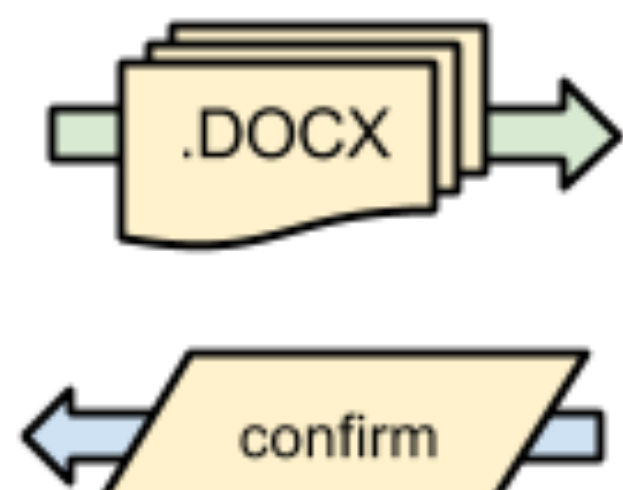


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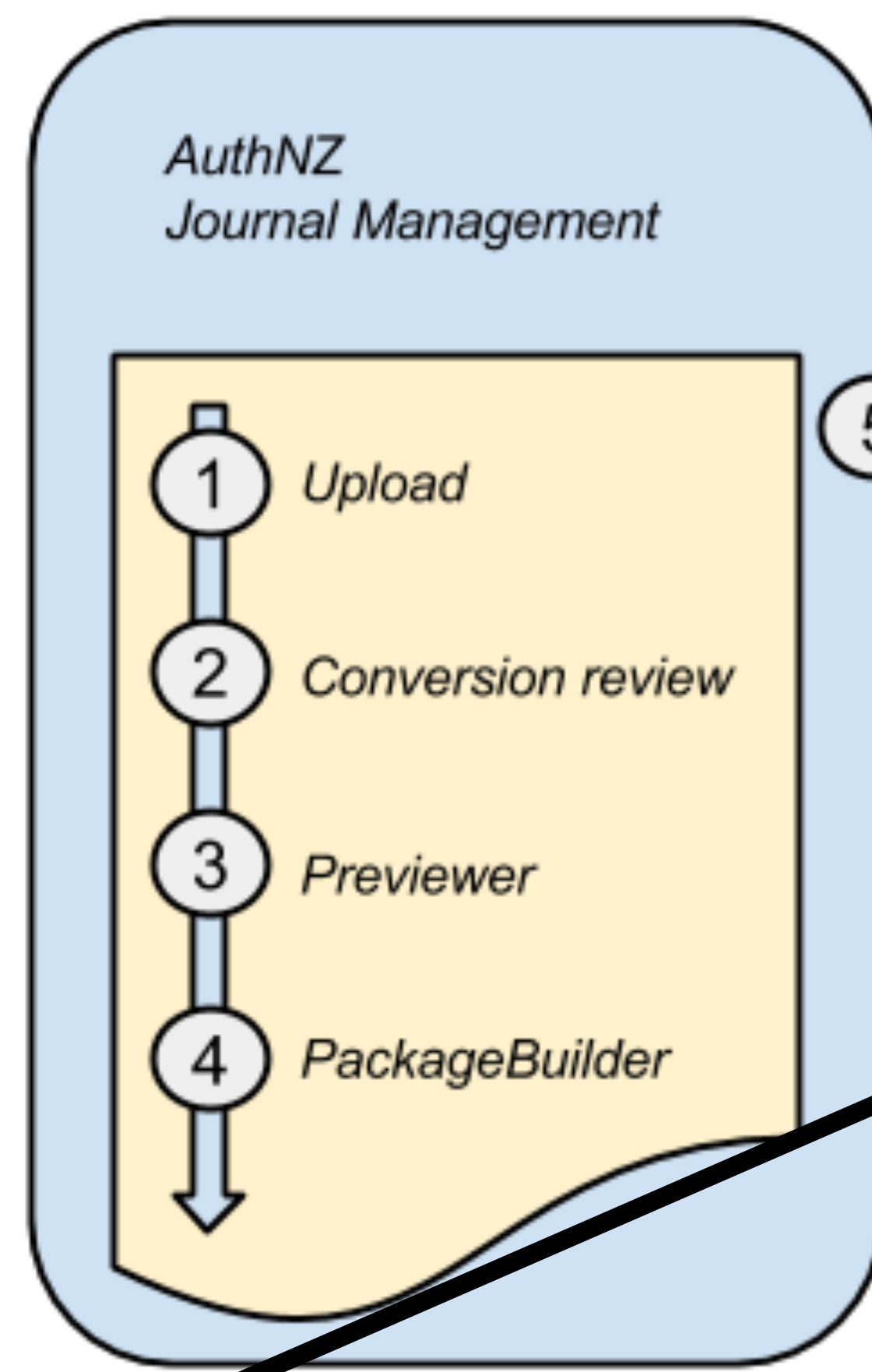


