





Spinning a web presence

No tangled web pages weaved here. Whether you're a home user with a free web page to fill, or you run a business and have to **maintain or build a web site**, here's a range of products to suit. And, there's a round-up of multimedia packages, too.

Be the creative type. This month we have rounded up the best in multimedia on pages 204 and 205, but elsewhere, as the medium of the moment, we have concentrated on web authoring.

If you have an email address, the chances are that your ISP will have thrown in a few megabytes of web space, too, so now there is nothing to stop you from having a web presence. All you need is the ideal web authoring package.

There is a bewildering array of choices aimed at everyone from the 'web master extraordinaire' to the web novice. Everybody's needs will differ, so we have divided the packages reviewed here into three specific categories.

First, we look at those aimed at users with a dedicated web server; the large businesses with equally large bandwidth which will need database integration, scripts and larger sites. The second category is small businesses in which a member of staff, although not necessarily a web professional, is keen to maintain a web presence. The third category is the home user, looking for a quick and easy way to create an impressive site while keeping an eye on cost. However, before you skip to the category you think would be the most applicable to you, cast your eye over the other sections because the selection is not as clear-cut as you may think. If you fancy tackling the task of building a site unaided, take a peek at our workshop on creating your pages from scratch (p216).

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• Reviewers: Nik Rawlinson and Panicos Georgiades

Large businesses

Large corporations often find themselves in the lucky (if expensive) situation of enjoying a dedicated web server and a leased line. While allowing employees direct and almost unlimited access to the internet, it also means that a web site can be hosted internally rather than on the third-party servers of an ISP. This gives the company's web site unlimited scope in terms of both size and content so that they can, for example, host FrontPage webs (although FrontPage is included in our Small Business category, opposite) which involves calling a number of server-based extensions not hosted by many ISPs.

One of the major uses of corporate sites is the re-publication, in electronic form, of company literature which can change frequently and will need to be updated on a regular basis. Producing clean, easy-to-amend code is therefore a must. While home users may be interested in incorporating impressive graphics and special effects at the same time as writing their content, this is likely to be a lower priority for the corporate user. A uniform look and feel is more likely to be produced using a dedicated graphics package such as PhotoShop and ImageReady from Adobe, or Fireworks from Macromedia. A corporate customer is thus more likely to need a simple means of implementing these 'third-party' images on their pages, and their requirements for web page design software are more often restricted to applying a theme or border set.

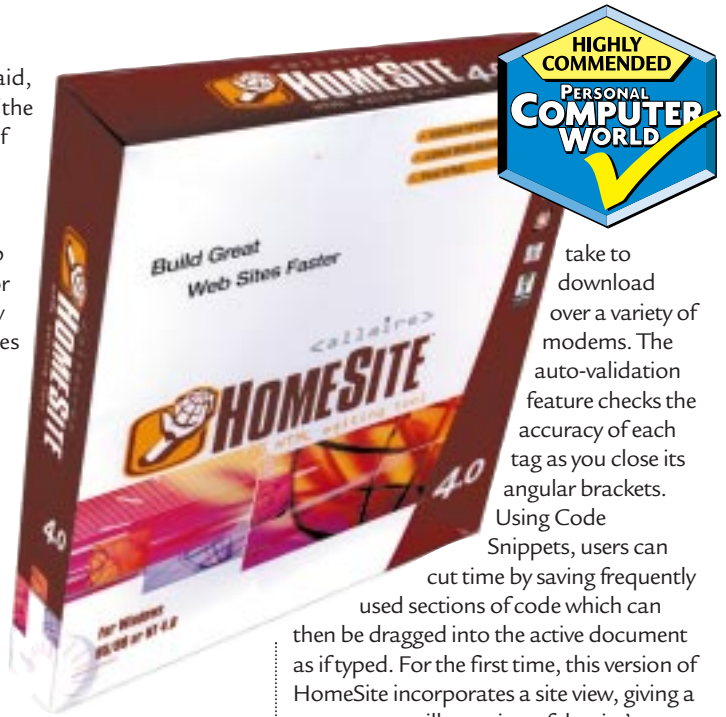
It is far more important for corporate sites than for home user sites that they are accessible to the widest possible audience. They are, after all, often seen as another means of revenue generation. Pages must therefore be compatible with a wide variety of browsers and not restricted merely to the most up-to-date versions. Furthermore, if the organisation wishes to sell through its site, it will need at least the ability to handle forms to return data, and, should it wish to track orders through the site, some form of database integration.

Allaire HomeSite 4

HomeSite offers users a 'pure HTML' code-based method for creating pages and the manufacturers maintain that the package is designed for those who know, or who are at least prepared to learn,

HTML. That said, it has much of the functionality of the primarily WYSIWYG packages. The drag-and-drop capabilities, for instance, allow links and images to be dropped into your document without the need to enter code, and this latest version of the software incorporates a 'design view' mode, allowing you to see how your page looks, as you create it.

Allaire says its interface is WYSIWYN (N standing for need) as users keep a constant eye on the code being produced. This makes working with tables easy for those who understand HTML, because the cursor can be positioned in precisely the right place to take advantage of font and alignment tags. However, this approach makes frame development far more complex than that offered by Adobe's

