



Web design software

It's easy to create a web page, but make sure you buy the right software for your needs

The appeal of the Internet as a publishing medium is hard to resist. Its advantages over other media are clear: post your site to a low-cost host and it's instantly accessible to a global audience of many millions who can access it 24 hours a day. Even better, the Web, and the HTML code it's built upon, was specifically designed to make it simple for you to become a web author. In fact, all you need to create your first page, or indeed any page, is a basic text editor (see *Cracking the code*, p130).

Every web page is produced with HTML code, and the more expert you become in it, the more useful you'll find it if you're able to handle it directly. But, let's face it, coding isn't exactly intuitive. That's why there are plenty of entry-level web authoring options designed to take care of the HTML in the background, while you concentrate on the design. That's also why the majority of packages provide a wysiwyg interface in which you effectively work in a page-layout view.

The wysiwyg approach provides a more familiar and productive authoring environment, but it's crucial to recognise that, because of its HTML basis, a web page remains fundamentally different to a printed page. As such, to really get to grips with web design you'll need a package that provides good table-based layout control and tag-based formatting. And these days you'll also want good support for CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) – a dedicated language that works alongside HTML.

Layout and formatting control provide the foundations for your page, but if you want it to stand out you'll need to use more than just text. What first gave the Web its design edge, and made it a success, was its support for graphics, so your authoring package will need good image control. As well as being a visual medium, the Web is also a dynamic medium and scripting capabilities can bring your pages to life even if it's only in the form of some simple button rollovers.

Finally, it's important to realise that you aren't just knocking up a few unconnected web pages: what you're actually producing is an entire website. To keep on top of it, you'll need dedicated site-management tools.

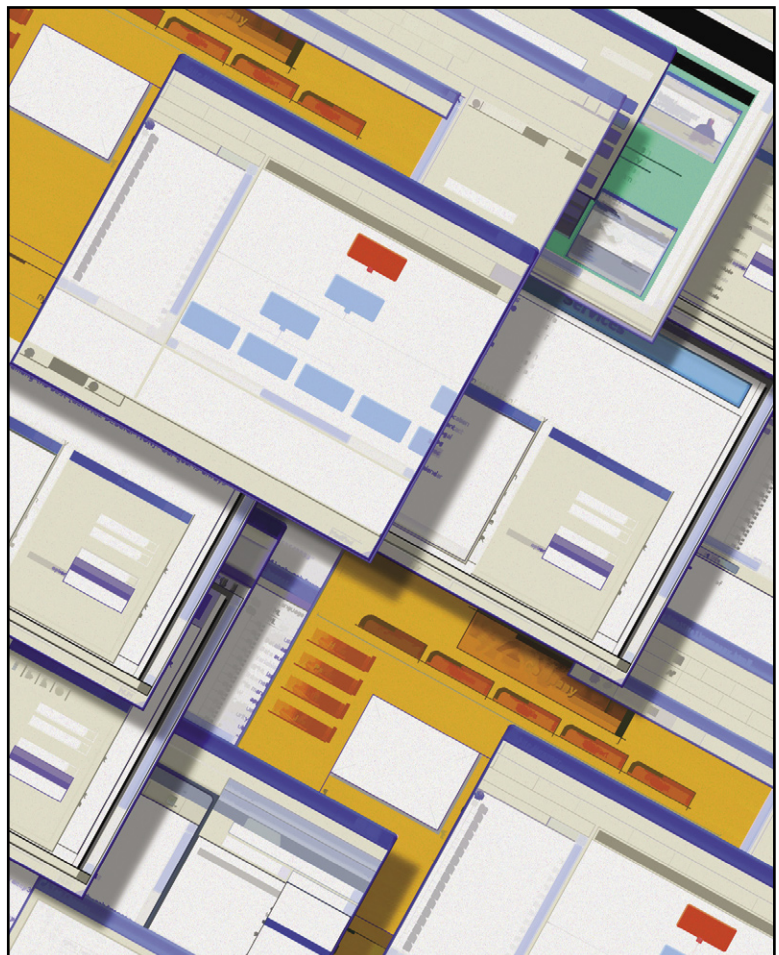
Now we know what we're looking for, let's go and see what the packages have to offer. ▶

CONTRIBUTOR Tom Arah

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NEXT MONTH! Read Tom Arah's in-depth feature on turning an idea into a successful website

VCOM Web Easy Professional 5

PRICE £21 (£25 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

VERDICT Easy: yes. Professional: no. Setting up a website may be simple, but customisation is much more tricky.

As its name suggests, the emphasis in VCOM's Web Easy Professional is very much on ease of use. The promise is that you can produce an eye-catching, professional-looking site without ever needing to know what an HTML tag is.