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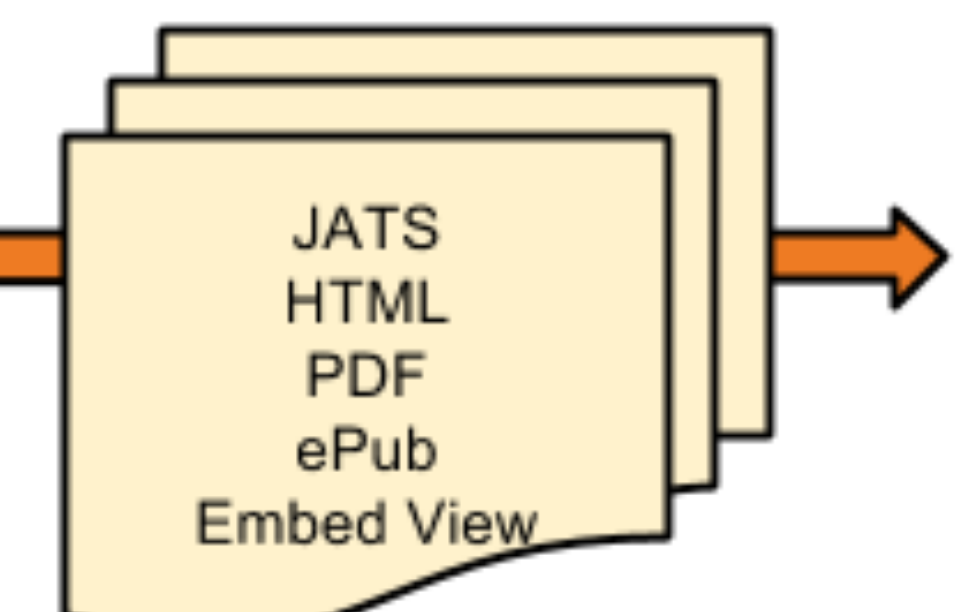
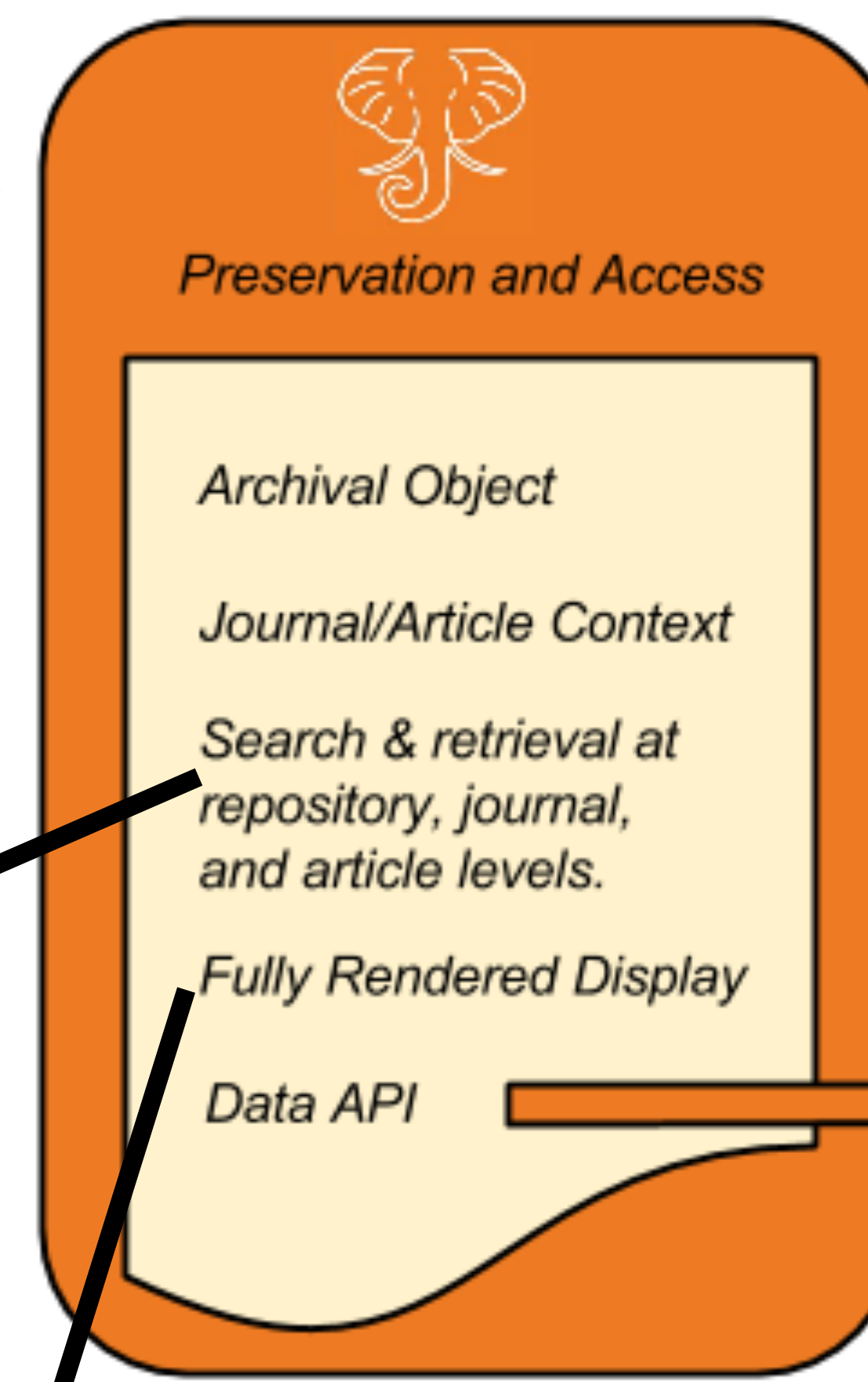