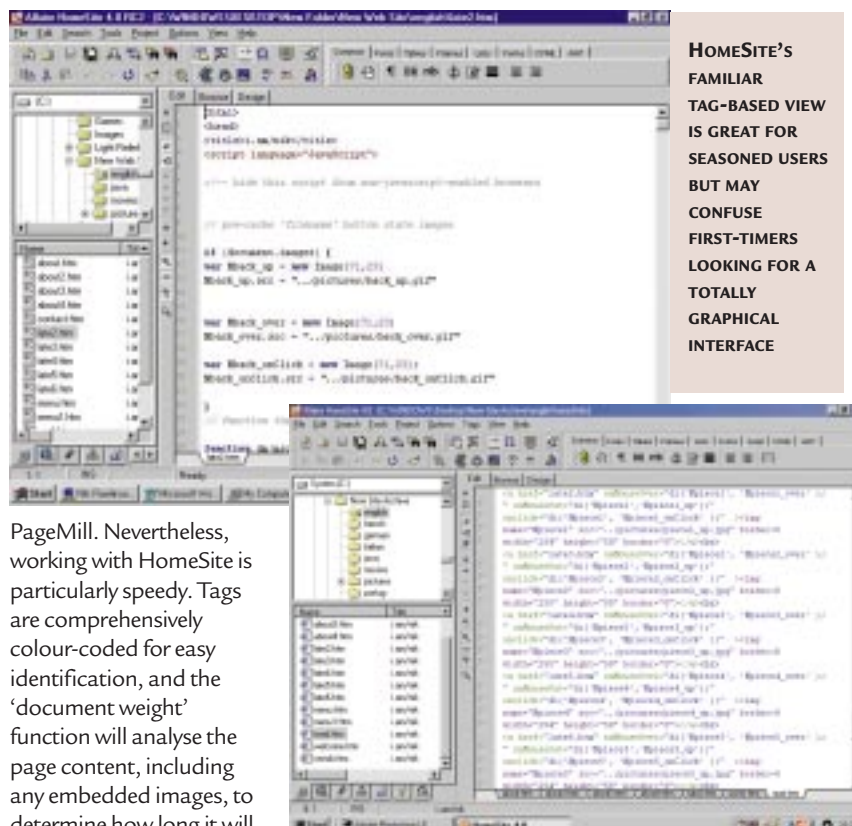


take to download over a variety of modems. The auto-validation feature checks the accuracy of each tag as you close its angular brackets. Using Code Snippets, users can cut time by saving frequently

used sections of code which can then be dragged into the active document as if typed. For the first time, this version of HomeSite incorporates a site view, giving a tree-structure illustration of the site's format. This works in conjunction with the integrated link validator and document weighting (download timing) features.

FileMaker HomePage 3

Not surprisingly, this package is tailored for publishing interactive FileMaker databases on the net. The Connection Assistant creates interactive forms designed to specifically suit databases compatible with FileMaker Pro 4.



PageMill. Nevertheless, working with HomeSite is particularly speedy. Tags are comprehensively colour-coded for easy identification, and the 'document weight' function will analyse the page content, including any embedded images, to determine how long it will



One of the most user-friendly aspects of this package is its libraries of animations, bullets, banners and clipart that can be dragged and dropped into any web document. This dramatically decreases the amount of time spent sourcing page elements. Handling of tables was unsurpassed. Multiple cells can be selected simply by clicking in the top left cell of the selection and Shift-clicking in the opposite corner. One cell can also be merged into another after it has been selected, by dragging its corner out into the adjacent cells with which it should merge.

Once a frameset has been defined, further frames can be dragged out from the edges of the screen, as in PageMill. Users cannot edit the pages whilst in the frames themselves, though, and the package performs no automatic naming of the frames, which has to be done manually from the object properties dialogue.

SoftQuad HoTMetal Pro 5.0

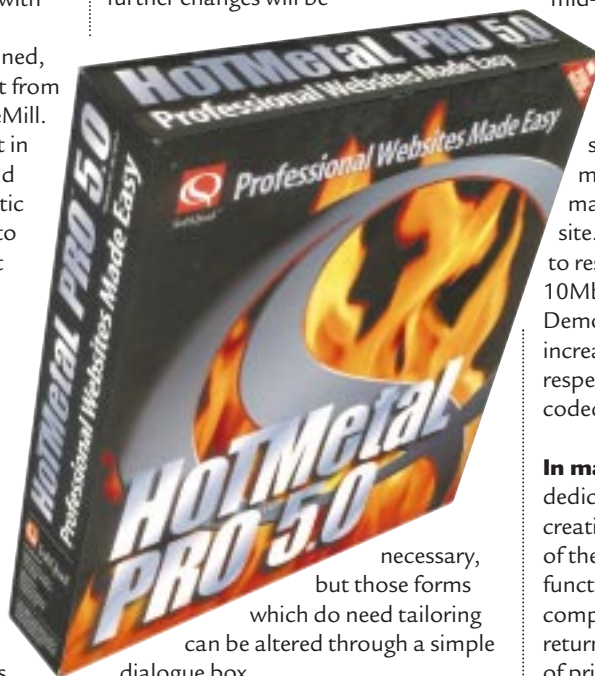
We were disappointed with HoTMetal's WYSIWYG mode. Although the HTML tags disappear, they are present in the form of invisible characters. This makes it difficult to accurately tell whether you are entering text before or after a font tag. In our trial, this soon became irritating as we had to keep repositioning our text. We also felt that tables were poorly handled; we could not select multiple adjacent cells in the table without selecting either the whole column, row or table.

This package will not allow users to

open HTML documents that do not exactly meet its strict requirements for conformity. While this is admirable in that it ensures your pages will be browser-compliant when completed, we found it irksome, to say the least, that it meant we could not load some pages created in other packages without accepting every one of HoTMetal's changes — reject a suggested change, and loading aborts.

Other types of validation are more useful. Any pages created or imported can be checked for spelling, accessibility (for users with a disability or text-only browsers) and for compliance with earlier versions of HTML.

Forms are handled well. Users simply select elements and drop them onto the page. The chances are that no further changes will be



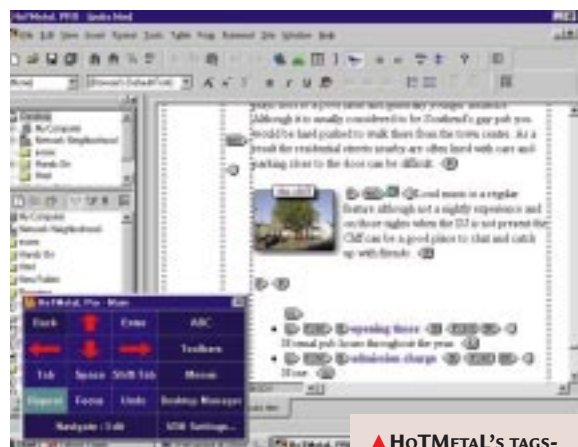
necessary, but those forms which do need tailoring can be altered through a simple dialogue box.

SoftQuad's HoTMetal Pro was able to import text from a wide range of packages, except we found that it was not as efficient as PageMill when handling Word documents. Although the general layout was preserved, some

of the coding, especially relating to colours, was stripped out.

Small businesses

The needs of a small-business user are not dissimilar to those of a large company, although there may be fundamental differences in the way the user accesses the net. Dedicated web



▲ **HoTMetal's TAGS-ON VIEW IS GREAT FOR USERS WHO WANT TO COMBINE TRADITIONAL CODING WITH WYSIWYG**

servers and leased lines are expensive luxuries and so many small- to

mid-sized organisations may find themselves using dialup networking and connecting to the net through an ISP. That same ISP will most likely also host their web site and so a number of restrictions may be placed on content. One such may be a restriction on the size of the site. It is not uncommon for many ISPs to restrict member web sites to just 10Mb or less, although the likes of Demon and Dircon have recently increased this to 15 and 20Mb, respectively. Sites must therefore be coded as leanly as possible.

