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Dreamweaver 2 satisfies design, management

By: Sean Wagstaff
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By **Sean Wagstaff**

With Version 2.0, Macromedia Dreamweaver has evolved into a capable and innovative cross-platform Web design tool. Although the \$300 (street price) product could dig a little deeper in a few areas, it's a smart investment for Web site builders.

Dreamweaver 2 lets Web site designers design and contributors contribute, without one group hampering the efforts of the other. This collaborative process starts with support for tracing layers. For example, a Web site builder can import a bit-map image created by a graphic artist to use as a background, and duplicate it with foreground HTML content. The background image appears only in Dreamweaver, not in the finished HTML pages. Furthermore, a Web site builder can use DHTML layers to design and position HTML content -- almost as if working with a tool such as Adobe Photoshop -- and with the click of a button can convert these layers to tables compatible with early browsers. This approach is comparable to GoLive CyberStudio's design grids, but is more dynamic.

Despite Dreamweaver 2's excellent design features, you can't preview a page's functionality within the program. Even though it supports Netscape Navigator plug-ins for previewing media files, you have to preview entire live pages in a browser, which can quickly result in a cluttered and confusing desktop.

A new and compelling feature not found in most Web design tools is page templates, which define the visual structure and content elements of a page. Because content can be marked as editable or not editable, a banner element, for instance, can be locked by the original page designer, while contributors are free to change the content in editable fields. If a designer changes an element in a template, the changes also become sitewide.



Finally, here is a Web design tool that lets you work with tables the way you do in Microsoft Excel. Dreamweaver 2 lets you cut, copy and paste rows and columns of tables, and define type, color and background image characteristics for rows and columns. You can also apply predesigned table formats and perform sophisticated sorts of table elements.

Dreamweaver 2 has extensive support for the cascading style sheets of Version 4.0 browsers, and you can also convert a cascading style sheet layout to Version 3.0-compatible HTML. It's easy to set up, modify and apply styles to page elements. You can also apply styles to page templates, which greatly speeds wide-scale modifications to a Web site. Dreamweaver 2 lets you quickly set up DHTML animations and incorporate and control Macromedia Shockwave for Flash and Director animations. However, helpful automated configuration for some deserving formats, such as Apple QuickTime 3, is omitted.

Although JavaScript and Microsoft VBScript support is good, and making rollover buttons is easy, Dreamweaver 2 ships with a relatively small number of ready-to-use JavaScript components. Other applications, such as NetObjects Fusion, offer a larger library of components.

Dreamweaver 2's new site map resembles those in other Web authoring environments, such as CyberStudio and Microsoft FrontPage. Dragging files into the map and from one position to another changes the structure of the site.

The application's collaborative authoring uses a simple checkout system that locks files on a server when a user checks them out. This feature, combined with the template support, handily prevents version conflicts. But because it lacks edit markup, version tracking and other features commonly found in workgroup design applications, it's only a partial solution.

One major improvement in this release is the extensive search-and-replace engine that offers searches in text only, in HTML source code or in text within tags, using a comprehensive selection of limiters, variables and grep-style (regular) expressions. Regular expression searches let you limit a search based on flexible wild-card information.

Dreamweaver 2 ships with support for Active Server Pages, Allaire's Cold Fusion, EveryWare Development's Tango, Icat's e-commerce software and other third-party Web data tools, and is readily extended to support others. Round-trip HTML lets you bring page data in from existing sites as well as edit Dreamweaver 2 pages in other editors. To facilitate HTML tweakery, the Macintosh version of Dreamweaver 2 is supplied with Bare Bones Software's BBEedit 5.0, while the Windows version comes with Allaire's HomeSite 4.0. Round-trip XML, meanwhile, automatically parses XML formats, which will become increasingly important as Web sites become more data-driven.

Dreamweaver 2 is a compelling upgrade to an impressive first edition. As a Web design tool, it is flexible and powerful; as a site management tool, it combines the most useful organizational features. While a number of details -- page preview and collaborative authoring, in particular -- need further attention, Dreamweaver 2 is a very good design system.

Mac -- Win 95 and 98 -- Win NT

HITS Strong design interface; useful tracing and DHTML layers; round-trip HTML capability; Shockwave integration; database support; search-and-replace features; extensibility.

MISSES Unsophisticated collaborative management; full, live preview in browsers only; no QuickTime 3 controls; limited JavaScript library.

\$300 street price*

Macromedia Inc. of San Francisco is at (415) 252-2000 or (800) 457-1774; www.macromedia.com.

*Upgrades from Version 1.2 or earlier, \$129; electronic upgrades, \$99. Upgrade does not include BBEdit 5.0 or HomeSite 4.0. Digital handyman **Sean Wagstaff** is author of the just-released "Animation on the Web" from Peachpit Press.

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