

# Taking a bite out of Apple

While Wintel holds a firm grip on the corporate computing world, many Internet users and Web authors have taken the **Apple Mac** to heart.

**Tony Smith** explores what's on offer.

**F**or Apple, the Internet represents not only a great new business opportunity but its survival as a mainstream computer supplier. While Apple's dominance of creative markets – publishing and design – nor its continued supremacy in these areas isn't doubted, it has failed to make major in-roads into the consumer and business arenas.

That failure has many causes, not least of which is the lack of compatibility between Macs and PCs. The Internet, however, blows that issue out of the water. Information on the Web does, by and large, look the same whatever browser and computer you use to view it. Java, the standard programming language for Internet-based applications and soon, perhaps, mainstream software too is platform-independent. Buyers no longer need choose one operating system or hardware type over another – both will run exactly the same software, in the same way. Instead, they buy on price, performance and quality, the three areas Apple's bosses are focusing on.

All of which makes Apple's latest Internet-oriented offering, the Power Macintosh Web Authoring Solution, surprising. Given the company's claimed success as a provider of Internet servers and Web design systems – the latest statistic its spokesfolks like to cite is *Web Week magazine's* findings that the Mac is the number one Web authoring platform, with 64% of the market – and its need to appeal to a wider audience, releasing the Web Authoring Solution seems a case of preaching to the converted.

604e processor: This is the chip at the heart of the Mac. Different to the familiar Intel chip, it is designed by Motorola, Apple and IBM. It comes in 601, 603 and 604 flavours – the higher the number, the faster the machine.



Not that the package is a bad one – quite the reverse, in fact. The Web Authoring Solution bundles 12 essential Web software tools with one of Apple's latest, fastest Power Macs, the 8600/200. It's a mean piece of kit. Equipped with a fast 200 MHz **PowerPC 604e** processor, it's around three times faster than a Power Mac 4400/160. It also boasts a 12-speed CD-ROM player and, in a new move for Apple, a built-in iomega Zip drive. Memory stands at 32 Mb (expandable to 512 Mb), storage is provided by a 2 Gb AV hard disk. Like its predecessor, the Power Mac 8500, this model contains two SCSI chains, a fast (10 Mb/s) one for internal peripherals, the other (5 Mb/s) for external devices. For all tasks, not just Web authoring, this is no slouch.

## Packaging Apple for market

However, all this power would be wasted had Apple not interpreted the phrase 'Web authoring' in its broadest sense. The software bundled with the Web Authoring Solution covers much more than HTML creation and encompasses the production of all the files a site is likely to include, from graphics and video to audio and interactive multimedia presentations. The applications provided that allow you to do this are big-name packages – this bundle hasn't been put together on the cheap.

Top of the list is Macromedia Director 5.0, the standard tool of the multimedia business, though the latest version is 6.0, though the enhancements are minimal. Director is a powerful application yet one that's not difficult to get into, whether you want to build

interactive presentations or displays that simply run for a time then stop. The Internet connection is provided by Macromedia's Shockwave technology, which compresses a finished presentation into a form that can be readily sent across the Web and played back through a browser plug-in.

That said, Shockwave files are by no means small, and can take significant lengths of time to download, especially via modems. It's for that reason that Shockwave has never become the Web standard Macromedia hoped it would and thus widen Director's appeal beyond the multimedia market. In the event, Shockwave was pushed aside by Sun's Java technology with its promise of highly visual and interactive applications that remain small enough to be quickly transmitted across the Net. Still, Shockwave, thanks to Director, is a powerful multimedia delivery system, and one that is more geared toward the creative process than Java, as a programming language, will ever be. A designer can get good results from Director very quickly; Java's learning curve is far steeper.

## Java flow

For Web site authors keen to learn, though, the Web Authoring Solution provides Metrowerks' Discover Java Programming, a CD-ROM containing an Acrobat version of the rather fine *Learn Java on the Macintosh* and a cut-down, Java-only version of the best-selling Mac programming environment, CodeWarrior. CodeWarrior is a developer-oriented tool, but one that isn't totally unfriendly to non-programmers.