In many organisations there is no dedicated web author and so site creation is often handled by a member of the team with a different primary function. Ease of use and the ability to complete the job swiftly, and hence return to their main business, is therefore of primary importance. Well-structured code, although always important, may be a lesser priority for small businesses than large corporates due to the fact that the site will most likely be modified by only one or two users.

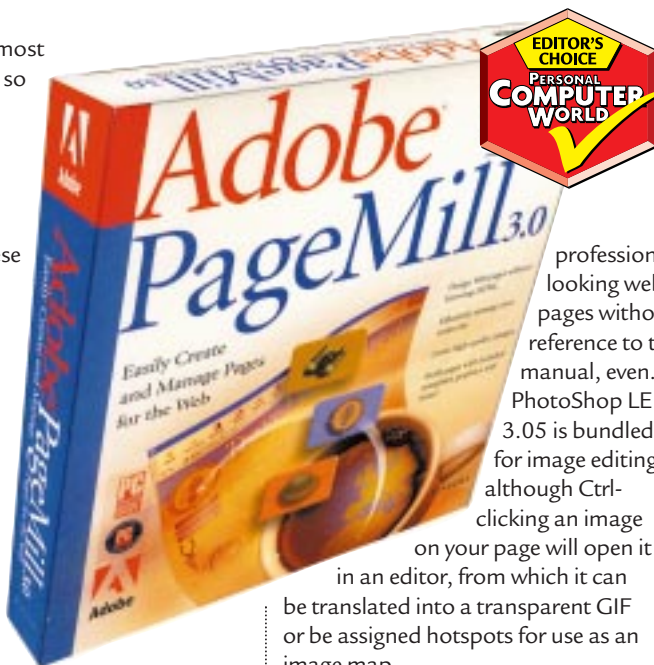
Customer feedback is of vital

importance to most companies and so the ability to handle forms should be a paramount requirement.

Not only do these ensure that the information returned to the site administrator can be categorised, but they also offer an alternative for those users who do not have an email package associated with their browser, and for those accessing the internet in libraries or from public-access areas such as web cafés. Attaching such a form to a database, however, is not often a vital requirement for small-business users, although Microsoft FrontPage 2000 (p196) has excellent database-handling capabilities.

Adobe PageMill 3.0

No package could be more user-friendly than PageMill. Its extensive, intuitive interface means that first-time users will be able to generate impressive and



professional-looking web pages without reference to the manual, even.

PhotoShop LE 3.05 is bundled for image editing, although Ctrl-clicking an image on your page will open it in an editor, from which it can be translated into a transparent GIF or be assigned hotspots for use as an image map.

Frames can be defined by dragging the boundaries into the screen from the edges of the active window. Right-clicking a link then brings up an iconic representation of the frameset, allowing users to click the frame in which the link should open. Word documents can be imported instantly and without a flaw.

Site elements are controlled by the 'Inspector', a context-sensitive dialogue box that even allows users to drag a bitmap onto it which will then be instantly tiled as the page wallpaper. Forms are generated at speed, and once a form element has been generated it can

be Ctrl-dragged to another location on the screen where an amendable replica will appear, dramatically reducing the amount of time spent on editing.

NetObjects Fusion 3.0

Fusion is fast. Each page is split into two distinct areas: the content layout, and the master border (the uniform design running throughout your pages). The master border theme

is entirely graphical, with each element being redrawn on-the-fly as the user adds further pages. Images are easy to handle. Defining the location will automatically launch the 'File open' dialogue and, once the image has been selected, Fusion will resize the frame to fit. Resizing the picture holder manually crops the image unless the 'stretch' option has been specifically activated. Text boxes will resize to exactly surround each stretch of text, allowing page elements to be



▲ **FUSION'S BORDERS ARE BUSINESSLIKE AND HIGHLY USABLE**

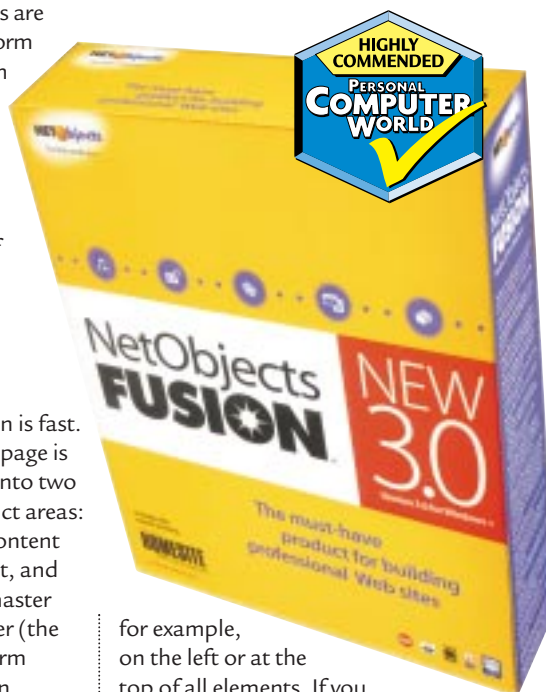
positioned precisely where they are needed. This extends to the constituent parts of a form.

Text areas, check boxes and radio buttons can be positioned with single-pixel accuracy. Multiple-form elements can be aligned along a common edge —



▲ **FRAMES CAN BE EASILY DRAGGED FROM THE EDGE OF THE SCREEN**

► **PAGEMILL'S INSPECTOR KEEPS A CLOSE EYE ON EVERY PAGE ATTRIBUTE**



for example, on the left or at the top of all elements. If you position two elements so that they overlap, Fusion will flag it as a problem if the cascading stylesheets and layers option (compatible only with the 4.x versions of Netscape and Explorer



▲ FUSION'S CONTEXT-SENSITIVE PROPERTIES DIALOG PUTS ALL YOUR CHANGES IN ONE PLACE

browsers) is not selected. A wide range of textual file types can be

imported, including RTF and Microsoft Word with the formatting retained. Pages cannot be saved individually because Fusion works on a 'whole site' basis with a 'save site' option instead. This ensures a fully working

possible to select multiple cells simply by dragging across them with the clicked mouse — an impressive and useful feature.

