● **WEB DEVELOPMENT SUITE**

Macromedia Studio 8

PC PRO A LIST

PRICE £699 (£821 inc VAT)

UPGRADE £299 (£351 inc VAT) from previous version or previous major standalone component

SUPPLIER Macromedia via online store

INTERNET www.macromedia.com

VERDICT All the power the web author and developer could wish for. It's a great deal for new users looking for a bargain, but as an upgrade it's only truly convincing for heavy Flash users.

With its planned takeover by Adobe (*see issue 130, p209*), this will almost certainly be the last version of Studio and its component applications released under the Macromedia brand. So is the company going out with a bang or a whimper? More importantly, does Studio 8 do enough to persuade users to part with their cash?

In many ways, this should be an easy decision. With Dreamweaver, Fireworks and Flash Professional, Macromedia provides the market-leading standalone web authoring, web graphics, and web development applications. More than this, with its shared interface and technologies, the integrated Studio suite can claim to be more
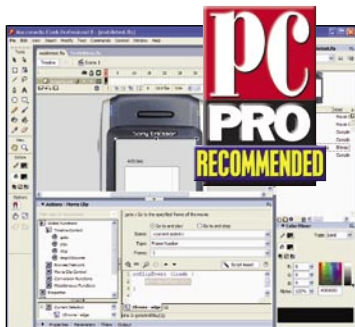
Flash Professional 8 replaces Dreamweaver as the core Studio application.

than the sum of its parts, especially in this release, which also bundles two new components: Contribute 3 and FlashPaper 2 (*see What's in, what's out, below*).

But the argument isn't solely about features, it's also about value, and here Macromedia is able to make the case for Studio even more compelling. In particular, the price for both Studio and its upgrade are more than 40 per cent cheaper than the equivalent combined standalone prices (also note we're being charged the same as US citizens for once). And to encourage former users to rejoin the Studio bandwagon, Macromedia is offering the same upgrade price to previous users of any of the main components, making it even more of a bargain.

Then again, it's important to remember that there's no point paying for features you won't use, and this puts things in a very different light. While all potential Studio users are likely to use Dreamweaver for producing their web pages and

Fireworks for producing their GIFs and JPEGs, the number who'd make serious use of Flash will be much lower. And for those thinking of upgrading, the benefits for the mainstream page-based web author are also correspondingly smaller. In this release, it's clear Dreamweaver 8 and Fireworks 8 remain market leaders of their respective fields, but that's thanks to their long-standing strengths rather than any new must-have features.

For Flash users, though, it's a different story. The new Flash 8 format and Flash Professional 8 authoring environment push forward on all fronts, building on the Flash player's popularity to make 'the world's most pervasive software platform' more attractive than ever. Flash's power and reach is undeniable and, if you want to deliver the most dramatic web experience, Flash 8 provides the best way to do it and Studio 8 the best way for most users to buy into that future.

Ultimately, whether Macromedia is going out with a bang or a whimper, and whether you should buy Studio 8 or not, depends on your primary interest. If you're producing page-based sites with Dreamweaver/Fireworks, version 8 is a damp squib of an upgrade, but if you're producing or planning to produce 'rich Internet apps' with Flash, it's a breakthrough release. But despite Flash's amazing strengths, the majority of web authors will be sticking with the much simpler page-based approach for some time to come. Nonetheless, Studio 8 is a watershed release.

TOM ARAH

PC PRO **RATINGS**

EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP.

What's in, what's out

Alongside its three main components, Studio 8 introduces two new supporting programs: Contribute 3 (*see issue 120, p88*) and FlashPaper 2. Contribute enables those users who actually produce a site's content to update it themselves using a simple browse/edit/publish methodology, while built-in protection and review features ensure site standards are maintained. FlashPaper is designed for the same non-expert users and outputs any Windows document, complete with all formatting, to FlashPaper or PDF format.

Macromedia is pushing Contribute and FlashPaper as natural web partners to Studio 8. However, it's important to recognise that it isn't the proficient web authoring Studio 8 user who'll actually use these programs. Both Contribute and FlashPaper will only benefit those who

are producing sites where it's practical and desirable to let non-proficient content contributors update the site directly. And where this is the case, you'll almost certainly need more than one copy.

