DREAMWEAVER 8: PRODUCT REVIEW

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Abstract

This document is a product review of the Macromedia Dreamweaver 8 computer application for HTML Web page design. It discusses Dreamweaver’s competitors, main features, ease of use, learning curve, price, and hardware and software requirements. It provides a recommendation as to Dreamweaver’s appropriateness for specific user groups.
Dreamweaver 8: Product Review

Macromedia's Dreamweaver 8 is a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editor for creating Web pages. With support for the latest Web technologies, such as PHP and XML, Dreamweaver is intended for professional designers. Dreamweaver is available for Mac OS X and Microsoft Windows 2000/XP.

Competitors

Dreamweaver's commercial competitors include Microsoft FrontPage and Adobe GoLive. Freeware and shareware WYSIWYG editors are also available, including Namo Web Editor and NVu.

Main Features

The main feature of any WYSIWYG editor is the ability to create Web pages with a minimal amount of manual HTML coding. Dreamweaver manages this with an easy-to-use drag-and-drop interface for adding objects, such as text and images, to a page. Dreamweaver generates all of the background code needed for standard HTML documents, CSS style sheets, frameset pages and even XML-enabled pages. According to one reviewer, this is one of the main selling points for this product. "CSS and XML are at the core of the new generation of Web design. Dreamweaver 8's inclusion of important new tools for CSS page design and XML embedding and styling makes the application worth buying" (Karlins, “Worth It” section, para. 1, 2005).

Dreamweaver allows for seamless integration with other Macromedia products, including Flash Professional 8 and Fireworks 8. This integration allows Web designers to easily add multimedia content to their pages.
Since manual HTML coding is sometimes necessary to achieve a desired effect on a Web page, Dreamweaver lets the user have a design window and a source code window open at the same time. A change made in either window instantly alters to other window to match. The code generated by Dreamweaver can conform to loose, transitional or strict XHTML 1.0, according to the user's preference.

For reviewing a page before publication to the Web, Dreamweaver has a built-in validation tool to check for compliance with World Wide Web Consortium standards. It also has a tool for checking a page's compatibility with various Web browsers, saving the user from having to manually verify the page's appearance on different browser platforms. "Using the new Rendering Toolbar you can now swap between seeing how a page will look onscreen, on a handheld, or in print. Most useful of all, you can see how the page will render if the display device doesn’t support CSS" (Arah, para. 3, 2005).

Dreamweaver also allows the application of different CSS stylesheets to a page to support different hardware platforms. "New support for media types lets you add styles aimed at specific devices—for example a stylesheet that only applies when a Web page is printed, and another when the page is displayed on a computer" (McFarland, “Expanded CSS Support” section, para. 3, 2005).

When the user is ready to publish a site to the World Wide Web, Dreamweaver provides a background FTP function that allows a user to continue working while Web site files are uploaded to the server. Dreamweaver can even be set to transfer all of the dependent files for a site, including all Web pages and associated media files, with a single click of the mouse.
Ease of Use

With all of these features, is Dreamweaver 8 easy to use?

The help section is extensive and well organized, and includes links to additional help references online. These resources are a great aid when exploring Dreamweaver's myriad features.

Design is speeded by Dreamweaver's intuitive grouping of related tools and properties. Once an object is selected, all of its properties can be modified from one location.

Using drag-and-drop to add objects to a page is easy. Dreamweaver has a tabbed window that allows easy browsing of both files on the hard drive and assets that have already been used in a Web site, keeping images and other objects close at hand. The asset list makes it simpler to re-use objects for consistency across a site. This facility for object placement extends to multimedia as well: "Dreamweaver even allows for drag-and-drop placement of Flash 7 Video (FLV) files—it’s brilliant in its simplicity and reliability" (Moody, para. 2, 2005).

Dreamweaver's GUI is customizable to meet each user's preferences. As the author of *Dreamweaver for the Complete Idiot* writes, "you can save an arrangement of panels as a 'Workspace layout.' In this way, you can save groups of panels to accommodate different workflows. For example, you could create one layout of panels for working on database-driven Web pages, a different layout for design-intensive, CSS-heavy pages, and switch between them as you work on different types of Web pages" (McFarland, “Improved Workflow” section, para. 2, 2005).