We were disappointed that VisualPage maintains only a single level of 'undo', thus permanently committing everything but your most recent

amendment to the page. The copy-and-paste method of associating radio buttons is less intuitive than those packages which assume buttons are associated, unless told otherwise.

Spacer elements are far more evident in VisualPage than many other packages. Rather than having to define the size in a dialogue box, these elements' borders are dragged to size. Image-map creation was similarly impressive. Once anchor points have been defined within the document, generating a hotspot on a previously inserted image will launch a drop-down menu containing the previously defined anchors. The user need only select one of these, or enter the URL for an off-page location.

Although VisualPage impressed us by generating two pages when we selected a 'new frame set' (the second page being for users without a frame-compliant browser), we did not like the way that it made the assumption that we wanted our screen to be divided vertically. Should we instead wish a horizontal separation, we had to insert a horizontal division within one of the previously formed frames before deleting the unsplit vertical frame.

FrontPage 2000

Under wraps until the second quarter of 1999, Microsoft FrontPage 2000 builds on the success of the '98 edition but incorporates enhanced features for small-business users.

Themes are more business-like and more easily modified. Unlike in the previous version, it is no longer necessary

to install the Personal Web Server because pages can now be saved directly to the hard drive rather than to a virtual server sitting inside the PC. Similarly, the formerly unique 'Explorer' and 'Editor' modules have been merged, giving the package a far more unified feel.



▲ CREATING AN IMAGE MAP IS A BREEZE USING SYMANTEC'S VISUALPAGE

Daughter pages can be added simply by selecting the parent page and then hitting the insert key, speeding up the process of generating your initial site tree.

Other time-saving features include automatically appending Submit and Reset buttons to a form area the moment it is defined. At the same time, radio buttons are automatically associated unless the user specifies otherwise. If you tell FrontPage the browsers you would like to be able to display your pages, the incompatible menu options will then be 'greyed out'. Also, FrontPage can analyse pages

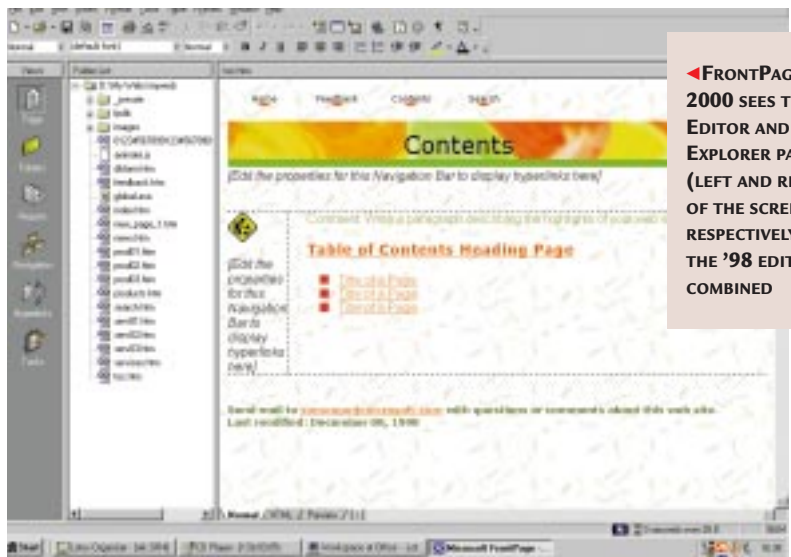


site, even prior to completion. Most editing takes place through the context-sensitive 'properties' dialogue windows, keeping all necessary tools to hand. Similarly, the navigation toolbar is context-sensitive, changing to match the element on which the user is working.

Symantec Visual Page

VisualPage is less intuitive than many packages included in this group test, with extensive reliance on toolbars rather than context-sensitive dialogue boxes. Although tables must be created via an on-screen form rather than simply dragging across a drop-down illustration attached to the table button, it is





◀ **FRONTPAGE 2000 SEES THE EDITOR AND THE EXPLORER PARTS (LEFT AND RIGHT OF THE SCREEN, RESPECTIVELY) OF THE '98 EDITION COMBINED**

Web!

Although most of the products in this test have been split into subgroups, users in any of the named categories can nonetheless employ them all. Web!, however, is designed for and aimed almost solely at the home user who wants to produce a site with a bit of pizzazz. All output is written in HTML4 and DHTML, but as only Microsoft Internet Explorer 4 and above can currently interpret both of these standards, any pages created using Web! will not be seen at their best by Netscape users.

Web! uses a simplified toolbar in which every page element is represented by a single button. Placing text on the site is therefore a matter of clicking the text button, clicking on

coded elsewhere and use them as templates for the layout of all future pages, giving the underlying structure of your site a uniform format. The 'attribute painter', common in Word and Excel, now also allows the pasting of DHTML attributes.

A selection of wizards allows users to create specific site types (a corporate presence, for example) rather than just a blank site. FrontPage does not handle frames as well as some other packages in this category, most notably Adobe PageMill — a frameset must be initiated by selecting a frame template. Frames within that template can then be subdivided. Each frame is automatically named and contains three buttons: Set Initial Page, New Page and Help.

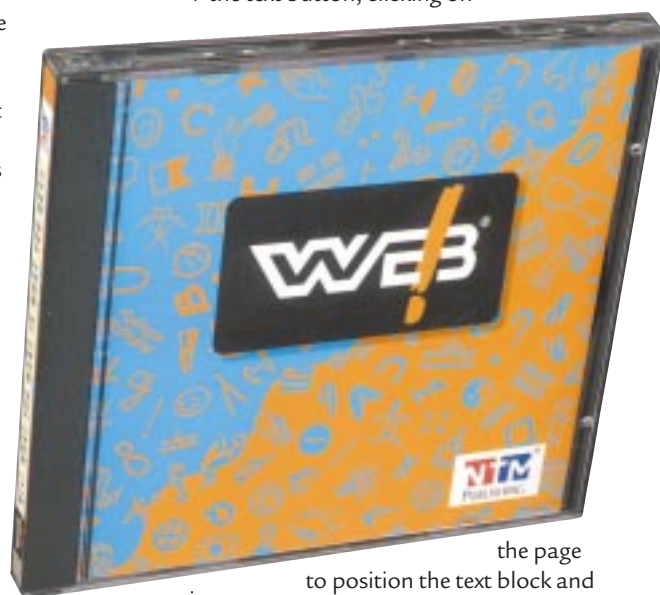
Of the three primary views, Normal, HTML and Preview, the Normal view is supplemented by a tags-on mode similar to that of HoTMetaL Pro 5. Hovering the mouse over one such tag reveals all attributes pertaining to that tag.