Key to this is Web Easy Professional's use of predefined site templates – and there are more than 120 provided. These templates don't just define a look-and-feel for your site, they define the pages and even the text they contain. Using the Website Assistant, for example, you can choose a template from the Business category, fill in information about your company, its products and services; when you click Finish, the entire site appears.

Creating a site by simply picking a template off-the-shelf is all very well in theory, but out in the real world you're going to need to be able to customise the results. However, this is peculiarly awkward in Web Easy Professional. Double-clicking a text block lets you edit your copy, but any formatting you apply

immediately disappears unless you first turn it into so-called Rich Text. Even then the control is limited – there's no obvious way to apply bold to a typeface, for example. Even stranger, when we added extra copy it ended up overrunning the text block below, which goes completely against HTML's inherent text-flow nature. Worse, when we previewed the page in a browser we discovered that the text block had been turned into a bitmap; this means it becomes unselectable, invisible to search engines and unnecessarily download-heavy.

Web Easy Professional's layout and text handling are poor but the program is much happier when it comes to graphics. Running across the bottom of the screen is the 'lightbox browser' palette, which displays thumbnails of more than 150 file formats including Flash and animated GIF. You can then just drag and drop these onto your layouts. The program also provides access to more than 30,000 images online with another 30,000 on the CD, and you can draw your own basic boxes, ovals and lines.



Also helping to add to your site's impact is Web Easy Professional's support for DHTML-based scripted effects. These start off with simple but effective image rollovers, move on to unnecessary but eye-catching page transitions and photo-based wipes and fades, before ending with over-the-top and undesirable effects, such as page elements zooming in from all corners.

Overall, there's no doubt that some of Web Easy Professional's pre-made sites are eye-catching and, if you're happy to go with what you're given, you can have a high-impact – though not necessarily efficient – site up-and-running in short order.

PC PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

Serif WebPlus 8

PRICE £51 (£60 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.serif.com

VERDICT WebPlus is effectively a print-oriented DTP that outputs to HTML, with mixed results.

Serif, the company behind WebPlus, has a long pedigree producing design applications, such as the popular DTP application PagePlus. In fact, the whole approach to design is very familiar between these two programs. To get started on your site, for example, you first select from the range of pre-made templates. As with Web Easy Professional, these not only set a look-and-feel for your site but also include sample pages with boilerplate text. Unlike Web Easy Professional though, it's very simple to edit the resulting layout, copy and formatting.

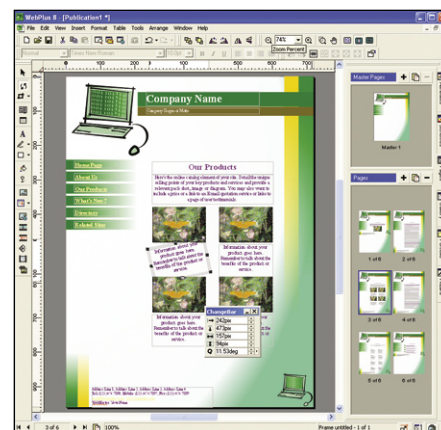
It's also simple to create your own pages thanks to WebPlus' DTP-style approach. This is based on a Pages palette for managing pages and freeform text boxes that you can position anywhere on-screen for managing layout – you can even have text flow from one box to another. WebPlus offers some advanced word-processing features, including a thesaurus, spell checker and AutoCorrect.

WebPlus again acts very much like a DTP application when it comes to adding

graphics. The program has reasonable drawing tools built in, complete with gradient fill and transparency support. WebPlus also supports the import of various image file formats that are automatically converted to GIF or JPEG format for web display and comes with 20,000 clip-art images. Most useful of all, the program automatically creates the graphical navigation bars for the pages in its templates.

WebPlus's DTP-style approach promises to make it as simple to create a website as it is to design a printed publication. However, designing for print and for the Web are two entirely different propositions and confusing these can quickly lead to problems. Managing your site as a single document, for example, is fine when it only contains a few pages but becomes increasingly unwieldy as it grows. WebPlus's page-based approach to layout is also problematic as it uses CSS positioning, which not all browsers support.

Even less desirable is WebPlus's artificially fixed page size, which means that if you load a large text file your copy automatically,



and unnecessarily, flows onto another page – particularly irritating as you then have to manually add the navigation to make it accessible. Worst of all is WebPlus's design-intensive high-impact approach. For example, the use of full-page rather than tiling graphical backgrounds is wasteful, while the encouragement to rotate your text blocks leads to them being converted to bitmaps, which are not only unselectable, unsearchable and download-heavy but almost unreadable.