Ultimately then, the inclusion of Contribute and FlashPaper is little more than a useful taster for a minority of Studio users. And there's more bad news: although Macromedia isn't exactly highlighting the fact, the biggest single change to Studio 8 is the omission of FreeHand, its vector-based graphic design package. In a way, this makes sense, because FreeHand, with its long-standing print-based pedigree, was always semi-detached from such a clearly web-focused suite. Over recent releases, however, Macromedia has grafted on several features that made the program a natural vector design partner for Flash and, despite
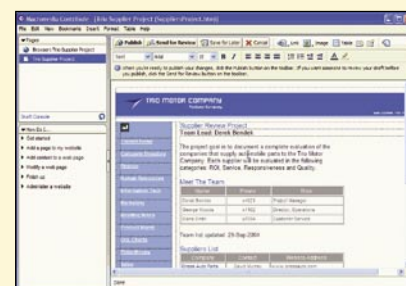
Contribute 3 enables site contributors to publish their own content.

Flash Professional 8's new graphics capabilities, many Studio users will miss it badly.

Hopefully, this isn't the end of the road for FreeHand, and Macromedia has talked vaguely of a new version towards the end of the year. However, this pushes any release beyond the likely Adobe takeover, so the jury is out. For Studio 8, the bundling of Contribute and FlashPaper and the omission of FreeHand is certainly a case of half a step forward, one step back.

● WEB AUTHORING

Macromedia Dreamweaver 8

PRICE £399 (£469 inc VAT)　　　　**UPGRADE** £169 (£199 inc VAT)

**SUPPLIER** Macromedia via online store　　　　**INTERNET** www.macromedia.com

VERDICT Version 8 of this web authoring stalwart sees improved CSS, XML and Flash video handling, plus various productivity enhancements, but it's generally an underwhelming upgrade.

With more than 3.5 million users, Dreamweaver dominates the world of professional web authoring in much the same way that Photoshop dominates photo editing. It's achieved this commanding position by combining a wysiwyg design environment with unbeatable hands-on coding power, and by focusing throughout on workflow-based efficiency. It's these same three core areas – visual design, coding and productivity – that are targeted in this latest release.

In terms of design power, Dreamweaver 8 now falls into line with GoLive by offering a comprehensive zoom capability – ranging from 6 to 3,600 per cent – and Fit All, Fit Width and Fit Selection commands. While all this is potentially helpful for those working on high-resolution screens or when aligning objects, its importance shouldn't be overplayed – web design is nearly always viewed at 100 per cent. Of much more practical use is the new support for rulers and draggable guides, complete with tooltips for providing feedback on position and distances. You can control the display, locking and snap setting of guides, and Dreamweaver 8 includes a limited selection of preset guides representing the safe visible area of browsers at various screen sizes.

FOCUS ON CSS

Other improvements to Dreamweaver's wysiwyg concentrate on enhanced support for CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), the layout and formatting mark-up language designed to work alongside HTML. In particular, the core Design
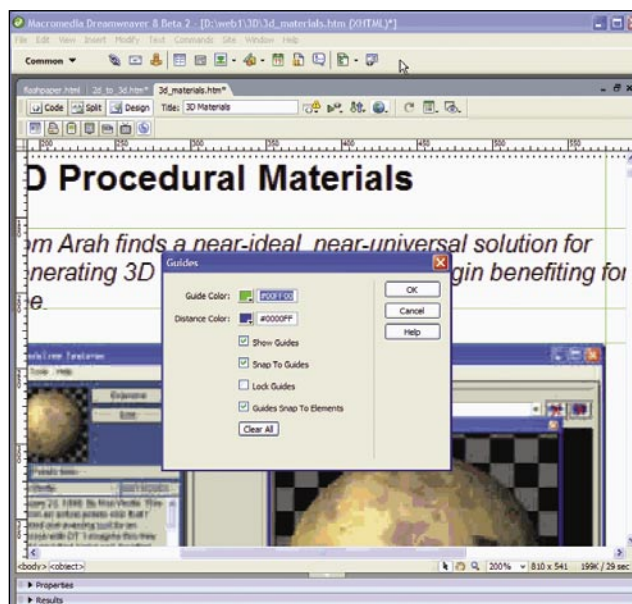
With new zoom and guide options, Dreamweaver 8's visual layout capabilities have been boosted significantly.

