

Dreams do come true

Web Design Macromedia Dreamweaver MX

by Simon Conlin

Back in 1997, Macromedia Dreamweaver was one of the first professional applications to offer both visual and code-based control through HTML pages. Now, almost 2.5 million users and six years later, Dreamweaver is as established for high-end web authoring as Photoshop is for professional photo editing.

So what's different about the new MX version of Dreamweaver?

THE INTERFACE

Those who were accustomed to the Windows version of Dreamweaver 4 (like me) or are new to the program will find a revamped look that's quite intuitive to use. The PC version now offers a choice as to how it displays the interface. In General Preferences, you can select the interface you want, whether it be the same as that in v4 or the new series of tabbed palettes that dock. This is a superior option because it lets you design the interface and workspace to accommodate your personal workstyle. Palettes can be widened by clicking and dragging the divider bars.

Another nice palette feature is the collapse button—just press it and they all slide away. Click the button again and the palettes slide smoothly right out again. Each individual palette can also be “rolled up”. And when a palette is rolled up, all you see is the palette's title bar.

However, none of this will be news to Mac users since the Windows MX interface now simply copies v4 for Mac.

IMPROVED SITE WINDOW

In Dreamweaver 3 and 4, the site window was separate, and unless you had two monitors the exercise of flipping between the site window and the document on which you were working was exasperating. However, in MX it is now a palette on the side

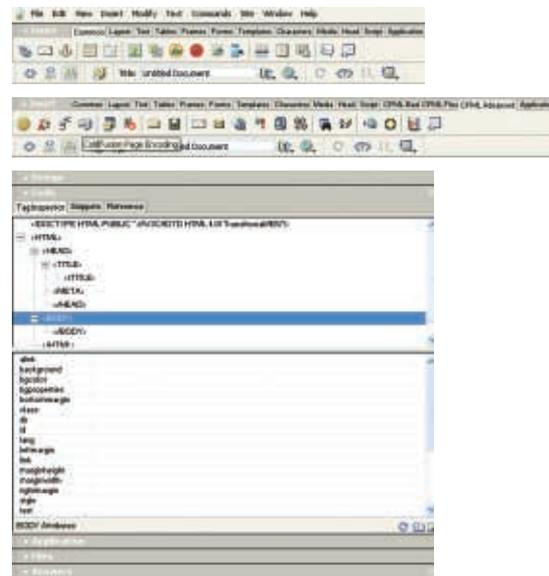
of the screen which is docked, locked and equipped to go. While this feature has some benefits, the time formerly spent moving palettes is now replaced by dragging scroll bars, since you often end up with a longer list of files than your monitor can display.

If numerous files are open, they no longer display like separate applications on the Windows taskbar as they would in DW 3 or 4. Now they are all contained in the main window and accessed through tabs at the bottom of the screen. Keeping preferred programs open and within clicking distance via the taskbar makes for a much tidier workspace.

Other interface changes include the new tabbed Insert toolbar, integrated file browsing and the revamped context-sensitive Properties Inspector. The Property and tool bar (insert palette) are not docked on the side of the screen. You have the option of docking them at the top or bottom and, similar to the other palettes, these can be expanded or rolled up so you only see the title bar.

The insert palette is a huge improvement. The old dropdown menu for selecting various categories of tools (table, frames, head, etc.) has been transformed into a tabbed palette, providing you with one-click access. This is an excellent start, but as with many program interfaces, one wonders if designers ever used them. An example of this is the ability to create Tables one Cell at a time using the Insert Cell icon found under the Layout Tab. Icons for inserting Tables and Cells are also located here, and these two icons are found as well under the Common Objects tab. For some reason, however, the Insert Cell icon is not included under that tab, and from my perspective, it should be.

If you're planning to create a dynamic site that hooks up to a MySQL or Microsoft Access database, you'll find a host of features in the new version that make this simple to do. These tools are easy to utilize if you understand the concepts, but novice users will be just as confused as



Dreamweaver MX's main menu and submenus will be a pleasant change for Windows users but familiar to those on a Mac.

they would be if faced with creating their own code to create the same functions. This wouldn't be an issue if not for the fact that this new interface was created to entice the novice into using it.

Sadly, one of version 4's better features has been dropped completely from the MX version, namely the “Site Map”. The Site Map gave you a graphic representation of the navigation within your site that was created using the Dreamweaver interface. This one tool, if properly understood, gave designers a great way for ensuring that the navigation within the site was as “clean” as possible. Now it's gone—a very disappointing decision.

But Dreamweaver's new improved FTP interface is unquestionably a step up from v4. Upload to either a test server or a live server through the site window via the built-in FTP client, and you can use a Secure Shell (SSH) program to provide secure authentication and send FTP commands and files to the server through the SSH tunnel, encrypting usernames, passwords and all data.

