Web-Based Software and the New Desktops on the Web

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One outcome of the Web 2.0 movement and its Ajax offspring (discussed in my May/June 2006 *ONLINE* column) is that a number of Web sites now offer Web–based software. These products are surprisingly easy to use, include collaborative features, and cost nothing. With only an Internet connection and a browser, you can use Web-based software for many computing needs.

E-mail was one of the first applications to become available as an online, Web-based program. Hotmail, Yahoo! Mail, and many similar services have offered e-mail free from desktop programs for years. The standard office applications such as word processing, spreadsheet, presentation, database, and calendar software have not been readily available online—until now. This movement away from desktop-based software to Net-based applications presents opportunities and challenges.

THUMBSTACKS PRESENTATION SOFTWARE

Thumbstacks [www.thumbstacks.com] is a good place to start exploring the possibilities. This Web-based presentation software is only in alpha (as in pre-beta), yet it already boasts a surprising array of features and is fairly easy to use. It includes a few background themes, bulleted and numbered lists, basic formatting, several fonts, image uploading, Flickr image integration, and automated resizing. Thumbstacks is designed to work on the Windows, Mac, and Linux operating systems. Like many of these online programs, the site requires free registration to save or publish a presentation.

Sign up, log in, and start creating a presentation within a few minutes. Many of the buttons are familiar, while other commands (Insert Text Box, Add Image, and Add Photo from Flickr) are only available from a right-click menu. The object and text boxes are easy to drag and resize. If you start with just two slides, you can add more by right-clicking in the left slide view bar. It is limited to three slide designs: one-column, two-column, and empty. The slide can appear all at once, or points can be "stepped through" one at a time.

While some of the user interface is fairly intuitive, many commands are buried in a right-click context menu that varies depending on cursor location. Still, for an alpha product, Thumbstacks offers some impressive capabilities. After logging in, use the "presentation builder" to create a presentation. Then take a look at the "remote" link, which lets Thumbstacks become a remote meeting service. Create a presentation and e-mail up to five others to view it. When they click on the e-mailed link, you can control the speed of the presentation on their computers. Combine it with a conference phone call for a free online meeting environment.

For most PowerPoint users, Thumbstacks will be a bit frustrating since so many features are not available. There is no way to import an existing PowerPoint file or even a text outline view for quick text entry. Themes and fonts are limited and no clip art, animations, word art, or diagrams are available. So its usability depends on which features are wanted or needed.
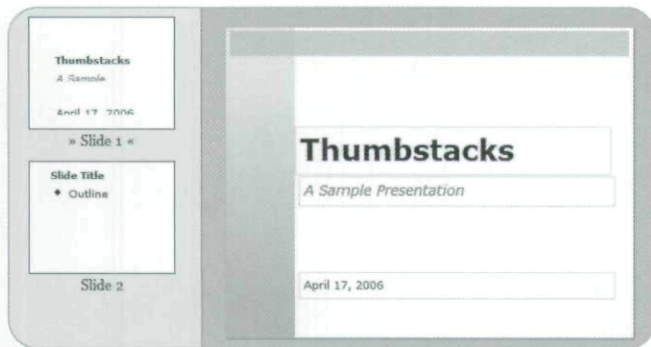
One justifiable criticism of many of these Web-based applications is the necessity of an Internet connection to view the finished product. Many of us are not always online. Thumbstacks' answer to that is its "export to HTML" option under Publish. This saves the necessary files to a local drive or flash drive, but be sure to save the file as a "Web page complete" type so that image files and the necessary style sheets are saved as well.

AVAILABLE SOFTWARE

When you start looking for Web-based software, or what some call the Read/Write Web, it is amazing to see the variety and sophistication of the many free tools. See the accompanying sidebar to this column for a list of some resources, or find even more listed online at the Protopage page [www.protopage.com/websoft].

For word processing, the best-known example is Writely. This free tool includes many common word processing options, lets users upload files from Microsoft Word, save to the desktop, post on a blog, and share documents with others. Well-reviewed for its ease of use, Writely was acquired by Google in March 2006, which promptly closed off new registration. If registration has not yet reopened, other options make online writing easy.

Zoho Writer is one able substitute. Also a free service, Zoho Writer features WYSIWYG editing including the use of tables and inserting images. It lets users upload files from Microsoft Word and Open Office, save to the desktop, produce PDFs, post on a blog, and share documents with others. Free, but more limited technically, is ajaxWrite. It does not work with Internet Explorer and requires Firefox 1.5 or higher with JavaScript enabled. Then again, most of these tools require JavaScript even if they do tend to work in more than one browser.

Spreadsheet users have several choices, none of which have yet been bought by Google or other large companies. iRows has basic spreadsheet capabilities along with sharing and publishing options. It includes charts and graphs, basic functions, summation, and sorting. A sheet can be shared just for viewing, or others can be granted permission to edit. Data can be exported to CSV, Excel, Open Office, and HTML. iRows can even generate code to be embedded within another Web page to display the spreadsheet. When the spreadsheet is updated, so is the data in the other Web page. Zoho, maker of Writer, also publishes Zoho Sheet, a spreadsheet

program. Unfortunately, it requires a separate registration process from Zoho Writer. However, Zoho Sheet also gives a "Throwaway Sheet" option that does not require registration at all. It can be used by those who need access to spreadsheet functionality but do not need to save it.

