

A brighter light

Panicos Georghiades and Gabriel Jacobs switch on to a new version of Illuminatus 3.0, the cheap and easy authoring program. There's an upgrade to Multimedia Toolbook, too.

Last month we mentioned the release of a new Windows 95 and OS/2 version of IconAuthor. Now it's the turn of that other mainstream multimedia authoring package for which so many people seem to be opting, Asymetrix Multimedia Toolbook, which is about to come out in version 4.

Multimedia Toolbook 4.0 (for Windows 3.1 and Windows 95) should be available by the time you read this. In the meantime we've been scrutinising the spec, and it really does look interesting.

For a start, the new version has a redesigned structure offering extensible plug-in architecture which allows users quick access to the specific functionality they need. For example, you can now use standard Visual Basic Controls and HTML (Internet) interfaces.

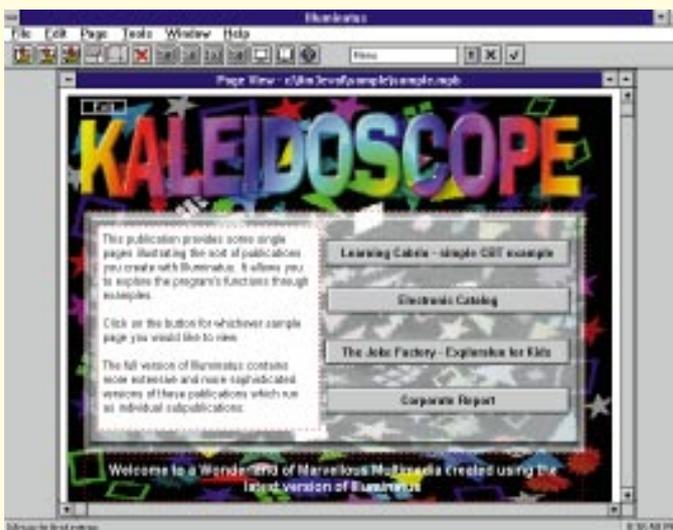
A new Book Specialist automates authoring tasks by making the user answer a series of simple questions, while a palette optimiser automatically adjusts colours to create a unified colour scheme. It is worth noting, as well, that a script remover protects your code, so that end-users cannot pinch bits of it from distribution versions of applications (something which rightly worries many developers).

A special CBT (Computer Based Training) edition will also be available. This includes an enhanced course management system with a bookmarking function that tracks down a student's progress. And there are CBT Specialists (similar to Book Specialists, above) which

speed development by enabling an instructor to create an entire CBT application framework by answering a series of questions. There are over 200 pre-scripted drag-and-drop widgets, too, that automatically add interactivity and test student comprehension of the material.

For both products, Asymetrix claims a 50 percent increase in runtime performance — that will certainly be an important step forward, if it's true. We'll be testing the products as soon as we get our hands on them.

The new standard version will cost £800 (a drop of £200) and the CBT Edition will be £1,050.



Sample pages illustrate the publications you can create with Illuminatus 3.0



The programs, accessories and games available in Illuminatus 3.0

Illuminatus 3.0

Last month, we mentioned the release of Illuminatus 3.0. This is one of the cheapest and easiest multimedia authoring programs around — which is why we've decided to give it a bit more space

here, to describe what it does and how it works. We're also including a demo version of it on the cover CD, so install it and see for yourself.

Illuminatus, which has been around now for three years, offers three main advantages over other products: speed of production, price and ease of use. It's

also a very flexible program, enabling you to produce a wide variety of applications such as electronic brochures, newsletters,



An overview of sample pages available in the Illuminatus multimedia application

disk-based catalogues and online books, as well as rolling demos for use in shop windows.

It supports most media available for delivering information on a modern PC. These can be text, still images (a wide variety of formats), animation, sound, music and video. The latest version supports MPEG video and PhotoCD images.

The simplicity and ease of use comes from the fact that there is no programming involved; there isn't even an attached scripting language. To create an application, you first prepare your material (text, pictures, movies, and so on) then import it into pre-drawn screen layouts in Illuminatus.

Although you can design and draw the individual screens that make up the pages in your application, the program provides hundreds of ready-made templates, some of which are even assembled into empty "books", ready for you to fill with your own data. There's also a good collection of clip media for your use.

Each of the templates contains a number of frames into which you place images, text or other multimedia objects. By double clicking on any object, you can set or edit its properties by filling in a dialogue box with the appropriate details about that object.

You basically work with these frames. You first import, say, a video clip or a bitmapped still image into a frame. You then use check boxes to select various options about how you want it to be displayed. For instance, you can scale it to

Questions & Answers

● I wish to set up an interactive multimedia database able to provide text, JPEG and MPEG images. Ultimately, the database is to live on the Internet. I want to be able to provide a copy of the database on a CD on a monthly basis.

Do you know of any applications which may address this scenario? Additionally, if you are aware of any good books which address this area, I would be glad to hear of them.

James Khan
jkhan@pncl.co.uk

You don't provide enough information for us to really narrow down our answer, but the question is one which will interest a number of readers.

Many multimedia authoring programs provide database support. But do you have an existing database file (such as one created in Access or dBase) which has to be accessed by a multimedia application you'll be writing, or do you intend to manage the database through the multimedia authoring software?

Anyway, since you'll be distributing this on a CD every month, we assume that it's a read-only type database — that is, the users will not be required to add any data themselves.