BETTER ACCESS TO CODE

Dreamweaver has always encouraged direct code editing, and in MX this focus continues. One of the best productivity

boosters is the View menu option that allows both Code and Design Views to be open simultaneously. If you want to see how a tag is applied to a paragraph, selecting it makes the paragraph's code appear in the Code View window above the page. From a site management and file accessibility point of view, local files or remote files can be displayed by making a selection from a dropdown menu. There's also an option that lets users see both at the same time (you need to widen the palette to make this useful). If you wish, you can revert back to the separate window.

For those who have a more advanced understanding of web technologies or prefer to write their own code, Dreamweaver MX incorporates many of the advanced features previously found only in UltraDev and HomeSite. HomeSite aficionados will be pleased to hear that HomeSite+ is included in the MX version. Essentially Dreamweaver MX combines Dreamweaver and UltraDev into one complete prod-

uct for high-end web application developers who produce and maintain enterprise-level data-driven sites with ASP and JS Structuring.

Creating dynamic web pages using Macromedia's Coldfusion technology has been made easier using MX's powerful site management tools, and new support for PHP and MySQL is an addition that was long overdue.

SNIPPETS, CODE HINTING AND CSS

Dreamweaver now makes it relatively uncomplicated for novice users to advance from generating static HTML to constructing server-generated dynamic pages. Unfortunately, the Site Setup Wizard is largely a waste of time—and I found it rather curious that the new "Advanced" wizard panel is exactly the same as v4.

On the other hand, the new Snippets panel for storing common pieces of code and reference material is quite useful. It eliminates hunting through hundreds of

HTML files on your drive, searching for the one that contains a small bit of frequently used HTML code. It's true that Dreamweaver's Library feature could have been used to hold Snippets, but that isn't its intended purpose. Dreamweaver MX provides the ideal solution: store all these minuscule bits of code, and customize categories that make sense for you; then, when you need a particular snippet, choose your insertion point in the code or document, select the snippet you want, and click the insert button on the bottom of the snippets panel.

Another helpful new source editing feature is Code Hinting, which automatically displays suitable selections while you type or edit in code view. Developers can now dramatically increase the speed of writing code, with access to customized menus showing appropriate tag attributes, method properties, function parameters, and CSS styles.

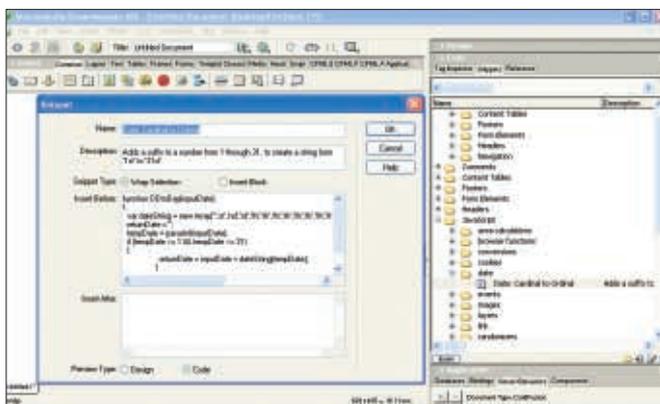
Speaking of CSS styles, Dreamweaver now has enhanced CSS Support, including Top Style Integration, enabling the construction of sites that are compliant with the latest CSS standards and with improved CSS rendering and design. The Dreamweaver CSS panel displays internally and externally defined styles and allows for design-time only style sheets. Couple that with the CSS tab on the Design Palette and the ability to link or embed externally created CSS files through the Property Inspector, and a complete CSS editing system is at your fingertips.

INSPECT IT ALL, TAGS OR TEXT

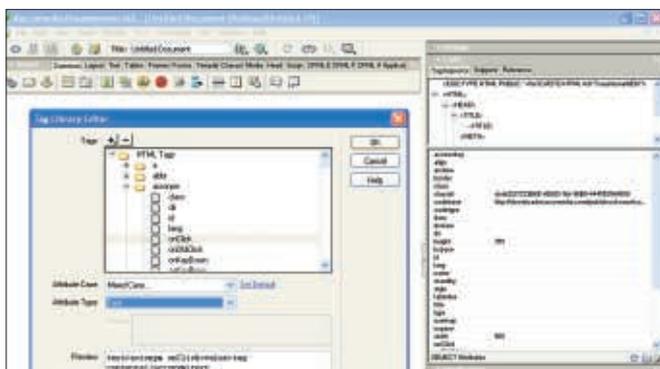
The Tag Inspector also warrants highlighting. Inspired by HomeSite, tag-based web authoring is expanded by the ability to view an editable list of all tags and their attributes in the current document and a Tag Chooser and Tag Editor to help you add new ones.

The Tag Inspector palette shows two things. First, it delineates an outline of the document tags or tree. From that point you can click on a tag and view a list of all the accessible properties for that individual tag, allowing settings to be entered for those properties. Second, it allows you to see the structure of pages rapidly and effortlessly and makes it very easy to identify inappropriate tag nesting and parent relationships and alter or fix them without having to edit the raw source code.