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About this article

Refurbishing the Camelot of Scholarship: How to Improve the Digital Contribution of the PDF Research Article

John Willinsky, Alex Garnett, and Angela Pan Wong

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Abstract

The Portable Document Format (PDF) has become the standard and preferred form for the digital edition of scholarly journal articles. Originally created as a solution to the need to "view and print anywhere," this technology has steadily evolved since the 1990s. However, its current use among scholarly publishers has been largely restricted to making research articles print-ready, and this greatly limits the potential capacity of the PDF research article to form a greater part of a digital knowledge ecology. While this article considers historical issues of design and format in scholarly publishing, it also takes a very practical approach, providing demonstrations and examples to assist publishers and scholars in finding greater scholarly value in the way the PDF is used for journal articles. This involves but is not limited to graphic design and bibliographic linking, the deployment of metadata and research data, and the ability to combine elements of improved machine and human readability.

Introduction

The Portable Document Format (PDF) was released by Adobe Systems in 1993 to facilitate the electronic distribution of documents. It was created to assist the circulation of digital documents among the newly networked computers that were spreading through offices, whether in local area networks (LAN) or through the Internet. What had become apparent was that documents were being prepared by various word-processing programs, each with their own proprietary file format. With networking racing ahead of file compatibility, John Warnock, Adobe Systems cofounder, in 1991 initiated what he called the Camelot Project in order to solve the "view and print anywhere" problem, as he neatly characterized it (1991, p. 1). Nearly a decade earlier, in 1982, the resourceful Warnock, working with Charles Geschke, figured they had solved the same problem with PostScript (marking the beginning of Adobe Systems). However, PostScript was itself not proving universally applicable. It required "powerful desktop machines," as Warnock put it, as well as PostScript printers (1991, pp. 1-2).

The goal of Camelot was to develop a lightweight file format that would serve the broadest possible range of users, at least until widespread computing power caught up with the demands of PostScript. Camelot was intended, then, as a temporary, transitional solution to the view-and-print-anywhere problem. Its history and success proved otherwise. When launched in 1993, the file format's poetic Camelot moniker was replaced by the prosaic "portable document format," now universally known as PDF. In 2008, Adobe released the PDF as an open standard for others to develop applications for writing and reading it, in what we might think of as the new twenty-first-century corporate spirit of open standards and open source software.

In scholarly communication, the PDF has become the standard file format for research articles published in the electronic edition of peer-reviewed journals. Although many journals also publish a HTML version of their articles along with a PDF, the bulk of the research literature is now available in PDF. Over the last decade, the majority of researchers have switched to reading the online edition of journals available through their library's electronic collections (King, Tenopir, Choemprayong, and Wu, 2009, p. 131; Hemminger, Lu, Vaughn, and Adams, 2007). While finding articles online is becoming a common practice, most academic faculty print out a good proportion of the PDFs they wish to read, while younger and more research-oriented scholars lead the way in reading articles on their computer.

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