tools of the trade

Visual Design

Microsoft's latest version of its **FrontPage® 2003** still lets you design Web pages and sites by writing the HTML code or by just clicking, dragging, and dropping, but one of the new additions to the 2003


Microsoft FrontPage 2003

edition is a split-screen view of HTML code above, screen image of the page below. As with earlier releases, if you're comfortable with the basic commands and drop-down menus for other Microsoft Office Products, you'll have little trouble navigating FrontPage. Dynamic Web templates let you design and edit entire sec-

tions of a site set up by regions. Style sheets simplify design chores, and you can target specific browsers and browser editions. Windows Share-Point Services can set up a data-driven website that functions as a collaborative workspace for a workgroup, a news site, or even a Web log. Report functions provide a variety of information on your site and individual pages. Other new elements in 2003 include: customized data views, XML support, remote website view, Flash support, improved interactive buttons, layers that can overlap and nest on pages, and more. You can see a demo at the Microsoft site or order a trial version CD (30-day) at http://www.microsoft.com/office/frontpage/prodinfo/trial.mspx.

PhotoImpact® 10 from **Ulead®** is a complete image-editing suite for digital photographers, graphic artists, and Web

designers for under $100. You can work on a basic level with ExpressFix™, which automatically corrects photo faults, or you can adjust elements such as highlights, midtones, and shadows a level at a time. Retouching for faults, including scratches, redeye, fading, noise, poor contrast, and focus, are available for photos as well as scans. Painting and drawing as well as a variety of special effects such as engraving, pen and ink, mosaic tiles, contour drawing, and cartooning are available. Ulead's COOL 360 lets you stitch together images in panoramic views, and the included Photo Explorer provides CD slideshow burning. Version 10 has simplified the interface, and there are tutorials on the program CD. For a complete list of features and demo go to www.ulead.com.

Vox Proxy™ from **Right Seat Software, Inc.** is an
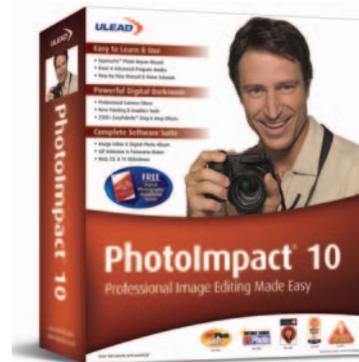
Ulead PhotoImpact 10

add-on for Microsoft's PowerPoint program. With it you can add avatars (animated characters) to your presentations, which will counterpoint your monologue with gestures onscreen, or they can even have dialogue of their own in a conversation they will have with you. You script their responses, both verbal and gesture, in "coding" that's as simple as: CrossArms, Move Right, LookLeftBlink. The characters are animated, claytoon-like people along with a crayon called Waxy. There are male and female characters (Chuck resembles a late-night host, and the Scientist is Einsteinian), and support for AT&T Natural Voices™ gives you choices for the sound of each character.

Getting Down to the Code ◆ Michael Castelluccio, Editor

■ MOST OF THE TIME you're working just one layer above what's really going on. While you're skating around on the interface, instructions are being called right beneath the buttons and keystrokes. Some computer programs merge the two levels in a single view. Microsoft's Front Page, for instance, can give you a split-screen view of the HTML coding on top and the resultant display screen right below it. It's almost like a fluoroscope of your computer screen.

Who Needs It?

Why should you care about the program's code? Isn't that a little like visualizing the circuitry activated when you turn on your car's ignition? You don't need to know what's connected and now operating as you're buckling up your seat belt. Well, your car and your computer aren't exactly the same.

There are two good reasons for learning something about a program's set of instructions (the code). By knowing how the program works, you're in a much better position to understand what it can do. The second reason is to satisfy curiosity. Without curiosity, growth ends.

You don't need to embark on a new career as a programmer to gain a general understanding of what's going on under the hood/glass of your computer. Just find a good book on the subject—a book like Greg Perry's *Absolute Beginner's Guide to Programming*. Now in its third edition, it's published by Que.

Perry's book has two unique

VOX IMAGE © 2001-2003 RIGHT SEAT SOFTWARE
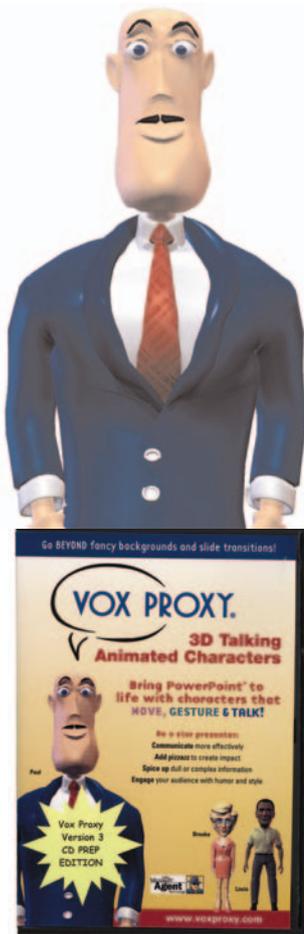
VoxProxy characters for PowerPoint

Version 3 of Vox Proxy includes support for the new PowerPoint 2003 Viewer so you can distribute your presentations to people who don't have the Microsoft program. Information is available at www.voxproxy.com.