In testing FrontPage 2000, we could not help but feel that it exactly matched the needs of corporate users as defined in our outline above, indicating that while all of the products reviewed here could potentially be used by any web designer, the features of FrontPage 2000 make it particularly adept in more than one field.

Home users

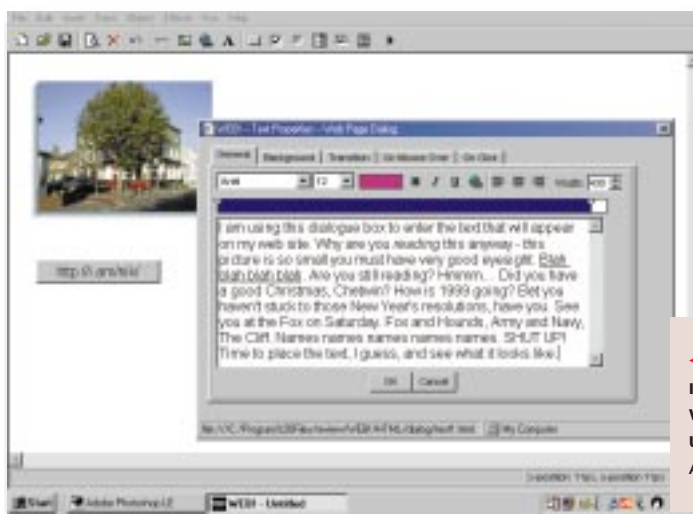
The majority of home users will be confining their design efforts to a personal or hobby-orientated web site.

Most will have had little or no experience of designing a site in the past and so may expect to be guided by the hand through the steps necessary to design and implement their creation. Bearing this in mind, any of the products reviewed in the above categories should suit their needs. However, anybody who has spent some amount of time using the internet will realise that many home users generate their site but then never update it. So, minimising the initial outlay and being able to create a professional impression with the minimum of fuss will be important considerations.



the page to position the text block and then entering the text in a dialogue box. Similar rules apply to all other page elements. While this allows items to be positioned with single pixel accuracy, it unfortunately also means that the

resulting HTML code becomes bloated and may be difficult to edit without referring it back to Web!



◀ **FORM-BASED INPUT MAKES WEB AUTHORIZING USING WEB! A BREEZE**

What's in a standard?

Not so long ago, all you needed to know about the web was that it used HTML. That's no longer the case. There's a large collection of standards: HTML, HTML 3.2, DHTML, CSS and XML are all things you'll hear bandied around. But what are they all, and why do they matter?

HTML is the foundation of the web as we know it today, and it's also responsible for many of the restrictions.

Because it's a markup language, it was only designed to say which parts of a document are paragraphs, lists, headings and so on. It's not intended to say 'use this font, in this size, and put the picture here on the page'. In the battle of the browsers that original distinction has been lost, but plenty of incompatibility has been introduced.

DHTML (Dynamic HTML) is a powerful way of making pages that can react when you click on different parts of them: moving different layers of information to the front, or revealing

menus, all without waiting for more data to download. You can even have scripts that will validate information on a form. The bad news is that you should avoid DHTML, at least for now: there are too many differences between the leading browsers so unless you want to write two versions of your site, stick

with other ways of enhancing the page.

If it's precise positioning, colour and formatting you want, **CSS (Cascading Style**

Sheets) is the tool to use. Just like style sheets in a word processor, these allow you to control the look of a document by changing the style definition in one place. Most modern browsers support CSS Level 1 to some degree, and Level 2 allows you to specify how a document should look on paper, or other

media, as well as on the screen.

The latest buzzword is **XML (Extensible Markup Language)**.

It's based on the same origins as HTML, the standard generalised markup language. With XML you can define how your documents look more easily than by using HTML. For instance, you can add your own tags and there are more flexible options for links. XML may not be popular yet, but in the future you'll find it gradually takes over as the choice for most new documents.

Right now, though, the best thing to do is to stick with plain HTML and avoid DHTML. If you want to use fonts and colours in your web pages, use CSS, but test it with different browsers.

NIGEL WHITFIELD

You should avoid DHTML, at least for now

► GO TO [HTTP://JIGSAW.W3.ORG/CSS-VALIDATOR/](http://jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator/) TO DOWNLOAD A CSS VALIDATOR



Is dropping a drag?

Modern web editing is easy, isn't it? Drag a picture and drop it on the page. Click at the side of the screen to create a new frame or press a button on the palette to add a form field. You really don't need to know what's happening underneath, do you?

Well, that's debatable. While drag-and-drop web editing can make it easy to put together a simple site, it's not always quite so straightforward when you want to add interaction to your pages. Of course, some programs provide 'web bots' and applets you can use, but they also sometimes neglect to tell you that the things you've added to your site will only work on certain servers.

There's no doubt that understanding the mechanics of HTML and scripting languages gives you more power and flexibility, just like the difference between speaking a language fluently or reading it from a phrase book.

Not everyone has the time to learn all the details, however, and as the web becomes more sophisticated, it will be easier to use components that other people have written to enhance your pages. Some editors, like HotMetaL, already support adding Java applets, for example. Microsoft's extensions to

DHTML in Explorer 5 provide ways in which the behaviour of web pages can be governed by small scripts, and it's likely that libraries of those will appear on the web, along with ActiveX plug-ins and Java applets that you can re-use, simply changing a few options to suit your own site.

While using those types of tool will make it easier to drag-and-drop your site

together, you'll still be at the mercy of those who created the components you use — and you'll have to trust that they only do what they say. And with so many variations between browsers at the moment, sometimes the only way to be

really sure you get the effect you want is to manually tweak the HTML.

One day, you really will be able to drag-and-drop

to build a web site that works with every browser. But until the different players — chiefly Netscape and Microsoft — decide to keep to the standards instead of tweaking them, you'll really need to know the ins and outs of HTML and scripts to make sure you can create the best web site, whatever someone's using to look at it.

NIGEL WHITFIELD

You'll really need to know the ins and outs of HTML and scripts

What else do you need?

A web-authoring package is a great starting point: it saves you from having to code your site 'by hand' and do battle with HTML tags. For all but the most basic of sites though, users will need a variety of supplementary items.

Web space is available free of charge from a variety of locations around the net.

Xoom at <http://xoom.com> and **Tripod** at www.tripod.co.uk

are more than willing to offer you varying quantities of space at no charge. But to avoid being used as an advertising billboard by the service providers, both corporates and home users would be advised to invest in an account with one of the many ISPs currently serving the UK.

