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Acrobat Connect: More, please

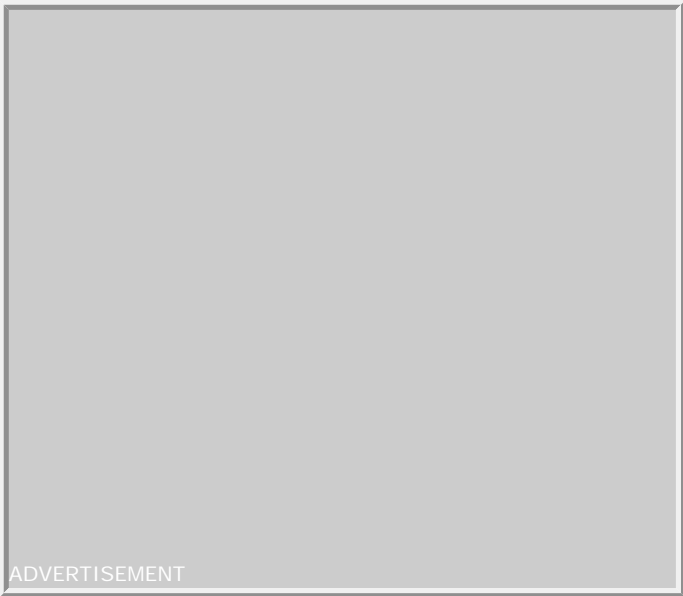
By Don Fluckinger

December 19, 2006

Opinion: Acrobat 8's new toy is way cool, but adding VoIP and enabling easier real-time PDF markup and annotation for all meeting participants would make it a dream tool.

MP3 mavens know that a good mashup is worth its weight in gold, like ECC's classic **Herb Alpert vs. Public Enemy** pastiche. Or DJ Danger Mouse's **Beatles vs. Jay-Z** tri remix, which is so phenomenal that Sony invoked the DMCA to shut 'em down because it was just too popular among the downloading set.

Mashups are great when they work, so-so when they don't—you can sort of see the potential of the concept, understand how the creator could see beauty in his or her idea. But it's just not quite there.



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That's where Acrobat Connect is, in Acrobat 8. Mashing up the former Macromedia Breeze and the new Adobe Acrobat has loads of potential. I for one love the idea of real-time collaboration on PDF documents. Email completely re-engineered the way we communicate at work, and real-time document markup over an audio-video conference could, productivity-wise, make email look like Morse code.

All potential

For a full month starting in late November, Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein in Boston, gyroball hurler Daisuke Matsuzaka in Japan, and Matsuzaka's agent Scott Boras in California screwed around with old-school communication problems. They flew around the world for a month in pursuit of the hottest Japanese-league export since Ichiro, inking an eleventh-hour deal just as the team's right to negotiate expired.

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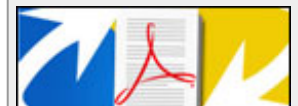
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Epstein, Red Sox diehards will note, lost much time that could have been better invested shoring up the bullpen. Team owner John Henry burned money as his minions logged all those hours in his private jet getting Matsuzaka on board for the 2007 season.

Imagine this scenario: All three parties, thousands of miles apart and comfortable in their own offices, hook up their webcams. Then they spark up Acrobat Connect, hash out the financial details of Matsuzaka's contract, and mark up a PDF of the document in real time over their DSL connections. Had they been able to do this, they would have hammered out a deal in a few minutes.

After putting Acrobat Connect through its paces in several sessions—one, notably, with MacAddict software critic John Cruise—I can see that Connect doesn't quite achieve that dream. Specifically, it supports text chat and allows for the hookup of Web cams, but the version included with Acrobat 8 doesn't support the voice over Internet protocol (VoIP).

Connect also doesn't support a group of people all marking up a PDF at once. Basically, in Connect one shares his or her desktop and the rest of the group can watch the presentation. It's possible to take a screen shot in Connect and have everyone in the meeting mark up the screen shot, collect everyone's marked-up screen shot, and export that to PDF—and by the time you've done that, the time savings you've created with a Connect meeting have evaporated.