Another time-saver is Dreamweaver's CSS properties panel, which clearly shows the CSS rules in effect on a given selection. This simplifies the design process when CSS styles overlap in a document. "Since the rules governing how multiple CSS styles combine to format a Web
page are complex and confusing, this feature will quickly become an indispensable tool for any Web designer charged with the task of troubleshooting complex CSS-based designs" (McFarland, “Expanded CSS Support” section, para. 5, 2005).

Learning Curve

Dreamweaver's learning curve is gentle for creating simple pages, but steep when learning to use its advanced features. With the included tutorials and easily customizable starter templates, new users can create good-looking pages very quickly.

The beginning tutorials walk the user through opening and saving files, creating a table-formatted Web page, adding text and images to a page, formatting with Cascading Style Sheet rules, and uploading a Web page to the Internet.

Later tutorials, such as those for XML, might be difficult for users who are not already familiar with advanced Web technologies. Dreamweaver's extensive support for these technologies can affect a new users' ability to learn the application. As one reviewer points out, "...the biggest drawback to Dreamweaver 8 is that it is so complex that amateur Web designers will find it overwhelming. There is a lot to learn and use in Dreamweaver 8 and unless you're willing to take the time, it can be a steep learning curve" (Kyrnin, “Guide Review” section, para. 1 2005). This opinion is not uncommon: "Dreamweaver’s complexity is both its greatest asset and its greatest drawback, as its deep feature set makes it a challenging app to learn. You could argue that Dreamweaver looks more like a professional programmer’s tool, with its army of viewing modes, tabbed palettes, and property grids" (Moody, para. 5, 2005).

Dreamweaver's no-nonsense GUI can definitely be intimidating for beginners. It has been noted that "Macromedia’s insistence on removing button labels in Dreamweaver’s interface slows workflow and makes it more difficult for novice users to quickly get up to speed" (Moody,
With so many tools and features available, new users may find themselves spending as much time looking for the tools they want as they do learning how to use them.

Recommendations

Whether Macromedia's Dreamweaver 8 is right for you depends on how much you know about creating Web pages and what kind of Web pages you need to make.

Dreamweaver is a powerful, full-featured WYSIWYG HTML editor. For professional Web designers and for those whose Web pages incorporate the latest multimedia and dynamic data access technologies, Dreamweaver is the obvious choice. Compared to its closest commercial competitors, Dreamweaver has the edge with its streamlined multimedia integration and its ability to produce "good clean HTML code without a lot of extraneous tags and special codes" (Kyrnin, “Guide Review” section, para. 2, 2005).

The simple fact is that Dreamweaver's impressive market share and industry acceptance make it the gold standard in Web design. "With over 3.5 million users, Dreamweaver dominates the world of professional Web authoring in much the same way that Photoshop dominates photo-editing. It has achieved this commanding position by combining a WYSIWYG design environment with unbeatable hands-on coding power and by focusing throughout on workflow-based efficiency. It is these same three core areas – visual design, coding and productivity - that are targeted in this latest release" (Arah, para. 1, 2005).

Dreamweaver's high retail cost and steep learning curve make it less attractive for home users and for small businesses without dedicated Web development staff. These users should consider Microsoft FrontPage or one of the free HTML editors currently available. Although these products may some of lack Macromedia's advanced functionality and ability to manipulate HTML code, most beginners will find them sufficient for their needs.
Price

The standalone version of Dreamweaver 8 retails for $399. It is also available as part of Macromedia's $999 Studio 8 bundle, a full-featured Web development suite. Existing users of Dreamweaver and Studio can upgrade to the latest versions for $199 and $799, respectively (Macromedia Pricing, 2006).

Hardware and Software Requirements

For Windows 2000 or XP, Dreamweaver requires at least an 800 MHz Pentium III processor and 650 MB of available hard drive space. For Apple OS X, Dreamweaver requires at least a 600 MHz PowerPC G3 processor and 300 MB of available hard drive space. Both versions require 256 MB of RAM and a display adapter capable of at least 1024x768 resolution. Users running more than one Studio 8 application at a time will need 1 GB of RAM (Macromedia Requirements, 2006).
References


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