For just £10 per month (ex VAT) Demon Internet bundles 15Mb of web space with its email accounts. Compared to the size of today's hard drives this may seem rather stingy, but in reality it is more space than most users will ever manage to fill, even with a fairly impressive corporate presence.

For the user on a budget, each AOL screen name includes 2Mb of complimentary web space. With up to five screen names to each account, opting for AOL's low-usage option can be a cost-effective way of nabbing

▼ **TROUBLE GETTING YOUR PAGES ON TO THE NET? TRY A SHAREWARE PACKAGE LIKE CuteFTP**

yourself a 10Mb presence. An image-editing package is also an essential piece of kit in the web author's toolbox.

A text-only site may have been perfectly acceptable several years ago when most users ran text-based browsers, but these days, as faster modems and greater compression ratios have slashed download times to a tenth of what they



◀ **BANISH LONG SITE ADDRESSES WITH A FREE, MEMORABLE URL FROM <http://i.am/>**

retain small file sizes. The plug-in is only an 118Kb download that can

automatically install directly from the Macromedia web site at www.macromedia.com, giving visitors to your site little excuse for not seeing it at its best.

To upload the completed pages to your web site you will

need FTP (file transfer protocol) software. While many authoring packages have FTP capabilities built-in, some do not. One of the most versatile FTP packages on the market is **WS-FTP** from Ipswitch. Currently at Version 6, a free trial version can be downloaded from its web site at www.ipswitch.com.

A shareware package such as **PaintShop Pro** (version 5 is on our cover CD) will suit most basic needs but for power users a dedicated package such as Macromedia's **Fireworks**, or ImageReady and ImageStyler from

Adobe, will be more suited to the task in hand. These packages specialise in minimising file sizes while simultaneously maintaining an acceptable level of image quality.

They do this by reducing the image resolution, or carving it into blocks so that higher compression ratios can be applied to those parts that will be able to handle it. At the same time, they

generate spectacular effects with the minimum of fuss, taking the hassle out of generating JavaScript rollovers (images that change as the mouse is passed across them) or animated GIF files.

Macromedia is also the manufacturer of the hugely successful **Flash** animation package. Whereas animated GIF files are made up of a series of still images overlaid on top of each other, Flash animations are based around

need FTP (file transfer protocol) software. While many authoring packages have FTP capabilities built-in, some do not. One of the most versatile FTP packages on the market is **WS-FTP** from Ipswitch. Currently at Version 6, a free trial version can be downloaded from its web site at www.ipswitch.com.

A suitable alternative comes in the form of **CuteFTP** shareware. Like WS-FTP, a trial download is available from the associated web site at

www.cuteftp.com and offers one-click uploading or downloading of your selected files.

Your pages are not going to go very far without a modem. The winner of our Editor's Choice accolade in the modem group test in the December '98 issue of PCW was the **Diamond SupraExpress 56ePro**, chosen on account of its price and the fact that, in these times when the market is still somewhat split between K56flex and V.90 technology, this modem has the capability to handle both.

We'll end our list of 'other tools' on a freebie — a memorable address. If you have a long and difficult-to-remember email address, then hop on over to <http://i.am/> and grab yourself something memorable for free along the lines of i.am/<yourname>.

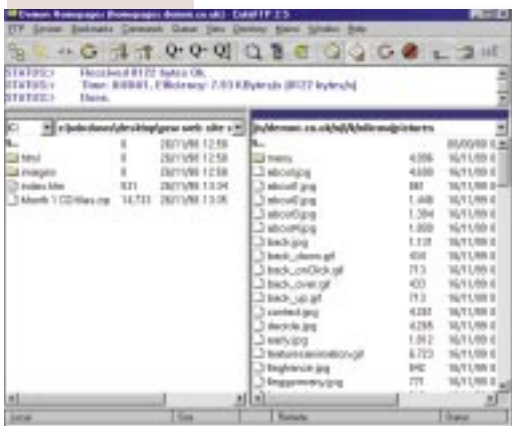


Table of features



PRODUCT	FRONTPAGE 2000 (BETA)	FUSION 3.0	HOME PAGE 3.0	HOME SITE 4.0
MANUFACTURER	MICROSOFT	NETOBJECTS	FILEMAKER	ALLAIRE
Price (ex VAT)	Not yet available	£233.83	£69.99	£88.13
Telephone	0345 002000	01189 829822	0845 603 9100	01638 569600
Web site	www.microsoft.com	www.netobjects.com	www.filemaker.co.uk	www.allaire.com
Frame creation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Form creation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Link verification	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cascading style sheets	✓	✓	X	✓
DHTML tools	✓	✓	X	✓
Database integration	✓	✓	✓	✓
MS Word import	✓	X	X	X
MS Excel import	✓	X	X	X
Integrated FTP	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bundled image software	✓	X	X	X
WYSIWYG interface	✓	✓	✓	✓
Link capture from browser	✓	X	X	X
Ratings				
Features	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★
Ease of Use	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Documentation	n/a	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★
Overall	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★

Table of features

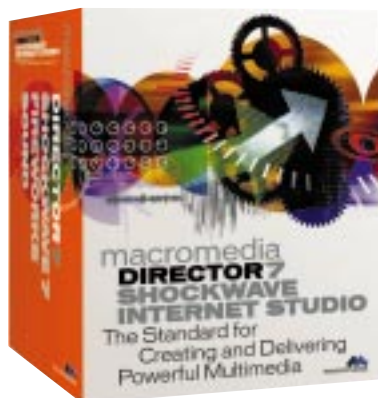


PRODUCT	HoTMETAL PRO 5.0	PAGEMILL 3.0	VISUAL PAGE	Web!
MANUFACTURER	SOFTQUAD	ADOBE	SYMANTEC	NTM PUBLISHING
Price (ex VAT)	£116.33	£92.83	£81.08	£29.99
Telephone	0181 387 4110	0181 606 4000	0171 616 5600	0113 234 0444
Web site	www.softquad.co.uk	www.adobe.co.uk	www.symantec.co.uk	www.baboonshop.com
Frame creation	✓	✓	✓	X
Form creation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Link verification	✓	✓	✓	X
Cascading style sheets	✓	X	X	✓
DHTML tools	✓	✓	X	✓
Database integration	✓	X	X	X
MS Word import	✓	✓	X	X
MS Excel import	✓	✓	X	X
Integrated FTP	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bundled image software	✓	✓	X	X
WYSIWYG interface	✓	✓	✓	✓
Link capture from browser	X	X	X	X
Ratings				
Features	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★
Ease of Use	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
Documentation	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Value for Money	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Overall	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★