Give Adobe some credit

In fairness to Adobe, let's remind ourselves that we didn't ask for Connect. They're basically giving away large hunks of the former Breeze for free in Acrobat 8 and even offering a **free trial** of the service. If you find it useful, Adobe doesn't charge too terribly much (\$40/month) to keep using it after the trial expires.

For power users who want to create large numbers of meeting rooms, there's Connect Pro, which does support VoIP, bigger audiences, and other large-scale features. Connect Pro also has a professional price tag, on a "flexible licensing model," according to Adobe materials. That means, basically, if they're not going to tell the public what the price is, VoIP support for Connect ain't coming out of a box at CompUSA like Acrobat does.

Adobe does offer conference-call voice support for Connect as part of the monthly subscription. For people who want real-time Acrobat document collaboration, there's always the option of doing it via network folders, WebDAV, or SharePoint, which can be going on in the background of a Connect session.

Epstein, Boras, Matsuzaka, and I have little in common. One thing we do share, however, is that we have neither the time nor technical savvy to set up a PDF review and commenting server via WebDAV.

I'm not ripping Connect, or calling Adobe a failure for putting out half-baked, not-ready-for-prime-time software. It's just, once you see Connect, you get a little taste of what could be. You start rooting around the menus for features that instinct tells you should be there.

It's instantly obvious how five people—with cheapo webcams that snap onto their laptops—in five different locations (office, airport, home, at a table in Barnes & Noble or Panera, wherever) could, one day, crack open a PDF, roll up their sleeves, and get some work done. No phones, no wires, no paper and pencil. Just Acrobat Connect, and enough battery power to make it through the meeting. Connect as presently constructed gives us some of that. Now we've seen it, we want it all.

To VoIP or not to VoIP

Why wasn't VoIP included in the vanilla version of Connect that everyone gets with Acrobat? The technology's overall not ready for prime time, says David Slater, senior product marketing manager for Adobe's Knowledge Worker Business Unit. Not everyone's computer and Internet setups are fast enough to tap into its coolness. Not everyone has a webcam. Yet.

If Connect supported VoIP, he says, people would blame Connect if they didn't quite grasp the ins and outs of the technology. Having a bunch of people talk at once, too, is a train wreck waiting to happen in the web-conferencing environment.

"VoIP increases the bandwidth requirements for a conference for each additional audio stream. Knowledge workers can have a wide variance in bandwidth availability, and without a good understanding of this area they could inadvertently create very poor meeting experiences," Slater says.

"We therefore are reserving VoIP for more sophisticated users who self-select themselves by purchasing the Pro product. . . . [As] VoIP improves, we will most certainly add the feature to the Connect product."

A Rosebud by any other name

Connect has incredible potential. As a Flash-based app, it extends across platforms more smoothly and conveniently than WebEx, one of Connect's major competitors.

Adobe sent all of us on their media Christmas lists \$39 Logitech webcams in an effort to induce us to play with Connect, and it was simple to get the software up and running—proving that this technology is inexpensive, and technically within the average (or worse) person's grasp.

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In the end, a sort-of competitor, **Rosebud**, blows away Acrobat Connect. Whereas Connect has the flash of Flash, video support, and the Adobe brand working for it, Rosebud is real-time, beautifully hi-res (yet fast) PDF-sharing software that facilitates productivity, albeit sans AV support. It's great, since Acrobat can pretty much turn any document it sees into a PDF, just take anything on your desktop and drop it on Acrobat and anyone in the meeting can start marking it up with Acrobat's tools.

What I'm wondering is what would happen if Adobe bought Rosebud, then hardwired it and Connect together—and made audio support available for the average Acrobat user smart enough to hook up a USB webcam. Together, they could rule the world. And this new breed of document collaboration might change the way we work—the way I think Adobe imagines Connect alone will.

I'm not asking for Adobe to give this away, either. If Adobe charged a couple hundred bucks for the meeting-leader's copy and attendees across the Web could access it with their free copies of Reader, that would be fine. If the meeting-leader couldn't host the meeting on his or her machine and had to rent server space from Adobe, fine, set up a per-hour system.

I'm sold on the concept, and I've seen enough of this web-based document sharing to believe it can be the next great thing if the process of using it can be dumbed down enough for non-techies to use in their everyday life.

Right now, Connect's a great little toy. The next version could be a monster that changes the way we work.



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