PC PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

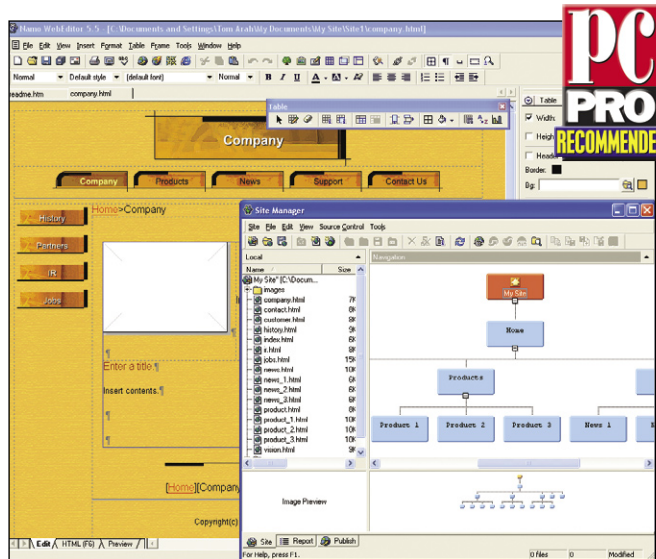


Namo WebEditor 5.5

PRICE £51 (£60 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

VERDICT A program with surprisingly professional web design and web graphics power, all at an amazing price.



Namu WebEditor provides good design control and site management.

Like VCOM Web Easy Professional and Serif WebPlus, Namu WebEditor promises to get you off to a flying start with its range of pre-made templates. You access these via the Site Wizard, which lets you choose a basic structure, specify a company or community site, and then one of 200 themed look-and-feels. The results aren't as high-impact as those of its rivals: in fact, most are downright ugly, so if you're looking to have a site up-and-running in half a day then look elsewhere.

Namu more than makes up for this disappointment by enabling you to take total control over your pages. Again, compared to Web Easy and WebPlus, the design power initially looks awkward; rather than simple freeform text boxes that you can position anywhere onscreen, Namu's page layouts are determined by table grids. It might seem clumsy, but this is the way HTML was designed to work and Namu does what it can to make handling simpler with its Table menu commands, tabbed Table Property Inspector and even a Table Pencil tool for interactively drawing your grids.

Alternatively, Namu provides support for CSS layers that act as freeform text boxes. Or you can even gain the best of both worlds with Layout Tables – freeform layouts that Namu automatically converts to HTML tables behind-the-scenes. Namu's text-formatting control is just as comprehensive, with the ability to apply the main

HTML tags directly from the Formatting toolbar and to set up and apply CSS styles both internally and externally.

And Namu is no slouch when it comes to adding extra impact to your pages. You can import JPEG and GIF images and apply a range of effects to them as well as resizing and cropping. Namu also provides plenty of web-oriented clip-art and, impressively, even lets you add your own animated Flash

buttons. You can also add dynamic impact thanks to Namu's Script Wizard, which offers more than 80 JavaScript-based actions that can bring your page elements to life, whether that's creating an image rollover or managing the visibility of CSS layers. There's even a dedicated Timeline palette for managing DHTML animations.

So far so good, but what really makes Namu stand out from its budget rivals is that it doesn't save its sites to a proprietary format that's then output as HTML. Instead you're working directly with the HTML files exactly as they're posted to the server. This has the unbeatable advantage that you can edit your code directly using the HTML tab at the bottom of the document window, so you have absolute control of your end results. And to help you get your code right, Namu offers syntax-based colour-coding, automatic indentation and even

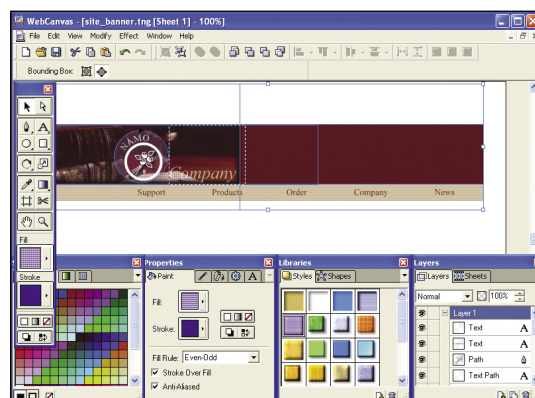
the ability to verify against the main HTML specifications and browser implementations.

Working with your HTML files directly is a big strength, but it also poses the problem of maintaining site navigation – for example, do you really want to manually create an image rollover link and add it to all your pages every time you add a new page? It's a problem that Namu solves thanks to its integrated Site Manager. Using the Site Manager's default Navigation view you can quickly create a hierarchical outline for your site. This hierarchy is useful in its own right, but more importantly it can be used as the basis for Dynamic Navigation Bars, which automatically create text or rollover links to, say, all top-level pages or all pages at the same level. The Site Manager also provides advanced publishing features, such as a Remote view of your server files, and can provide reports on potential problems, such as broken links and orphaned pages. You even have the ability to check-in and check-out your files for workgroup working.