view has been updated to fully support advanced CSS techniques, such as overflow handling, form elements and pseudo-elements. And to make life a little easier when working with CSS-positioned layouts, new visual aids are available to highlight CSS outlines, boxes and backgrounds, while tooltips provide greater feedback. Most impressive is version 8's support for CSS media types. Using the new Rendering Toolbar, you can now swap between seeing how a page will look onscreen, on a handheld or in print. Most useful of all, you can see how the page will render if the display device doesn't support CSS.

The ever-increasing importance of CSS is also made clear in changes to the working environment. In particular, the former Design panel group has been renamed CSS and the previously separate Relevant CSS/Rules panel has been consolidated into a single CSS Styles panel. This now offers two tabs, All and Current,

The new CSS panel makes formatting a breeze.

for handling all stylesheets associated with the page as a whole and those feeding into the current selection's formatting. It's an efficient system, providing feedback and powerful editing capability, showing Dreamweaver at its streamlined best. These are all welcome tweaks, but apart from the ability to limit the display to properties that have already been set, most of this power was already there in MX 2004 – it's just been rationalised.

HANDS-ON CODING

The CSS panel is a great way to directly access the power of code without getting your hands dirty, but for maximum control there's no escape – you have to edit your code directly. Whether you're working with static HTML/CSS or the dynamic markup languages, JSP, ASP, ASP.NET, PHP or ColdFusion, Dreamweaver has always made this as simple and efficient as possible. Particularly important here are Code view features such as built-in references, code hinting and syntax completion, and these have been updated to take into account the latest versions of PHP 5 and ColdFusion MX7.

Whichever language you're using, you'll also benefit from the new Coding toolbar running down the left-hand side of the Code view, which provides quick access to snippets and source formatting, invalid code highlighting, commenting and so on. It also provides the ability to collapse and expand tags or selections; the idea is to let you focus in on sections of code, but we found it complicated and a possible source of confusion when working with HTML/CSS.

Code collapse makes much more sense when working with more structured languages, most obviously XML, and this is a major focus in Dreamweaver 8. New reference content has been added for XML/XSLT, and code hinting has been improved. Dreamweaver 8 also comprehensively tackles the formerly dark art of XML-to-HTML conversion via server-side and client-side XSL transformations. Most impressively, users with server-side support can now simply point to an XML file or live data feed, such as RSS, and Dreamweaver will introspect it, enabling fields to be dragged and dropped onto the page ready for formatting.

But while Dreamweaver 8's XML/XSLT support sets a new standard, it's still a minority interest and most sites will be built on static
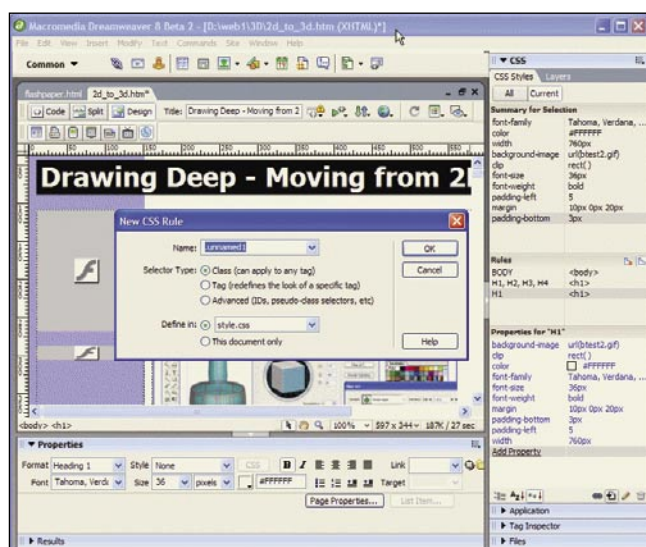
HTML/CSS for a good while to come. So what does Dreamweaver 8 offer these mainstream users? Again, the focus is on workflow and productivity. Virtually all users will be reusing content written in Word, for example, and Dreamweaver 8 now offers a Paste Special command that lets you control how copied text should be handled. Options include pasting just the text, text with structure, text with structure and basic formatting, or text with full structure and all formatting, including styles. We had high hopes for this, but the command needs to offer more control to be truly useful – for example, paragraph breaks are still interpreted as line breaks.
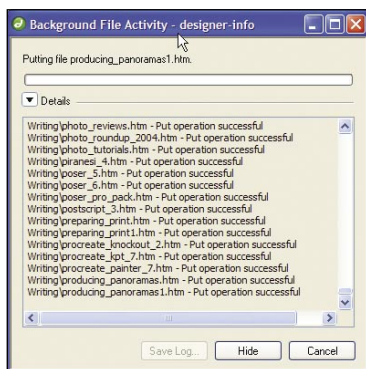
As well as text import, Dreamweaver 8 revamps its Flash support with Import FlashPaper