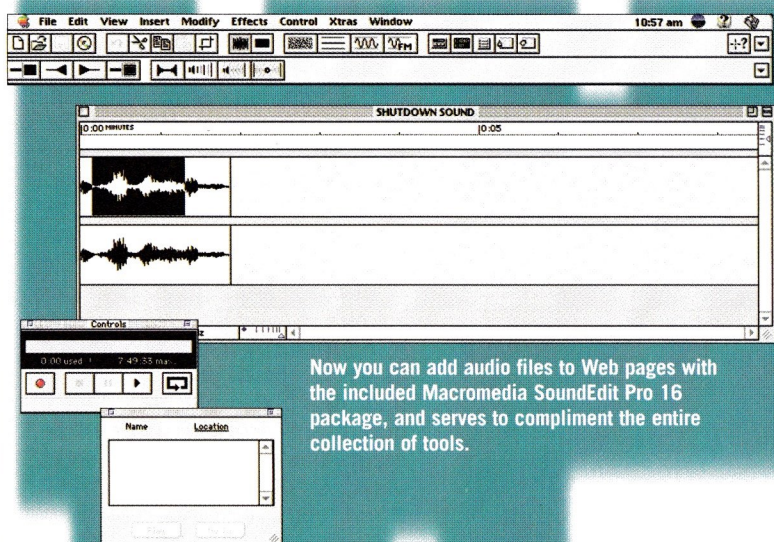
However, Java, for all Sun's

## What you get

Computer: Power Mac 8600/200  
 Processor: 200 MHz PowerPC 604e  
 Memory: 32 Mb expandable to 512 Mb  
 Level 2 cache: 256K  
 Hard disk: 2 Gb AV-rated  
 CD-ROM: 12-speed  
 Extra Storage: built-in 100 Mb Zip drive  
 Expansion: 3 PCI slots, 2 3.5in peripheral bays  
 Video: 24-bit input and output, S-Video and composite  
 Graphics: 2 Mb of video memory  
 Software: System 7.5.5, Macromedia Director 5.0, Macromedia SoundEdit Pro 16, DeBabelizer Toolbox 1.6.5, Bare Bones Software BBEEdit, Claris HomePage 2.0, Metrowerks Discovering Java, WebBurst, Fractal Design Painter 4.0, HexWeb, Netscape Navigator 3.0, Pantone ColorWeb, Specular 3D Web Workshop, Strata VideoShop 3.0.

claims, isn't an easy language to learn, especially if you've never done any programming before. A good grounding in the C language pays dividends, but that's not included here. Help is at hand in the form of WebBurst, a visual development application that lets you create applets by dragging and dropping code components than linking them graphically.

The Power Mac 8600/200's built-in video digitiser and CD-quality sound system can be harnessed through the bundled VideoShop 3.0 and SoundEdit Pro 16 respectively. VideoShop, now owned by 3D graphics specialist Strata but once Avid's low-end video editing product, is a powerful, professional-oriented QuickTime tool, but remains



Now you can add audio files to Web pages with the included Macromedia SoundEdit Pro 16 package, and serves to compliment the entire collection of tools.

inferior to Adobe Premiere, a package that's far easier to use and the QuickTime editor of choice. Macromedia's SoundEdit Pro, on the other hand, is a worthy inclusion, and allows sampled sounds to be manipulated and modified in a wide variety of ways, including distortions, adjusting the stereo spacing and adding special effects. Sound files can be saved in all commonplace file formats for easy playback on any platform.

**File under tricky**

Getting file formats right is a notoriously tricky business for Web authors, especially when it comes to graphics. Apple has wisely included DeBabelizer Toolbox 1.6.5, the ultimate image conversion utility. Not only will it translate a picture from one format into any of 69 possible alternatives, but it also optimises the image's palette to match those of the browsers it will eventually be viewed in. Ignoring this is a common fault in Web design. Netscape Navigator, for instance, has its own pre-programmed set of 250 colours that it can display. Images that contain other hues won't be displayed correctly – Navigator will dither the image, simulating the extra colours from ones it knows it can show. DeBabelizer processes the image's palette so that it only uses Navigator colours but mixes them to ensure a far better, less dithered look than Navigator itself is capable of.

Pantone ColorWeb offers similar features but works with spot colours rather than pictures. Whether you're producing HTML code manually – the Web Authoring Solution includes BBEdit for this – or through a WYSIWYG page layout tool, like the bundled Claris HomePage 2.0, ColorWeb will provide you with the correct colour values to ensure that your links, solid-colour backgrounds, highlighted text or whatever look that same irrespective of the computer, monitor and browser they will eventually be displayed on. It works by providing a library of 216 Pantone shades that have been calibrated to look the same on any platform. The software provides a pop-up colour picker that allows you to select hues from the library.

To produce graphics in the first place, the Web Authoring Solution includes the highly popular Painter 4.0, from Fractal Design. This 'natural media' application features tools that simulate real oil paint, water colours, charcoal, pencil crayons and the like to allow you to produce images that look if they were created by hand and then scanned into the computer. Not only are the tools simulated but so too is a wide selection of paper stock. It's an impressive package, and can be used to generate very good results – it even lets you mimic artists like Van Gogh and Seurat.

Unfortunately, it's not a line art tool, leaving the Web Authoring Solution without a way of producing simple graphics like icons. The bundled copy of Specular 3D Web Workshop, with its 3D graphics and background texture tools, and huge supply of clip-art goes some way to filling the gap, but a copy of Macromedia FreeHand or Adobe Illustrator would be more welcome. So too would a photo editing application like Adobe Photoshop, though you get a similar level of functionality by mixing and matching the applications that have been bundled.

It would be a tad unkind to dismiss such a good selection of bundled software just because it lacks coverage in a couple of areas or that some of the applications it



Pantone ColorWeb is one of the bundled packages with the Mac, and allows the creation of platform independent colour.

does include, specifically VideoShop and HomePage, are bettered by other third-party programs, Adobe's Premiere and PageMill, for instance.

**Return of the Mac**

Of greater concern is the current unavailability of Power Mac 8600/200s, which, despite a mid-March release date, have still to ship to dealers. As a result, Apple has yet to issue a price for the Web Authoring Solution. The standard 8600/200 is believed to have a £2,185 (exc. VAT) price tag – the true value of the Web Authoring Solution will depend on how much extra you have to pay for the

software. Chances are, Web designers already own a good proportion of the tools included so the decision to buy the Web Authoring Solution really boils down to whether they need to upgrade to a faster Mac – in most instances, a more basic, cheaper Mac will do the trick.

For newcomers to professional Web design, however, the Web Authoring Solution represents a solid bundle that's well worth consideration. In performance terms, the 8600/200 not only beats most other Macs, it can also give top-end PCs a good run for their money. Add in its video input/output features, along with the software bundle, and

the Web Authoring Solution becomes a very serious contender for companies looking to move away from the consultants and produce their own Web pages.

In this light, the Web Authoring Solution makes more sense as a part of Apple's Internet strategy. The Mac-maker may have failed to attract mainstream business, but if it can continue to offer quality systems like the Power Mac Web Authoring Solution, it may begin to win their support.

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