Plugged*In*

Publishing on the Web

A new generation of programs simplifies difficult process of creating sites / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

UNTIL RECENTLY, creating sites on the World Wide Web required knowledge of the somewhat arcane computer language called Hyper-Text Markup Language, or HTML. But that's changing, thanks to a new generation of programs that can make writing HTML files as easy as using a word processor.

Adobe PageMill is one of the most heavily promoted HTML editors available, though it runs only on Macintosh computers. The software can be downloaded from Adobe's web site (http://www.adobe.com) for $99. As one would expect from an Adobe product, PageMill makes it easy to manipulate text and graphics. You can create HTML headlines, arrange the placement of images and even perform limited image editing. PageMill also allows you to create pop-up menus, push-buttons and form fields. All of this can save a lot of typing drudgery.

Unfortunately, the initial release of PageMill doesn't allow you to create tables, which are useful for presenting information such as price lists and train schedules. Since this is one of the most time-consuming HTML tasks, the absence of tables is a significant detraction. The first version of the program is also buggy: my Mac, which is normally quite reliable, kept crashing when PageMill was running.

The biggest problem with PageMill, though, is that the program doesn't really know anything about the Internet. You must use a separate program to download your pages from your web server to your computer before you edit them, and you must separately upload the pages back to the server when you are finished with them.

Two HTML editors that are designed to get around this problem are NaviPress, from NaviSoft (recently purchased by America Online), and FrontPage, from Vermeer, a Cambridge company. Both programs combine web browsers with the HTML editor, allowing you to browse your web site and, when you find a typo, just click to edit.

Both firms allow you to download a free 30-day evaluation program (from http://www.navisoft.com or http://www.vermeer.com). NaviPress runs on Windows, Macintosh and Sun/Unix, while Vermeer runs on Windows (although a Macintosh version is due early next year).

NaviPress understands a wider range of HTML – it will let you create tables – whereas FrontPage has sophisticated features for mapping out an entire web site, giving you a graphical view of all of your pages and showing you links that don't go anywhere.

But the real power of Navi-Press and FrontPage is that they can save the pages back to the web server. Each company does this in a slightly different way. In

the case of NaviPress, you need to purchase the company's own program – $1,499 for Windows/NT, $5,000 for Unix. The commercial version of the browser costs an additional $99.

For FrontPage, the package is sold with "extensions" that run on a server program that you already have. In addition to saving files, Vermeer's extensions allow you to create "robots" on your web pages to implement features like search fields and discussion groups. FrontPage is sold with the server extensions for $695 per user.

Netscape Communications is also working to build similar what-you-see-is-what-you-get editing capabilities into its Netscape Navigator and Commerce Server, although the system is not yet available.

For the casual user all of these programs might be overkill. That's because word processors such as Microsoft Word, Word Perfect and Claris Works are all being updated for the World Wide Web as well. For example, Microsoft's Internet Assistant for Word, which can be downloaded free from Microsoft's web site (http://www.microsoft.com), permits Microsoft Word for Windows to read and write HTML files. If you are using Windows 95 with Microsoft's Internet Explorer, you can browse a web site, click a button and edit the document in Word. That's almost as good as NaviPress or FrontPage, except that you can't save the file back.

And even Microsoft's Internet Assistant might be more than most users need. According to the Fourth Survey of World Wide Web Users by the Graphics, Visualization & Usability Center at Georgia Tech, the typical Internet user learns HTML in about three hours. (For information on the survey, check http://www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/user-surveys.)

Nevertheless, the perceived difficulty of learning HTML has been a stumbling block for many people interested in publishing information on the Internet. Hopefully, this new generation of software will help the web to create a new generation of poets, rather than mouse-potatoes.

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