And that's not all. Namu WebEditor also comes with several supporting graphical applications to take care of GIF animation, image slicing and screenshot capture. These are handy but the bundled Namu WebCanvas is in a different league. Using its comprehensive vector-based shape tools, gradient and texture-based formatting and non-destructive effects and styles, it's easy to create eye-catching graphics, especially web buttons and rollovers. These can be saved to GIF or JPEG or even the web-friendly vector-based SVG (Scalable Vector Graphic) format. Most usefully they can be saved to Namu's own Smart Button format, which can be losslessly scaled within the WebEditor application and used as the basis for Dynamic Navigation Bars.

It's extraordinary power for the price – and typical of the whole Namu package. With most budget packages, the more you investigate, the more likely you are to come away disappointed. With Namu it's the opposite. As you explore you come across yet more features, such as auto correction, the ability to directly open, edit and save remote files, an equation editor, a macro recorder, XML capabilities, even the ability to produce database-driven pages using ASP, JSP, or PHP.

The power is very impressive, but it's important not to get carried away. There are still plenty of rough edges, so full-time professionals won't be attracted away from Dreamweaver, while one-off and occasional users looking for a simple HTML-free solution would do better with NetObjects Fusion. That said, Namu WebEditor provides excellent features at an unbelievable price.



Namu WebCanvas is an impressive web graphics application in its own right.

PC PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

Macromedia Contribute 2

PRICE £68 (£80 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

VERDICT Contribute concentrates on authoring web content rather than creating websites, which is a novel and useful approach.

Macromedia Dreamweaver is the professional designer's tool of choice, so a budget offering from the same developer that concentrates on ease-of-use has to be an attractive proposition. So just what web authoring power does Macromedia Contribute provide?

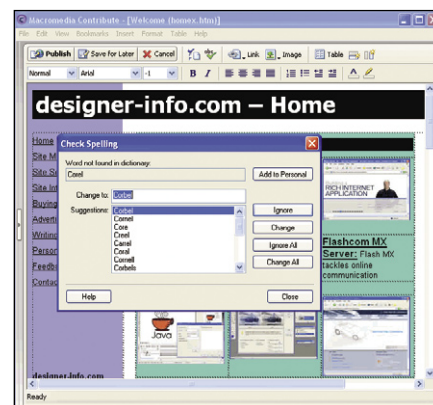
The simple answer is very little. For layout, Contribute offers basic table handling but nothing as advanced as CSS positioning. Text formatting from the main toolbar is slightly more advanced as you can quickly apply preset CSS paragraph and character styles – but you can't create your own. Graphics handling is similarly basic as you can only load existing GIF and JPEG format files. And you can forget about adding any dynamic scripting and interactivity.

In short, there's nowhere near enough power to enable users to create a working site from scratch. The lack of power is deliberate, as Contribute is a web authoring package with a difference – it's designed to work with existing sites. Central to this is the ability to browse to

a live page on the server, download it to your system, edit it and then republish it. In other words, Contribute is designed for editing pages rather than originating sites (though you can of course add new pages).

The first obvious question is: why would you want to tie one hand behind your back like this? The answer is safety and simplicity. Creating pages that work successfully on different browsers and platforms, while ensuring that they conform to the site's overall look-and-feel, isn't child's play, as there's always the danger that non-experts could mess up completely. With Contribute's subset of power combined with Macromedia's unrivalled experience of working with HTML/XHTML, that danger is removed. If all you want to do is to update text or add a link, Contribute is a safe and simple bet.

The next question is: if Contribute can't create your site from scratch, who does? The answer is someone who knows what they're doing (preferably a Dreamweaver expert who can take advantage of Contribute's support for



Dreamweaver templates to manage just what elements on a page are editable and which are not). After all, knowing how to create a truly successful site requires a lot more than picking the best authoring package (see next month's feature), and posting an amateurish effort can do more harm than good.

Macromedia Contribute's success is that it enables everyone to do what they do best: the designers take care of setting up an efficient and attractive working site, while the contributors take care of the content.

PC PRO RATINGS

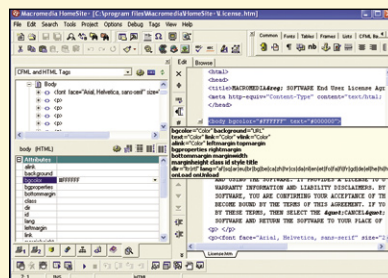
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

Cracking the code

Look at any web page in your browser's source code view and you'll see the actual visible content of the page surrounded by reams of text in angled brackets. These are the HTML tags that your browser interprets when formatting and displaying the page. And because the HTML tags are just straightforward text (rather than binary computer code), it means that all you need to produce a simple web page is a simple text editor, such as Notepad.