Our advice is to create and manage the data in a standard database application: Access, Paradox, Superbase... whatever you're familiar with and suits you best. Then use the multimedia application only to access its data. This gives you maximum flexibility with regard to the programs you use (your data may be used by many different programs). What's more, your data will be in a format that may have a longer shelf-life.

Most multimedia authoring packages enable you to access database files. Some do this directly, some via ODBC, and almost all can access data tables in ASCII format. All databases enable you to export their data to ASCII files.

So accessing database data is not a real problem. You could run into complications, however, if your database is a relational one; in other words, if the data is spread among a number of files and records related to each other through common data keys. In this case, using single ASCII-based tables (files) will be slow if your files are large, and linking them together will be difficult. If you have a relational database, you will have to access database files in their native format.

If this is the case, not all multimedia authoring packages can do the job. Some,

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Questions & Answers (continued)

such as Authorware, Multimedia MasterClass and IconAuthor, can work via ODBC, while packages such as Toolbook and Director require external modules. Asymetrix sells a database connection module for £200, which enables Multimedia Toolbook to access external databases. Third party software exists for Director.

As for putting this up on the Internet, we don't envisage major problems, but it will mean a lot of work.

Of course, Internet access ought to be the same as any other kind of access. As a matter of fact, one of us has just set up a database on the Net which is updated monthly and we have had no access problems. It's text-only, but in your case, pictures to download shouldn't present any great difficulty (though remember that downloading video segments can be time-consuming for the average user).

Anyway, what do we mean by a lot of work? You have three choices:

1. Design the database twice; once for the CD-ROM and once for the Internet.
2. Design one database and a single front-end which will be distributed on the CD-ROM. Internet users can download the front-end, so they can view the database, using ftp.
3. Design the database for the Internet to be viewed via a standard Internet browser, and also distribute copies of the browser on the CD-ROM version.

Which method you decide to use will depend on the size and complexity of your database.

As for any good books which address

this area, there are many on databases, multimedia and the Internet, but we've never seen one that specifically covers the subject of designing multimedia databases for the Internet and CD-ROMs. If anyone out there knows of any, please let us know.

● I read an article some time ago [PCW, July 1995] in which Karl Dunkerley wrote about the program MediaStudio 2.0. Do you know how to contact U-Lead to get some more information about the program (email, fax or telephone number)?

Maybe you know whether there is a demo version of the program somewhere on the Internet or on a BBS.

Robert Maliszewski
<robert-m@dsv.su.se>

U-Lead's Media Studio 2.0 is available from BIT (UK) on 01420 83811. A demo version will be available by the time this goes to press. We plan to include it on the cover CD.

● Myself and a couple of friends are considering trying to create our own CD-ROM. We have been in touch with a CD pressing firm in London, and they have told us their prices for actually cutting the CD; they will also accept the finished item either on removable hard disk or backup tape.

The problem is that it seems to be very difficult when it comes to deciding on a particular authoring program, as there's a lot to choose from. We are anxious not to spend a huge amount of money on the program, as that would leave us penniless when we come to cutting the disk; our resources being quite

limited. Obviously we cannot aspire to producing anything like Encarta, but we would like the finished article to be reasonably up to selling to Joe Public.

We live in the Peak District and our idea is to create a CD-ROM guide to the National Park, perhaps limiting ourselves to an initial run of a thousand to see how they go. This means that spending the best part of £1,000 on a program like Director is not a realistic option.

Your advice would be much appreciated. Also, any info you have on any aspect of making a CD-ROM will be useful.

Nicholas Buttle
Tideswell
Derbyshire

We have just the answer you want to hear. It's not often that we recommend a single product for anything, but since your budget is so low you probably can't spend more than £200 on software. So have a look at the review of Illuminatus 3.0 on these pages, and on this month's CD.

Bear in mind, however, that the average multimedia title costs in the region of £100,000 to produce, if done properly. We're not saying that yours can't be done a lot cheaper and we certainly don't want to put you off, but make sure you've taken into account all possible costs. Think about original photography versus copyrighted pictures; recording sound so that it doesn't give an amateurish feel; the amount of time required for writing the text (or paying for permission to reproduce it); and designing, testing and debugging.



Find the hidden jokes; an example of one of the games in Illuminatus 3.0

In this way you make up pages, giving each one a name which will later be used to set up a navigation list.

There's a facility for creating a distributable copy of your application, and this can be on floppy disk or CD-ROM. If you're distributing on floppy disks, Illuminatus compresses the files into suitable chunks to fit the floppy disk size you're using.

Perhaps equally important is the fact that Illuminatus can create executable files for your applications which don't require a runtime player. Furthermore, Illuminatus applications can be run from other programs, thus extending their flexibility. Some of the program's specialist functions are ready-supplied as extension modules, such as one to keep scores if

you're designing a quiz, computer game or CBT application.

With a price tag of £200 and no programming language, don't expect the sophistication and complexity that come with more expensive multimedia authoring tools. But remember that some of the most successful commercial titles are pretty simple both in structure and design. ■

PCW Contacts

If you have any multimedia-related problems or queries, email us at g.c.jacobs@swansea.ac.uk. We're sorry, but we can't answer queries by personal reply — we'd be at it all day! But we're glad to publish queries, with our answers, which we think will interest PCW readers generally.

Asymetrix products from ICS Solutions **01256 469460**
Illuminatus 3.0 from Digital WorkShop **01295 258335**

fit the frame or change the background colour.

But you don't just have frames. Templates also contain buttons for various actions such as displaying an image, playing a sound or video file, moving to a different page, or even launching another Windows application. You can test the button-controlled actions at any time as you design your application.