In addition, Dreamweaver MX includes an integrated tag database for accumulating information on native and custom tags. The Tag Library Editor lets authors easily edit the properties of existing tags or introduce new ones. The Tag Chooser, which shows the structure of all tags available to Dreamweaver, includes custom tags imported through the Tag Library Editor. The new ability to quickly position and locate edit tags in their rele-



Frequently used bits of HTML can now be stored in Dreamweaver's new Snippets panel.



The Tag inspector palette displays the documents tags or tree as well as allowing page structure to be viewed easily and quickly.

vant pages and see help content on individual tags is a big improvement.

The text Property Inspector feature also includes a new CSS-only mode for developers who want to work exclusively with a document's available CSS styles, eliminating inadvertent insertion of rogue font tags. This allows users to quickly define styles and classes, edit classes, apply classes and externally link or embed CSS styles sheets into the open document.



MACROMEDIA DREAMWEAVER MX

System requirements

Macintosh

Power Mac G3 or better
 Mac OS 9.1 or higher, Mac OS X.1 or higher
 Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher
 96MB RAM (128MB recommended)
 275MB available disk space
 Minimum 800x600 resolution (1024x768, millions of colors recommended, thousands of colors required for OS X)

Windows

300MHz or more Intel Pentium II processor or equivalent
 Windows 98, 2000, NT, ME or XP
 Minimum 800x600 resolution (1024x768, millions of colors recommended)

Pricing

US\$399 [~CDN\$599]
 (US\$899 for complete Studio MX package including Dreamweaver, Fireworks, Contribute, FreeHand, Flash, Coldfusion Developer Edition)

Macromedia

Web www.macromedia.com

STICKING TO STANDARDS

With Dreamweaver's Code Validation Report you can evaluate your pages against specific browser profiles or standard versions, including XHTML, transitional and HTML 4.0. Dreamweaver also supports all major server-scripting technologies. Not only has support been added for ASP and JSP, but also for PHP, ASP.NET and ColdFusion. Users of PHP, ASP.NET or JSP can also take advantage of new XML-based Web services. With the Components panel, this becomes a straightforward task of drag, drop and customize.

The Site Setup Wizard for ColdFusion MX can automatically configure a ColdFusion site using a locally installed ColdFusion MX Developer Edition. The steps are laid out in the Application palette, making it simple even for first time users.

The Customizable Tag Database is another welcome feature—it provides the opportunity to store information about the structure of available tags in an XML-based tag database. This allows Code Hints, Tag Chooser and Tree View to work with both native and custom imported tags, including Tag Editors for HTML, CFML, and ASP.NET. No more copy-and-paste into a notepad, only to lose all the formatting. With Source Code Printing you can print your source code from code view and it maintains the formatting.

One caution: DWMX demands a substantial amount of memory, so if you're not using a high performance machine, you may see a noticeable lag when the application initially loads.

WHAT I LIKE MOST

I'm big on Flash MX, and the integration between Dreamweaver MX and Flash MX is very smooth. Dreamweaver's Flash MX ActionScript Support provides support for ActionScript editing, including color-coding and code hints.

Fireworks MX graphics placed on a Dreamweaver page are one click away from editing in Fireworks, and vice versa. Graphic placeholders, another unsung feature, let you add a placeholder to a Dream-

weaver page, click it, launch Fireworks MX, and create the graphic. Click the 'Done' button and the graphic is on the page when you return to Dreamweaver.

Other new features and improvements include the new Document toolbar that allows quick access to commonly used file open, save, new and clipboard commands. And it is now completely customizable using XML and JavaScript.

Enhanced Dreamweaver Templates make it simpler to set up sophisticated rules for contributors to input content without compromising the site design. Customized layout control through template inheritance and editable regions gives contributors a great deal more flexibility. And the application ships with an extensive collection of templates (or you can create your own).

EXTENSIBILITY

Although Macromedia has done an excellent job of anticipating what users need, there's no way to please everyone. The solution to this fact of life is Extensions—plug-ins which extend the application's functionality in a variety of ways.

For example, there's a Calendar Extension that allows you to add monthly calendars to your pages. Another, the Wire Framing Extension, allows you to quickly mock-up the page. These are all available through the Macromedia website.

Dreamweaver has become the standard for what-you-see-is-what-you-get (almost) web design, although I would have been happier if Macromedia hadn't tried so hard to satisfy the needs of both the novice and the pro in one version of the program. Nevertheless, Dreamweaver's interface is impressive. With UltraDev and HomeSite integrated, the application's power finally matches its ease of use, which is why—despite its minor flaws—I'm giving this upgrade full marks. 🍌

Originally hailing from the UK, Simon Conlin is now ambassador and executive director of Flash-inTO, Canada's largest Macromedia user group. He can be contacted at simon@flashinto.com.