The biggest productivity improvement is background file transfer.

and Import Flash Video commands. The latter is particularly useful, as a single dialog lets you set up your FLV file for streaming or progressive download and choose from nine playback skins – it's as simple as that. Or rather it is if you have your FLV files ready to go. That's not a problem if you're a Studio 8 user (*see p70*), as Flash Professional 8 comes with FLV export plug-ins and a standalone video converter. However, these aren't bundled with the standalone version of Dreamweaver, so you'll need to buy in a dedicated FLV authoring package.

When it comes to publishing though, the productivity benefits of Dreamweaver 8 aren't in doubt. Compatibility with a wider array of servers is now offered, including digest authentication and SSL secure transfer for WebDAV. Check-in, check-out has also been improved and you can now compare files both locally and remotely. Most usefully, the Synchronise command has been reworked to allow files to be removed from the transfer list or deleted entirely, and files are now transferred in the background. This last capability in particular could potentially save many users hours of lost work.

But it's one of the very few new stand-out features in this release. Thanks to its existing strengths, Dreamweaver remains the best web-authoring package available. However, for most, there's disappointingly little to be gained from upgrading.

TOM ARAH

● WEB GRAPHICS

Macromedia Fireworks 8

PRICE £249 (£293 inc VAT) **UPGRADE** £129 (£152 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.macromedia.com **INTERNET** Macromedia via online store

VERDICT A few tweaks to creative power, workflow and integration don't add up to much.

When Fireworks was launched back in 1998 (*see issue 95, p138*), it was the first graphics application to concentrate solely on producing web graphics. What made it such a success was its integration of vector and bitmap handling, a combination that provided the best of both worlds: control and creativity.

This latest release sees the core bitmap and vector tools left virtually unchanged, but there are some extra features. There's a new Image Editing panel to provide quicker access to the most common photo-editing commands, and a new AutoShape panel that lets you take precise control of settings (such as arrow length and spiral radius) that were previously set interactively. You can also now turn vector paths into bitmap selections and vice versa. Other creative possibilities come from a perspective shadow command that can be applied to open paths and text, and a Solid Shadow live effect that repeats the object itself to create the effect. Fireworks 8 also adds no less than 25 new blend modes to boost creative options for combining the colours in overlying objects.

That's it for new graphic power: the rest of the enhancements in Fireworks 8 come in the form of workflow enhancements. Here, there are various minor tweaks, including object locking and automatic naming of text layers in the Layers panel, a new Character Insertion panel and smarter use of default folders for common operations.

The biggest changes are to file handling, with support for JPEG2000 import and a new Save As command,

Fireworks 8 adds new creative options and handy side panels.

which is more convenient for saving standalone images than the Export dialog. Batch processing has also been enhanced, with the ability to check dimensions when scaling, more powerful file renaming and the addition of a status bar and log file.