Calendar software has been another popular category with the likes of Kiko and 30 Boxes. With the recent launch of Google Calendar, it will be interesting to see if the others survive. Lazybase makes a simple database product. See its site for examples of databases of award-winning fiction and a book club database. Other examples include Calcr, an online calculator, and myImager for image editing. Zoho also has a Planner with to-do lists, appointments, notes, and shared files. It can even update pages just by sending an e-mail to an e-mail address displayed at the bottom of each page. 37signals offers several business-oriented applications such as project collaboration, to-do lists, information organizers, and group chat.

JAVA ADAPTATIONS

The Ajax Web service has some competition in older technologies. Think Free Office Online uses Java to offer a free online word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation package. Similar to the Ajax Web 2.0 crowd in functionality, Think Free has some powerful office alternatives. With PDF output options, shared viewing, blog posting, and Flickr importing, it goes even further with some features. Think Free Show, for example, is much more similar to PowerPoint in functionality than Thumbstacks, with an outline view, more design templates, and a more familiar user interface.

However, compared to the speed of the other programs, the initial loading for the Think Free programs is slow. The output is in traditional Microsoft Office formats or PDF as opposed to the Web-based formats of the Ajax tools.

COLLABORATION PROGRAMS

The collaborative nature of the Web makes these programs a natural for increased collaborative opportunities. Sign up, create a document, and invite others to edit it. The invitation process typically involves listing the e-mail addresses of collaborators in a box. The system sends invitations to them, and they may or may not be required to create their own accounts.

With multiple contributors, there is an increased risk of losing data or multiple people editing a document at the same time. To prevent this from becoming a problem, many of these programs have automatic, frequent backups. Some track versions of a document, noting the time and author of the last several changes with access to the older versions to recover from an accidental deletion. Other applications lock the file when one person is editing and will not let anyone else change it.

For anyone who has spent time e-mailing a file back and forth between participants, these collaborative applications hold the promise of more effective and efficient communication. The ability to share data, text, schedules, and project plans on the Web is especially convenient when the participants are at geographically dispersed locations.

USES

One possible reason to learn about such software is to use the Web to replace desktop applications. In his February 2006 *Information Today* column, Steven Cohen tells of his move to an online-based desktop for most of his computing needs. Even for those of us still planning on using most of our applications as installed, desktop programs, these Web-based online programs have some unique uses and advantages.

Here's one example: The other day, a student at my reference desk needed to print an image file from a flash drive but first wanted to add some text to the image. None of our public computers have image editing software available. Knowing about and suggesting the use of myImager via a Web browser makes it a fairly simple task to add the text to the image file before printing.

Another one: On a pilot virtual reference project involving several librarians, we were exploring ways to keep usage and coverage statistics. We started with the idea of creating a log in a word processor and then sharing the file for each librarian to print off and fill out or to download and fill out electronically. However, that still involved compiling the statistics later. Instead, we set up a spreadsheet at iRows and shared it with all participants (who each had to establish an account). Now we just log into that spreadsheet to fill in statistics and can quickly see what others have added. We were also able to import the spreadsheet directly to a project page on the intranet by inserting a few short lines of code (which iRows supplies).

Planning a project with multiple participants? Take a look at Zoho Planner's tools. Even contributors who limit their technical skills to e-mail can update pages just by sending a message to a specific e-mail address displayed at the bottom of the project's page.

Any collaborative editing project could use one of the online word processors. Using one with version tracking can track changes and authors. Or try Lazybase to create a database that users can re-sort using whichever column heading they prefer. Keep track of a series of calculations with Calcr. Try at least a few of these tools to consider what other projects might benefit from their use.

THE CONCERNS

Many of these Web applications remain in prerelease as alpha or beta products. Some have only been available online for a few months. The technology supporting them is relatively new, and they have yet to struggle with managing a heavy user load. Their longevity is questionable, especially since they have unknown financial models for long-term support.

Google buys Writely, and new accounts are immediately closed. With a free product, what financial support will be available to keep the product going? Getting bought out by a large company such as Google gives hope for continuity, but the questions remain as to what Google plans to do with Writely and how it will be developed over the next few years.

Given the questionable permanence of the products, be sure to download copies of any crucial documents to a local machine. And continue to do so on a periodic basis. Another

A Selection of Read/Write Web Tools

Presentation

Thumbstacks	www.thumbstacks.com
Think Free Show	online.thinkfree.com

Word Processing

Writely	www.writely.com
ajaxWrite (Firefox only)	www.linspire.com/ajaxwrite.php
Zoho Writer	www.zohowriter.com
Think Free Write	online.thinkfree.com

Spreadsheets

iRows	www.irows.com
Num Sum	www.numsum.com
Numbler	www.numbler.com
Zoho Sheet	www.zohosheet.com
Think Free Calc	online.thinkfree.com

Calendar

Kiko	www.kiko.com
30 Boxes	www.30boxes.com
Google Calendar	www.google.com/calendar

Database

Lazybase	www.lazybase.com

Calculator

Calcr	www.calcr.com

Business Applications/Project Management

Zoho Planner	www.zohoplanner.com
37 Signals	www.37signals.com

Image Editor

myImager	www.myimager.com

concern with hosted applications is that the data is passed from user to program over the open Internet. The data itself is hosted on the remote site. Consequently, data security is a major concern. Unless full encryption is available, and the provider is a trusted company, do not use any of these services for confidential data.

On the very practical level, Internet access is necessary to use these tools. Unless you have the most recent backup on your desktop or laptop, any time the Net connection is unavailable, so are all your documents and files on the remote server. Frequent travelers will not have access on the plane ride. Dial-up users must be online every time they want to use one.

Our personal computer use preferences vary considerably. But even for the many of us who remain wedded to desktop-based software, consider specialized uses for these free, Web-based, collaborative applications. Know the options that are available, and use the ones that work best for you.

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