To produce more advanced pages, though, you're going to need a bit more help. Most users choose one of the wysiwyg editors but, if you're more technically minded, there's a lot to be said for one of the text-based web-authoring packages, such as AceHTML Pro (£50) from www.visicommedia.com, HotDog Pro (\$100) from www.sausage.com and HomeSite 5.5 (£79) from www.macromedia.com

What unites all these packages is that they focus absolutely on the code



Text-based editors like HomeSite+ make the tag central.

that makes up your page – so much so that in many ways they seem more like programming applications than design packages. In particular, this means that by default you work in a text-based code view, previewing your page's actual appearance only to check it. Coding capabilities are naturally to the fore including all the basics of colour-coding, syntax checking and automatic formatting.

These days many of the wysiwyg editors offer similar capabilities, but the text-based editors can still provide

an edge by providing more tag-centric capabilities, with features, such as automatic tag completion, dedicated tag editors and comprehensive tag-based references, providing examples of usage and detailing specific browser support.

The text-based editors can also come into their own when working with the Web's other markup languages. CSS, for example, controls your pages' presentation, but to really master it you again need to get to grips with the code itself and the less-than-reliable browser support for it. The tag-centric approach makes even more sense when working with data-driven languages, such as JSP and CFML. That's why Macromedia bundles HomeSite+, a tailored version of HomeSite 5.5, with Dreamweaver MX 2004 specifically for those users who like to be able to switch to a more programmatic environment when developing web applications.

If you want to become a web author, you're almost certainly better off with one of the wysiwyg editors. But if you're determined to become a code-focused web master then it's worth checking out the text-based editors.



NetObjects Fusion 7.5

PRICE £77 (£90 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.netobjects.com

VERDICT The best HTML-free route to foolproof professional results, NetObjects Fusion puts site structuring at the heart of web design.

NetObjects Fusion 7.5 calls itself 'the smart way to build websites' and it's hard to disagree, as the program is simple, surprisingly powerful and creates impressive end results.

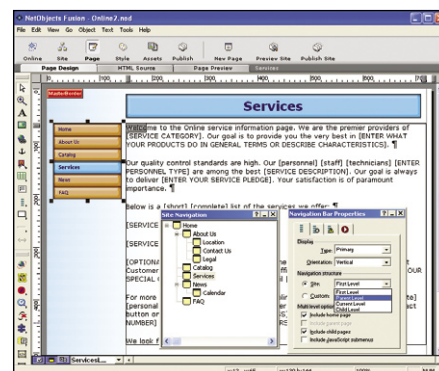
The secret of the program's success is its clean and streamlined workflow based on various modules or 'views' accessed from the large graphical toolbar. The first of these, and in many ways the most important, is the Site view, which provides an attractive hierarchical, family-tree style view of your site structure. You can quickly rough out your structure with the step-by-step Site Wizard, but it's just as easy to add, name and rearrange your pages from scratch.

Crucially, when you switch to Fusion's Page view, you'll see that this site hierarchy has been used to automatically add dynamic navigation bars (either as text links, image rollovers or even multilevel, fly-out menus) and these can be quickly customised, say, to link to all pages at the same level in the same section. At a stroke,

one of the web designer's biggest headaches – maintaining site navigation – is removed.

Adding the rest of your page content in the Page view is just as simple: Fusion provides a wysiwyg layout editor in which you drag-and-drop freeform text boxes to create your layout, while tag and CSS-based formatting is handled via the Properties palette. You can also add graphics, form objects, rotating banners, Flash movies and even advanced data-driven elements.

Moving on to the Styles view, you select from a reasonably wide range of pre-provided visual themes with more available via add-on packs. Select a theme and everything from the default banner and navigation bar down to heading and link formatting is updated across the entire site. Next, you're ready to switch to the Assets view to manage all the elements that make up your site and then finally to the Publish view. Here, you output your pages and all their associated files, then you upload them to your server.



It's almost impossible to go wrong and the results are bound to look good. However, it's important to realise that NetObjects Fusion has the same fundamental limitation as Web Easy Professional and WebPlus – since it saves your site to its own proprietary format and only produces the final HTML pages during the publishing process, there's no possibility of the user taking serious coding control. In other words, you have to take what you're given, which isn't necessarily the most efficient or powerful solution, so be aware of that before you buy.

PC PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

Microsoft FrontPage 2003

PRICE £85 (£100 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

VERDICT Plenty of help for beginners, combined with increasingly high-end power – but it's an uncomfortable mix.