New BPM Suite

The newly released **Applications Suite 4** from **Hyperion** is one of the broadest, richest suites of Business Performance Management (BPM) software available. It provides a unified environment for enterprise planning, reporting, and analysis with seamless integration across applications. New features include a task-oriented user interface, common Microsoft Office interface, enhanced offline planning, a new Workforce Planning Module, enhanced scorecard strategy maps, improved financial modeling, a new intercompany Detail Module, improved audit trails and document links, and a new Compliance Management Dashboard. The new suite provides "a common look and feel, common reporting and analysis tools, and a single point of maintenance and administration that decreases training costs, increases user adoption, and promotes line manager participation," according to Rich Clayton, vice president of product marketing for Hyperion. Visit www.hyperion.com and click on Applications Suite 4 for details.

Dashboard for Hyperion Application Suite 4

advantages: The chapters are short, and the coverage of topics is truly wide ranging. From the basic definition of a computer program to how debugging works in testing, the author takes you from COBOL to OOP (Object-Oriented Programming) in prose you can understand. And he reassures you from the outset that programming doesn't require a genius-level skill set. What you need more than anything else is accuracy.

After outlining the early history of computers through three generations and the network, he goes on to explain how a program is just a set of instructions, a recipe, and he explains the importance of design and logic flow. His first example is in pseudocode (words without symbols). When he gets to the programming languages, his first example is a short FORTRAN program that calculates payroll. He follows that with a comparison of the same problem (calculate payroll) done in COBOL.
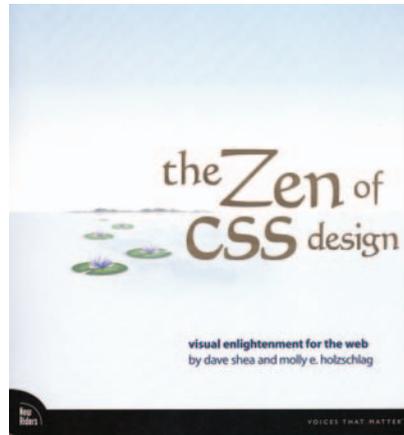
There are a lot of different programming languages, and although the book focuses on Visual Basic (Perry actually teaches you how to write simple VB programs), if you want to see what C++ looks like and learn a little about the way it works, that's covered in Chapter 14. Chapter 17 introduces HTML, the coding used for Web pages, and it can be read quickly—it's only 11 pages. The markup languages, XML, Java, and JavaScript, are also outlined.

The 15-page survey of computer program algorithms is excellent, along with one of the final chapters (22. The Importance of Maintenance), which explains flowcharts, pseudocode, structured programming techniques, and testing.

The Visual World Online

It's said that those who spend most of their time developing the analytical side of their brain are less likely to excel in visual or creative endeavors. But as businesses rely more on their online presence for everything from image to sales, the corporate Web persona demands more attention.

The kind of programming you find online basically involves markup languages with a desired end result that's visceral rather than computational. Luckily, there are a number of author/programmers who offer texts on the artist/programming chal-

lenges of website design. One of the better new books is *The Zen of CSS Design* by Dave Shea and Molly E. Holzschlag, published by the New Riders division of Peachpit Press.

The CSS in the title refers to Cascading Style Sheets, a method for putting the tags that describe layout elements in templates that don't have to be repeated every time you want them to appear in a particular place. In other words, you can code design elements and have them appear in many places without constantly rewriting the instructions.

Dave and Molly's book assumes a basic understanding of CSS syntax and grammar, so you're not going to learn these skills here. What the book does explain is design using CSS tem-

plates. The book is really for designers and secondarily for coders. If you want a quick look at what impresses the authors, go to www.csszengar-den.com and browse through the examples. The text is the same on all the Web pages shown—what differs is the handling of the design elements, and the results range from serene to gaudy. Check out Bugs by Zohar Arad on the opening page or Cat Sleep or Hedgehog in the conceptual design section on the archive pages. Each has the same content but a completely different feel.

With *The Zen of CSS Design* you get the feeling early on that design is critical and that it precedes content on the page. Logically, of course, before you begin reading you see and respond to the visual page. And good design has an organic integrity, it's not composed of pieces pasted into a growing montage—as you've no doubt seen often on crowded Web pages.

The most important lessons in the book are about what is possible on your website that you hadn't considered. Management of shapes, white space, typography, and visual elements are all covered on highly illustrated pages that often include the CSS code (you can give that part to your website manager).

And one last recommendation. O'Reilly, the ultimate computer publishing house, has just released a series of design notebooks for PhotoShop users. Translated from the French, the beautifully designed books have all the step-by-step technical information for the program, but what sets the series apart is the innovative information on design. Go to www.oreilly.com and search Designer's Notebook. You can read sample chapters from any of the three books. ■