Elsewhere, integration with the other Macromedia apps has also been improved. Fireworks 8 now recognises ActionScript colour values, and Flash Professional 8 can now read Fireworks' supported blend modes and some of its effects. For improved integration with Dreamweaver 8, Fireworks 8 uses CSS by default when creating interactive pop-up menus. The result is much cleaner code that can be viewed and even customised in Dreamweaver's CSS Styles panel, although full-blown editing is better left to Fireworks.
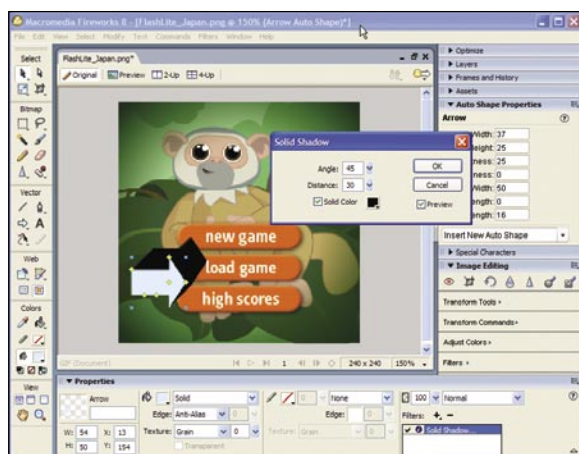
In short, there's nothing much to write home about and, as with Dreamweaver 8, there's little reason to upgrade. It's a serious disappointment: Macromedia could do so much more with Fireworks' integrated vector and bitmap handling, as Microsoft is currently proving with its work on the new Acrylic beta (**www.microsoft.com/ products/expression**). Hopefully, Adobe, which should shortly inherit Fireworks as part of its takeover of Macromedia, will appreciate the program's true worth and realise its full potential.

TOM ARAH

● **INTERNET APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT**

Macromedia Flash Professional 8

PRICE £499 (£586 inc VAT)   **UPGRADE** £249 (£293 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER Macromedia via online store   **INTERNET** www.macromedia.com

VERDICT Substantially improved graphics, text, animation, video and code handling see Flash Professional push forward on all fronts.

It's hard to believe that Flash began life just ten years ago as FutureSplash, a simple cartoon-style vector drawing and animation program. Since those early days, Macromedia has grafted on advanced multimedia and programming capabilities to turn Flash, and its all-pervasive player, into an all-encompassing web platform. Now, to reinforce the program's development credentials, Macromedia has phased out the old standard Flash and replaced it with a new version of the previously high-end, programmer-oriented Flash Professional.

After a decade of relentless reinvention, today's Flash Professional is largely unrecognisable, but FutureSplash still lives on in the program's bizarre approach to the fundamental task of drawing. Overlay two identically coloured objects, for example, and they merge together; overlay differently coloured objects and the top one eats a hole out of the one underneath. In skilled hands, the system can be surprisingly efficient, but for most users it's an initial stumbling block and a constant irritation. Now, at last, the nightmare is over with the introduction of a new optional Object Drawing mode; use this, and objects in Flash finally behave in the same way they do in all other drawing apps.

VECTOR POWER BOOST

In fact, Flash 8 Professional's vector drawing power has been enhanced all round to bring it more into line with the likes of FreeHand and Adobe Illustrator. Using the Properties panel, for example, you can now control end caps, mitres and joins. There's also a Stroke Hinting option, which ensures nodes are anchored on full pixels, guaranteeing razor-sharp horizontal and vertical lines. Gradient handling has also been seriously overhauled, enabling up to 16 colours to be mixed, with full control over overflow modes and focal points. Gradients can also now be applied to strokes as well as to fills.