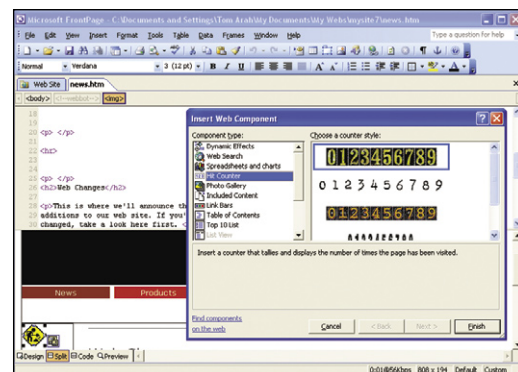
Like the other Microsoft Office apps, FrontPage has to be both simple to use and able to deliver high-impact results in short order. Helping to get users off to a good start are a wide range of productivity features, such as pre-made site templates (with wizards guiding you along the way) and professionally designed themes. There's also a Navigation view in which you can visually manage the structure of your site ready to be used as the basis for automatic link bars – though this is an option rather than a central part of the workflow as it is in NetObjects Fusion.

When you turn to the Page view to work on your pages, FrontPage tries to make the experience as similar to working in Word as possible. For example, there's the Draw Table tool for interactively handling layouts plus familiar formatting commands. There's also access to clip-art and reasonable image-based control. You can add impact via JavaScript, including interactivity, such as rollover

buttons and expanding menus. FrontPage also provides its own proprietary web components that take advantage of dedicated server extensions to enable users to add impressive features, such as integrated form handling, searches and discussion groups.

FrontPage has always scored highly for its quick results but ultimately the program has seemed underpowered compared to Dreamweaver. No problem: for the 2003 release Microsoft simply set its developers to copy the market leader. This included adding Dreamweaver-style support for CSS-based layered layouts and a Behaviour panel for managing scripted interactivity. Most notably, it involved a complete revamp of FrontPage's coding capabilities, adding a split HTML/ Layout view, a Quick Tag Selector, context-sensitive AutoComplete based on HTML and CSS syntax, and tag-based find-and-replace.

You could argue that FrontPage 2003 now offers the best of both worlds, with fast results for beginners and advanced



control for experts. In practice, there's still no sound reason for professionals to shift from Dreamweaver, especially as there's a long history of mistrust for Microsoft based on its proprietary leanings (for example, tying sites to its own server solutions) and willingness to take undesirable shortcuts (such as producing pages that only work as expected under Internet Explorer or just on the user's own system). These failings aren't good news for the occasional user either, and FrontPage 2003's attempt to move up market has also inevitably added complexity.

PC PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★



Behind the jargon

The Web was designed to be a simple publishing medium but over the years it's been extended by a range of technologies. Here's a jargon buster:

HTML

Devised by Sir Tim Berners-Lee, HTML (HyperText Markup Language) is the fundamental architecture on which the Web is built. Use your browser's source code view and you'll see how every web page is based on a series of HTML tags – `<h1>`, `<table>` and so on – that surround the actual content of the page. It might look intimidating but it's important to recognise that HTML isn't a rigorous programming language but rather a forgiving markup language (the browser software reads each tag to know how to handle the tag's contents). Moreover, it's a very simple markup language based on just a few core tags.

CSS

The HTML tags were designed to describe the content of each web page – headings, lists, addresses and so on

– rather than to describe how these elements should be presented. For a long time this was left to the browser application to interpret as it saw fit, but a much more powerful, reliable and efficient solution is to use another markup language designed specifically to handle presentation. That's exactly what CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) is and today's web authors need to be able to handle CSS just as well as HTML.

DHTML

By treating each page element – image, paragraph, division – as an object, the version 4 HTML specification, often referred to as DHTML (Dynamic HTML), enables the use of scripting to bring the page to life within the browser. Roll over a button image, for example, and the image can change while the text in a CSS-positioned layer is updated.

ASP, ASP.NET, CFML, JSP, PHP

DHTML enables an interactive form of dynamic content, but much more significant is the ability to dynamically create the web page itself. This is where the major server-side languages come in: Microsoft's ASP (Active Server Pages)

now updated to ASP.NET, Macromedia's CFML (ColdFusion Markup Language) pages, JSP (JavaServer Pages) and PHP (PHP Hypertext Preprocessor).

These all work in a similar way and for the same purpose. Additional tags are embedded within the core HTML framework of the page and these are interpreted by the server and used to interact with external data sources – databases, cookies and so on – to serve up the final HTML/CSS page to the browser. If you've ever wondered how sites like Amazon can provide all those customised pages for each of its visitors, this is the answer.

XHTML, XML

HTML is the basis for the Web as we know it, but it's hitting its limits. To move on, the Web needs a more powerful and more reliable underlying architecture. In particular, it needs to support a wider range of tags and these need to be much more rigorously defined and handled. That's exactly what XML (eXtensible Markup Language) was designed to provide, and XHTML (eXtensible HTML) is a version of HTML that has been rewritten to make it XML-compliant.

