

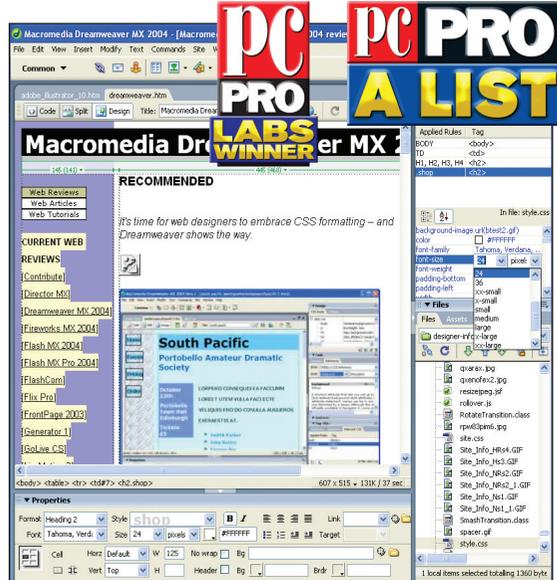


Macromedia Dreamweaver MX 2004

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 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

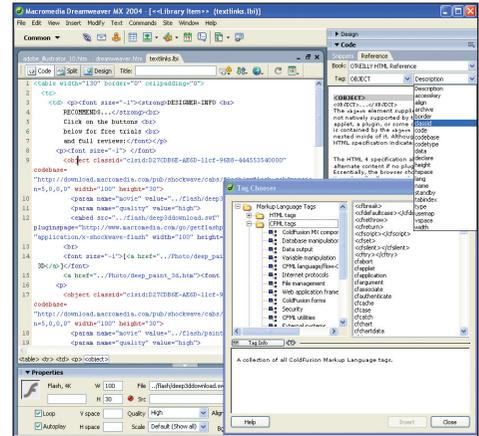
HTML-based formatting – this is as it should be, as CSS-based formatting offers greater power, control, consistency, reliability, scalability and efficiency. To make the most of CSS, though, you need dedicated and fully thought-through functionality, which is exactly what Dreamweaver provides. The context-sensitive 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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