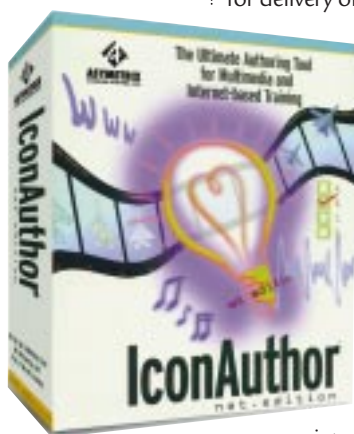
Multimedia authoring

You could be forgiven for thinking that with the rise of the web and the decline of CD-ROMs, multimedia authoring applications were a spent force. But while they have undergone a change in direction and are now more web-orientated, they still retain their original nature. They are able to produce feature-rich, fully-interactive programs no matter what the distribution medium. Here, we look at the four main contenders.

➔ **Macromedia Director** is the most widely known and used multimedia authoring tool for CD-ROMs. This major upgrade, Director 7 Shockwave



Internet Studio, has been redesigned to enable developers to build multimedia web sites. As its name implies, the playback applet Shockwave is part of the Internet Studio package and Macromedia has released version 7 to go with Director 7. Also bundled are Macromedia Fireworks for producing moving web graphics and Sonic Foundry's Sound Forge XP4 or BIAS Peak LE for sound editing. You also receive a multi-user server for creating distributed Shockwave applications such as multi-player games and online chat rooms. Director uses the movie analogy for creating multimedia, where events are placed in frames on a time-line. Sophisticated visual effects allow you to create TV-like presentations.



Director's HTML support includes links to all its media types (text, graphics, sound, video and animation), HTTP for media distribution, HTTPS for secure e-commerce transactions, XML for data exchange, CGI POST for two-way communication, and updated support for Java. You can also integrate and control other web technologies such as Flash, QuickTime 3, QTVR and animated GIFs.

Lingo, Director's scripting language, has been enhanced to control internet connectivity, vector shapes, alpha channels, scaling and rotation and now supports the dot-syntax — as found in JavaScript and Visual Basic.

➔ **Asymetrix ToolBook II Instructor** 6.5 is a leading light in CBT (computer-based training) applications and offers an integrated development environment. It is based on the page-book metaphor for creating general multimedia and online learning applications. It includes a full set of objects such as buttons, media players, text fields, hyperlinks, animations and ActiveX controls, as well as accessory programs for editing audio, icons, cursors, bitmaps, menus and colour palettes. There's a Palette Optimiser to eliminate palette shift. Also bundled is Asymetrix Digital Video Producer for capturing and editing video files.

Instructor uses an object-orientated (MS Visual Basic-like) scripting language, called OpenScript, which incorporates a debugger and the ability to link to Windows system functions.

You can export your applications to HTML with Java and/or ActiveX support for web delivery, or to ToolBook II format for delivery on any Windows platform with the royalty-free runtime. The new version has improved HTML export, including pixel-perfect object positioning and object overlapping. There are new objects to add RealMedia, Windows Media and PowerPoint files to your applications, and a new video synchroniser catalogue object allows you to display text that is associated with a frame in a video file.

➔ **IconAuthor Net Edition** is another major player in the CBT market. It is an icon-based development tool for creating training applications to be delivered on CD-ROM, intranets and the internet. The emphasis on online



distribution is obvious, especially with the inclusion of Asymetrix Librarian for managing online courses with IconAuthor applications.

IconAuthor combines page layout and a simple but powerful flowchart assembly environment to create the flow of your application. More importantly, there is no programming language to learn. IconAuthor's Universal Media Access technology separates application

PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

Macromedia Director 7 Shockwave Internet Studio

Price £938.83 (£799 ex VAT)

Contact Computers Unlimited
0181 358 5857 www.macromedia.com

★★★★★

Asymetrix Toolbook II Instructor 6.5

Price £2,291.25 (£1,950 ex VAT)

Contact Asymetrix Learning Systems
0171 345 1500 www.asymetrix.com

★★★★★

IconAuthor Net Edition (7.6 for Windows, 7.1 for Unix)

Price £2,344.13 (£1,995 ex VAT)

Contact Asymetrix Learning Systems
0171 345 1500 www.asymetrix.com

★★★★★

Macromedia Authorware 5 Attain

Price £2,643.75 (£2,250 ex VAT)

Contact Computers Unlimited
0181 358 5857 www.macromedia.com

content from logic to enable easy updates, and gives you the ability to create hybrid applications delivered via a combination of CD-ROM and the internet or intranets. The new version supports both ActiveMovie and Lotus ScreenCam — useful if you are training personnel how to use new computer software and if you are developing electronic performance support software.

If you require advanced database capabilities using the power of SQL, IconAuthor's database object supports this. You can access other external data, too, using the ODBC (Open Data-Base Connectivity) standard. If you need to build or run your applications on multiple platforms, IconAuthor supports most: Windows 3.x, Windows 95/98, Windows NT and Unix.



➔ **Authorware 5 Attain** forms part of Macromedia's Attain Enterprise Learning System of integrated, open, scalable tools for creating online learning applications to be deployed across the web, local area networks and CD-ROMs. It uses flowlines and icons to enable you to create your applications. You drag icons, which represent screen elements and other components of the application, to the flowline to create the outline of your application. Then you use menus to add content and interactivity. You can add

hyperlinks, hypertext, full text search and retrieval and there are 11 different built-in interactions. One of the product's new features is advanced compression and streaming for delivery over the internet, so rich-media courseware can even be delivered economically to users with dial-in connections. Another is Knowledge Track, which automatically captures student progress and performance and seamlessly integrates your training with the Attain Enterprise Learning System.

Content developed with Authorware Attain can be embedded in web pages created with Dreamweaver Attain, Macromedia's visual HTML authoring tool for web learning. For internet audio, Authorware bundles the Voxware audio streaming codec and the Real Networks server. Authorware is simple to use. Wizards let you develop applications easily and you can drag-and-drop from a gallery of pre-built learning interactions to add logins, quizzes and so on.

Other useful packages

In addition to the big players, there are a number of other packages that are nevertheless worth investigation and consideration.