Adobe GoLive CS

PRICE £270 (£317 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.simply.co.uk (code: YD78770)

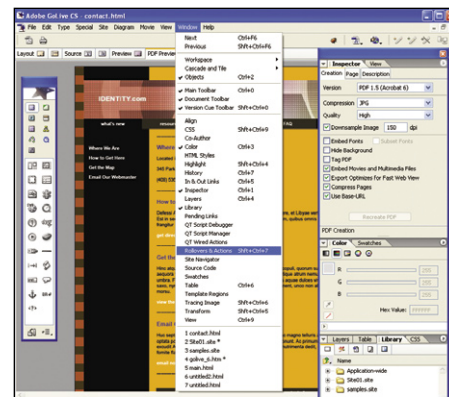
VERDICT Experienced designers will feel at home with GoLive, and it offers plenty of design-intensive power. Unfortunately, it also has a strong tendency to bloat.

What distinguishes GoLive from the competition is its design-intensive approach to creating high-impact web pages. In many ways this makes it a natural partner to Adobe's print-oriented apps, and experienced print designers will certainly feel at home with the Layout Grid concept that GoLive pioneered: familiar DTP-style textbox-based layouts are automatically converted to HTML table grids behind the scenes. The danger here is that the resulting code is inefficient and more experienced web designers will choose to work directly with tables or CSS-based layers. GoLive also provides rich CSS-based text formatting, though the implementation is confusing.

Page layout and text formatting take care of the bare bones of your design, but it's graphics that make them stand out. Naturally, Adobe is keen to use its vast experience here and does so via SmartObjects. Simply drop a Photoshop PSD or Illustrator AI file onto your page and GoLive automatically creates

an optimised GIF or JPEG version of it. Resize or crop the placed SmartObject and GoLive automatically goes back to the original to repeat the process so ensuring maximum quality and efficiency. Further impact can be added through GoLive's comprehensive DHTML scripting and the program's advanced QuickTime movie-editing capabilities.

GoLive's emphasis is on rich visual design, an approach that it has inherited from its predecessors, but it also recognises the importance of coding. There are various capabilities to help you get your code right, including syntax-based colour coding, tag-aware find-and-replace, browser validation and, in the latest CS release, a syntax-aware completion engine. Almost all the boxes are ticked (apart from the crucial online tag-based references), and you could even make the case that GoLive offers the most advanced coding capabilities – after all, you can edit your page's HTML directly in the Source Code window, in a split Layout/Code



view, in a special HTML Outline view, or a mix of the above.

Ultimately, though, the mix of approaches is itself confusing, which is typical of the program as a whole. With no less than 24 palettes, many with multiple tabs, there's a strong feeling of bloat about GoLive CS. A bit of workflow-based streamlining along Dreamweaver lines would go a long way. And the same can be said of the pages that GoLive produces. Adobe still needs to learn the crucial lesson of web design: less is more.

PC PRO RATINGS

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

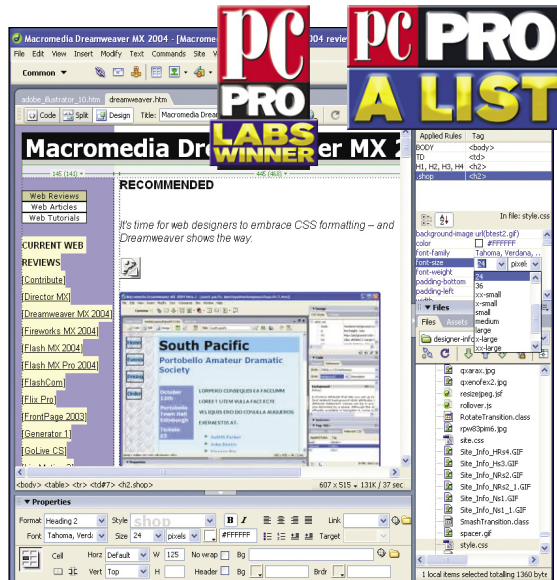


Macromedia Dreamweaver MX 2004

PRICE £294 (£345 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.simply.co.uk (code: YD84686)

VERDICT It takes some time to understand the power on offer, but Dreamweaver can take professional users wherever they want to go.



Macromedia's Dreamweaver offers best-of-breed table handling and CSS formatting.

With more than 90 per cent of the professional market, Dreamweaver is clearly doing something right – but that's certainly not getting inexperienced users off to a flying start. Even the new 'user-friendly' Start Panel is intimidating with its bewildering choice of acronyms ranging from ASP to XML (see Behind the jargon, opposite), while the new pre-provided samples turn out to be stripped-down and hardly eye-catching. And, with no pre-designed graphical site themes, site structuring capabilities or automatic navigation bars, you certainly won't be producing a fully working site in a morning.