Gradients are a crucial weapon in the Flash designer's formatting toolkit, but they pale in comparison to Flash 8's support for blend modes. If you convert your objects to a movie clip or button (although not a graphic symbol for some reason), you can now apply one of the new blend modes – multiply, screen, lighten, darken, difference, invert, add, subtract, alpha, and erase
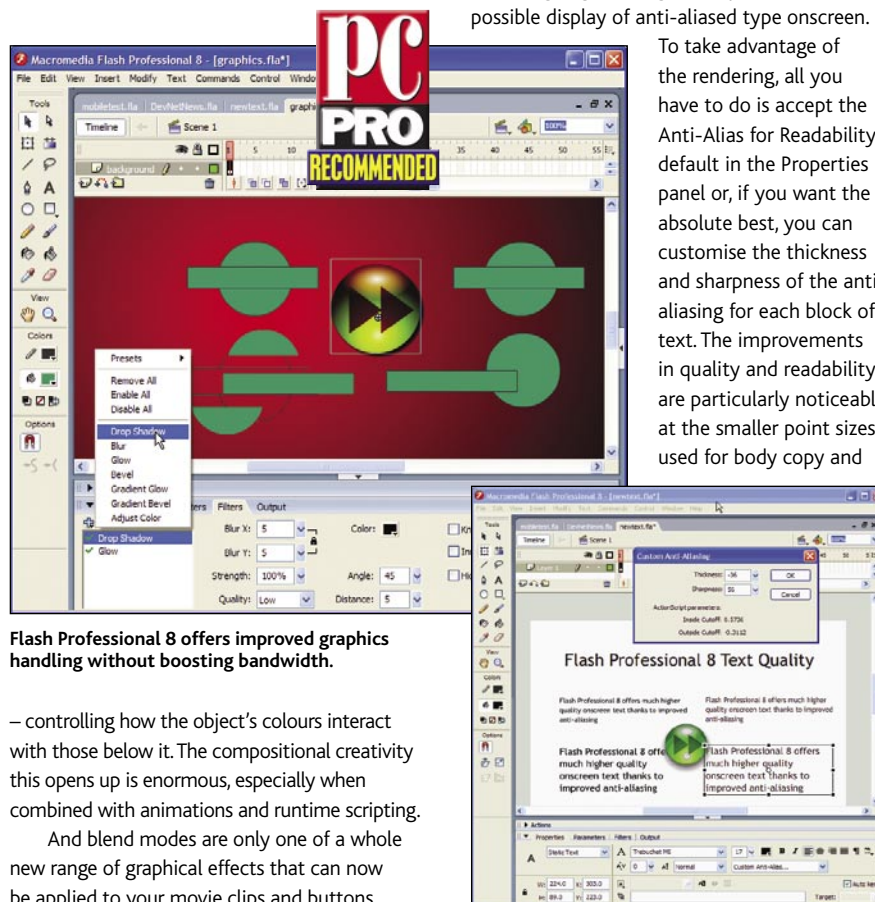
Flash Professional 8 offers improved graphics handling without boosting bandwidth.

– controlling how the object's colours interact with those below it. The compositional creativity this opens up is enormous, especially when combined with animations and runtime scripting.

And blend modes are only one of a whole new range of graphical effects that can now be applied to your movie clips and buttons. Using the new Filters tab on the Properties panel, you can add bevel, drop shadow, glow, blur, gradient glow, gradient blur, and adjustable colour effects – ideal for quickly creating Fireworks-style effects, such as a bevelled button with rollover glow. The control offered over each effect is impressive and you can always fine-tune parameters as desired. You can also animate them to produce effects such as a drop shadow moving in response to an apparent light source. Best of all, the effects processing is left to the Flash 8 Player, so file size is hardly affected, offering a major leap in end impact at little cost.

Devolving the graphics processing to the player cuts down on download time, but it can affect performance on the host computer. As such, Macromedia recommends limiting the number of effects you apply to any given object. In addition, you can take advantage of Flash 8's new runtime Bitmap Caching

feature. This automatically converts static elements such as buttons and backgrounds to bitmaps, so saving the player from having to process the same vector data for every frame – a huge boost to performance. All vector data is maintained, so the clips can always spring back to life.

As well as its graphics handling, Flash sees a fundamental improvement in its handling of text. Again, the benefit comes from building the required intelligence and processing into the latest Flash Player, this time in the form of a completely new text-rendering engine designed to provide the best possible display of anti-aliased type onscreen.

To take advantage of the rendering, all you have to do is accept the Anti-Alias for Readability default in the Properties panel or, if you want the absolute best, you can customise the thickness and sharpness of the anti-aliasing for each block of text. The improvements in quality and readability are particularly noticeable at the smaller point sizes used for body copy and

Onscreen text quality has been significantly enhanced.

should go a long way to help establish Flash as a platform for handling text-heavy as well as graphics-rich content.

GETTING ANIMATED

Flash 8 Professional sees a major advance in terms of animation. As with its core drawing capabilities, Flash's animation has been left largely unchanged since the old FutureSplash days, relying on an awkward and underpowered system of keyframes and tweens. At first sight, the graph-based Custom Ease In/Ease Out dialog doesn't look like it will change this situation much, offering little more than the ability to visually control the speed of tweens.

