flag.

Job Options have been renamed (again). In version 4 it was PressOptimized, PrintOptimized and ScreenOptimized; in v5 it was Press, Print, Screen and eBook. Now we have six options: Press Quality, High Quality, Smallest File Size, Standard, PDF/X-1a and PDF/X-3 — although I'm not certain this list provides the clearest description of the choices.

In this release, Adobe gave us new PDF 1.5 specs to work with, but in actual use, selecting PDF/X-1a or PDF/X-3 job.options still uses PDF 1.3. The Press Quality setting does it one version better, moving to PDF 1.4.

While Distiller was running, it did everything well — I just couldn't keep it running. Sometimes it distilled fine, sometimes it produced no output file. Sometimes a library failed to initialize. Sometimes the Default Settings pop-up went blank and Job Options completely disappeared.

Initially it appeared that the problem occurred when dragging and dropping a PostScript file onto the open application. However, resorting to File>Open only added to the confusion.

I selected my PS file and clicked the "Open" button. Distiller asked for a file destination for the new PDF. The button should have said "Save", but it still said "Open". That gave me pause; I thought I was being asked to open the file twice.

Regardless, distilling PS files didn't work any better using this method. Several times after Distiller had crashed, an application restart wasn't enough, and I found it necessary to reboot the OS X system to get things working reliably again. It didn't take out OS X proper, but Distiller wouldn't launch without a restart.

ADDRESSING THE DISTILLER INSTABILITY PROBLEM

With some help from Adobe tech support, I was directed to OS X's Root directory/Library/Application Support/Adobe/Acrobat, where two files could be found, ominously named AcroENUProSelfHeal.xml and AcroENUDistSelfHeal.xml. (If Reader 6 has been installed, you may find RdrENUSelfHeal.xml.)

It seems that 'SelfHeal' and 'Repair and Detect' under Help are somehow connected. Deleting the two files resulted in what seemed to be a fresh install — serial number and all.

So did the fresh install solve Distiller's instability?

Unfortunately, no.

But working like a million monkeys on a million typewriters, this monkey stumbled onto why some profiles — such as all the PDF/X job.options — performed perfectly, and others didn't.

To correct the problem, choose any profile except PDF/X and go to Settings>Edit Adobe PDF Settings General. Turn off Object-Level compression *and* Optimize For Fast Web View. *Both* must be disabled (and this was the tricky part to discover).

After doing this, Distiller worked as expected.

OKAY, SO I'M NOT SO DISAPPOINTED

It's not unusual to find problems in a new software release, never mind one operating in a strange new environment like OS X.

So, setting aside the teething problems, it's obvious that Acrobat 6 — especially on the Mac — represents a major upgrade. It's faster, it uses Mac/PC TrueType fonts interchangeably, and the addition of native preflight functionality is a huge advance. The printing engine is greatly enhanced by a number of features, notably built-in color separation capabilities and transparency flattening. And I've restricted myself to prepress-related functions, but to do so ignores many noteworthy additions like Review & Comment, Secure and Sign. All in all — terrific stuff.

Acrobat 6 is light years ahead of its forebears, but as always, the OS X version is a light-minute behind its Windows big brother. Alack and alas!

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