



Enabling the masses

Simple pan, zoom and attribute query are all the functions that many sites require

Only a few years ago, developing content for a Web site was a matter of opening up a text editor and typing in HTML tags. You then had to fight with cumbersome software to upload a file to a Web server, only to find you had mistyped a `</BLINK>` and the whole of your page was flashing at you. As new features were developed, an eager army of techno-nerds was implementing them into Web pages. The Web became more concerned with “eye candy” than content.

As the complexity of development increased and the capabilities of both browsers and servers expanded, the ability to create content moved farther into the programmers’ court, pushing up prices accordingly. For the technically adept, this was (and still can be) a licence to print money, yet for many years, the tools to aid the creating of Web sites were poor and perpetually out of date. You often had to understand how HTML worked to use such products.

Products such as FrontPage and PageMill now provide unprecedented ease of Web development and site management. They also enable you to implement the most recent client-side technologies

Possibly the most important recent introduction, Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), has been around since Internet Explorer 3.0. CSS allows you to specify how content appears on your Web page, without the need for cumbersome frames and tables. You can also specify styles for particular elements you can then apply across a range of pages. Beyond CSS, browser manufacturers have also added extensions that give developers control over the exact placement of elements, visibility and whether the elements are in the foreground or background. Coupling this with scripting lets you develop consistent, professional-looking Web sites. Using such development tools requires the minimum of effort, allowing you to concentrate less on design issues, more on content.

What you want and what you need

While FrontPage and other products may not be able to deliver access to all the potential capabilities of such technology, they allow you to get at the 25 per cent that “most” users will require. This is similar in concept to many of the spatial-enabling Web products. While “out of the box” they do not give you access to all of the spatial capabilities present in modern GIS, they give access to the 25 per cent that many users require for a spatially enabled Web site. Simple Pan, Zoom and Attribute Query are all the functions that many sites require. As with anything, if you want to access any more capabilities, you will have to get your hands dirty with coding.

There will always need to be two levels of Web development – out of the box products that are easy to use and provide 25 per cent of the functions most users require, and more extendible, programming-based products that allow access to the other 75 per cent. The worry is that users will not understand the technical implications of what they are producing. While it may be possible to add VBScripting, CSS and other components without a thought about their potential audience, it is pointless to add such technologies to a site whose visitors still have Navigator 3.0. Understanding that because something is possible does not necessarily make it appropriate is one of the fundamental lessons to be learnt by any Web developer. Otherwise, your killer site may be killed due to lack of interest and it’ll become part of the growing number of sites that consist of “404 Not Found”.

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Technical Notes