➔ **Quark Immedia** lets you add multimedia to existing static documents created in Quark XPress, the publishing package used by most newspapers and magazines, for delivery on CD-ROM, intranets or the internet. The development product is Mac only but there is a player for Mac and Windows. The familiar Quark tools work as usual except that any object you create can be given multimedia properties. You can also script sequences of events.

➔ **Matchware Medi8tor 4.0 Pro** is an entry-level package, so there is no programming language to learn but there are functions for manipulating text, numbers and logic so that some sophistication can be built-in. Applications are built by using objects and adding actions to them. One of Medi8tor's highlights is the ability to animate video objects while they are running and add transparency to them.

➔ **Scala Multimedia MM200** puts its emphasis on TV-like visual effects and so has lots of features such as transitions and video titling. Uniquely, the program can run at a 320x200 screen resolution which is useful for preparing material to output to video. It is good for business presentations, is easy to use, and includes a simple scripting language.

➔ **Illuminatus 4** is cheap, easy to use and comes with a wide collection of clip media. To create an application you can just import prepared material into pre-drawn screen layouts. You can also use it to create screensavers and HTML pages.

➔ **Dazzler 4.1** is similar to IconAuthor and Authorware and is powerful enough to be a competitive, cheaper alternative. It uses flow diagrams and objects to create applications. Essentially, you drag objects from a toolbar onto a worksheet and create a tree-type structure for your application. Then you specify details for each object, such as which sound or video file should be played. Dazzler applications can be run on the web using a supplied Java player.

PCW DETAILS

Quark Immedia

Price £828.38 (£705 ex VAT)

Contact Quark 01483 454397

www.quark.com

Matchware Medi8tor 4.0 Pro

Price £223.25 (£190 ex VAT)

Contact Bit UK 01420 83811

www.mwin.com

Scala Multimedia MM200

Price £233.83 (£199 ex VAT)

Contact Scala 01932 862214

www.asymetrix.com

Illuminatus 4

Price £116.33 (£99 ex VAT)

Contact Digital Workshop 01295 258335

www.digitalworkshop.co.uk

Dazzler 4.1

Price £229.13 (£195 ex VAT).

Deluxe version £934.13 (£795 ex VAT)

Contact Intel Media 01372 363717

www.dazzlersoft.com

Editor's Choice

Although we have divided the eight web authoring packages reviewed here into three distinct categories, defined by the primary user of each piece of software, it should be remembered that each package will more than likely suit all users.

Although some do not include the database integration functions found in others, it is only a small proportion of large corporate users who will actually use this facility. Indeed, when examining a number of sites on the net, one is struck by the fact that there are very few sites which could not be put together by even the most rudimentary package.

Web authoring

A home user should certainly not be discouraged from selecting a package from the small or large business sections. Likewise, users with a leased line and dedicated web server should not shy away from those packages making an appearance in our 'small business' category. As we have seen in the case of FrontPage 2000 in particular, many of these packages include all of the functionality such users would need.

It is unfortunate that some of the most useful functions of many of these packages are not universal. Symantec Visual Page, for instance, has unrivalled table-handling functions, allowing the user to select multiple cells using the mouse and format the contents independently of the remainder of the table. Adobe PageMill, on the other

hand, far outperforms its rivals in handling frames and is bundled with the excellent PhotoShop LE. Users may find that combining two or more packages will best suit their needs, even if that is an uneconomic and sometimes frustrating experience.

The first of two products which

are **Highly Commended** is Allaire's **HomeSite**.

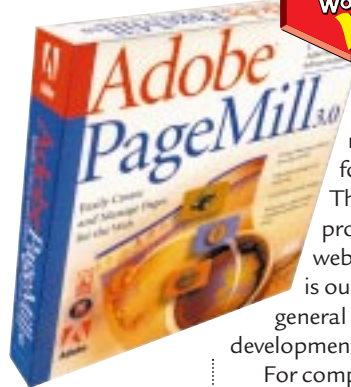
Now at version 4, it retains its major strength, that of a WYSIWYN (N standing for need) interface of colour-coded HTML tags, while still incorporating the drag-and-drop functionality of a more graphically orientated product. Also **Highly Commended** is NetObjects' **Fusion 3**. Its logical interface enables any novice to create a presence, in a matter of minutes, of which they may be proud. It's fast, too. Any changes applied are done so on a global basis almost instantaneously. The toolbar is context sensitive, minimising the number of irrelevant functions on display. This perhaps explains why Fusion, found here in our 'small business' category, is the number one choice of so many large corporations.

Before presenting our final award, we tip our hats for an honourable mention to **FrontPage 2000**. FrontPage 98 was an impressive product and the changes made to the beta version of its latest incarnation have certainly paid off. Watch out for it in the shops when it hits the shelves in the second quarter of this year.

Adobe PageMill 3 walks away with our **Editor's Choice** accolade. The strength of this product is in its simplicity. First-time users will spend next to no time getting to grips with the interface and will probably fail to realise that the thought which has gone into its creation allows them to perform technically complex functions that would take several lines of tags to replicate if coding by hand.

Multimedia authoring

Since the acquisition of Aimtech, which produced IconAuthor, by Asymetrix and its decision to concentrate on online learning software, the price of Asymetrix Toolbook has doubled. This leaves



dropped in the last year, as the only contender for high-end multimedia applications for delivery on CD-ROM. The new version extends the program's capabilities to the web. **Macromedia Director** is our **Editor's Choice** for general multimedia application development.

For computer-based training applications, although IconAuthor and Authorware attempt to make development easier through the use of flowchart assembly methods, the best product is still **Toolbook II Instructor** and is therefore **Highly Commended**. It has a wide user-base in educational establishments, as well as third-party support products, and it is very powerful. In addition, it belongs to a family of products which include Toolbook Assistant and Toolbook Librarian, which are designed as a whole to cater for a complete training solution.

PCW CONTACTS

For product ratings, prices and other details see our table of features on page 202.

FrontPage 2000

Microsoft 0345 002000

www.microsoft.com

Fusion 3.0

NetObjects 01189 829822

www.netobjects.com

HomePage 3.0

FileMaker 0845 603 9100

www.filemaker.co.uk

HomeSite 4.0

Allaire 01638 569600

www.allaire.com

HoTMetaL PRO 5.0

SoftQuad 0181 387 4110

www.softquad.co.uk

PageMill 3.0

Adobe 0181 606 4000

www.adobe.co.uk

VisualPage

Symantec 0171 616 5600

www.symantec.co.uk

Web!

NTM Publishing 0113 234 0444

www.baboonshop.com