In other words, with Dreamweaver you're best off starting both your site and its pages from scratch. That's bad news for beginners, but for experienced users it means that you're in absolute control of what goes into your pages and so able to ensure the leanest and meanest possible end results. While Dreamweaver does offer a Layout View, for example, in which you can create freeform layouts by dragging out layout cells as you do in GoLive, the assumption is that you'll switch back to the default Standard View to fine-tune the underlying HTML table. And with its efficient Properties panel-based handling and new on-table feedback and control, Dreamweaver's table handling is the best around. If you want to shift to CSS-based positioning, Dreamweaver caters for that too.

Dreamweaver's CSS-support is even more complete when it comes to text formatting. In fact, it's now positively difficult to add

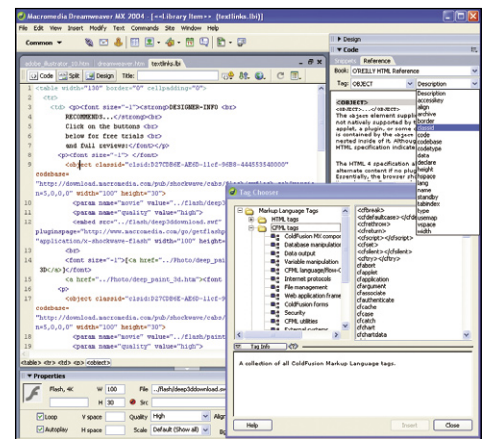
HTML-based formatting – this is as it should be, as CSS-based formatting offers greater power, control, consistency, reliability, scalability and efficiency. To make the most of CSS, though, you need dedicated and fully thought-through functionality, which is exactly what Dreamweaver provides. The context-sensitive CSS Inspector panel in particular is a model of efficiency, letting you edit properties and showing just which styles are feeding in to the current selection's formatting.

With its table handling and CSS-based positioning and formatting, Dreamweaver is capable of producing efficient designs, but what about when it comes to adding impact?

Dreamweaver pioneered the use of DHTML-based scripting with its Behaviours panel but with just over 20 actions supplied, it only concentrates on the basics: handling CSS layers, pop-up menus, browser and plug-in detection and so on. If you want to extend these core capabilities you'll need to download external scripts or write your own in Dreamweaver's dedicated scripting environment.

It's the same story with graphics. Dreamweaver supports the two web bitmap standards GIF and JPEG, offering basic in-built control over cropping, resampling and optimising, and also lets you create Flash-based buttons and text. If you need more advanced bitmap and vector control, Dreamweaver provides good support for importing and working with Fireworks PNG files and image tables, as well as Flash SWF movies. In other words, Dreamweaver provides the most important functionality itself but avoids adding unnecessary bells and whistles and instead concentrates its efforts on integrating with dedicated solutions. And with its Studio package, which combines Dreamweaver, Flash, Fireworks and FreeHand, Macromedia provides the perfect all-in-one solution.

Dreamweaver moves into a class of its own when it comes to the coding capabilities it offers alongside its wysiwyg visual design. Nowadays, features that Dreamweaver pioneered, such as the all-important split code and layout view and syntax-based colouring and hinting, are increasingly commonplace, but Dreamweaver still leads the pack with its comprehensive



Dreamweaver's coding capabilities aren't an added extra, they're fundamental.

online tag references. Recent innovations also keep it ahead. For example, dynamic validation automatically highlights potential problems with how the main browser versions will interpret your HTML/CSS code as you work.

Moreover, Dreamweaver's coding capabilities go far beyond the basics of HTML and CSS. To begin with, Dreamweaver is already looking ahead, making it simple to ensure that your code complies with the stricter future requirements of XHTML and XML. Even more powerful is its coding support for the data-driven markup languages ASP, ASP.NET, JSP, PHP and ColdFusion, complete with full tag library support and online references. Even better, you can work with all these languages to retrieve and display dynamic content directly within Dreamweaver's main visual environment.

Of course, if you're just setting out to become a web author all these technologies seem a long way off and seriously intimidating. The central point, though, is that with Dreamweaver there's no ceiling. You can start working with HTML/CSS in the wysiwyg Design view and as you become more experienced begin working directly with the code. Then, if you hit the limits of static HTML/XHTML/CSS, you also have the choice of all the major alternative routes to producing your pages dynamically.

Ultimately, it's this that makes Dreamweaver stand out. To one extent or another, all the other wysiwyg web authoring apps from Web Easy right through to GoLive are constantly fighting against the fact that web pages are built on code. By embracing the fact and working with the Web's underlying architecture rather than against it, Dreamweaver provides the most efficient and effective interface and workflow and enables its users to produce the most efficient and effective sites.

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