In fact, by graphing the degree of motion over time, you can visually and intuitively control advanced animation effects, say producing a

realistically bouncing ball coming to rest. Previously, this would have involved multiple keyframes and tweens and would have been a nightmare to edit; now, it can all be handled with a single tween. Even better, you can independently control the tweening of position, rotation, scale, colour and filter parameters. And the icing on the cake is the ability to preview the effect of changes as they happen onscreen.

VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS

Vector animation is great for bringing Flash projects to life, but these days video is increasingly taking centre stage and Flash Professional 8 sees major changes here too. To begin with, the Sorenson Spark codec has been replaced by a new codec – On2 VP6. According to Macromedia, this offers near DVD-quality video at much lower bandwidth, although this was impossible to test in the late press beta. Crucially, the codec also supports embedded cue points to trigger events during playback, and an 8-bit alpha channel. This support for runtime transparency and even semi-transparency is particularly striking, enabling video to be fully integrated with other Flash content – the possibilities are endless, from subtle smoke and fire effects to a presenter overlaid onto the slide show that's being discussed.

It's not just the end results that are more integrated; the video workflow has also been rethought and moved centre stage via Flash 8's new Import Video command. This single dialog now walks you through all the stages necessary to set up your video, including specifying whether the video will be embedded, progressively downloaded or streamed. It also lets you choose from several skins that determine the appearance of the lightweight video component, which handles playback.

If you're embedding video directly within your SWF movie, the Import Video dialog provides everything you need to get up and running, but for most jobs you'll need to have your standalone Flash Video (FLV) files ready prepared. Flash Professional 8 comes with QuickTime-based FLV export plug-ins for many high-end editing packages, including Avid and Discreet Cleaner (although still not Premiere Pro). It also now provides a standalone Video Encoder that offers advanced features, such as batch processing and support for the older Sorenson codec for backward-compatibility with earlier versions of the Flash Player.

REWRITING THE SCRIPT

With such major changes to the core features of drawing, text, animation and video handling, we began worrying about what Macromedia was

Tween-based animation can now be controlled visually, but that's just the start of Flash's improvements.

Flash's video handling has been heavily reworked, including a new codec.

going to do to Flash 8 Professional's scripting capabilities, especially after the last release's introduction of ActionScript syntax and the unwelcome removal of the non-expert Normal Mode code entry. Thankfully, this time the core language has been allowed to stabilise on ActionScript 2. Even better, Normal Mode is back – now called Script Assist – and along with descriptions of parameters it also provides automatic syntax completion.

Script Assist is particularly useful for occasional programmers, but also comes into its own for expert users who want to transfer their existing ActionScript knowledge to the new syntax used in Flash Lite 1.1 – the cut-down programming language aimed at mobile phone users. The Target Language drop-down in the Actions panel also helps here, as does the interactive Mobile Device Emulator, which provides advanced testing profiles for every device that supports the Flash Lite player.

That's about it for major new features, but Flash 8 Professional also sees several minor but still welcome enhancements, such as an expanding pasteboard, the ability to group panels together in tabbed-panel sets, and the new single-panel Library that lets you navigate between open files via a drop-down. You can also now add metadata to your SWF movies to marginally improve search-engine compatibility, and you can switch between the standard 'document-level' and 'object-level' undo (although sadly this can't be done on-the-fly).

It's clear that Flash Professional 8 is a major, even seminal release, but it's important not to get carried away. Flash Professional 8 certainly isn't the right product for everyone. For a start, potential new users should see whether the upcoming, cut-down Flash Basic offers them all the features they actually need. Even current power users might want to hold off for a while, as so many of the advances in Flash 8 Professional – blend modes, filter effects, bitmap caching, superior onscreen text, and the new video codec – depend on the end user having the Flash 8 Player installed.

More importantly, despite its many strengths, Flash itself just isn't the right solution for the vast majority of text-centred, organically developed sites. However, for those designers and developers who want to give their users the most dramatic web experience, Macromedia has once again succeeded in taking that experience onto an entirely new level.

TOM ARAH