Against the Grain

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Nouvelle Cuisine-WebWhacker to the Rescue

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Imagine this scenario. You are preparing a training session on the latest Web pages for a presentation to 50 of your closest friends and colleagues. You have spent what seems to be a zillion hours surfing the Net, organizing your bookmarks and creating a comprehensive Web page of those collected sites. You have charged the batteries in your laptop computer, prepared your script, pressed your shirt and polished your shoes. You arrive an hour before your presentation to set up the computer, panel display and screen. You plug in to the network or local telephone connection, power up your computer, click on the Netscape icon and you are greeted by this message: NO NETWORK CONNECTION. OK, stay calm (your heart rate is climbing.) Check all the connections...try it again and again. Yikes! It should be working. HELP!!

Any experienced trainer or presenter would have anticipated problems so some method of back-up would have been planned, like transparencies or photocopies. However, the most effective means of demonstrating Web sites includes the showing of HTML documents with the complete text, hypertext links and graphics or images. Off-line readers or browsers have been developed just for this purpose. Saving costly Internet connection charges by viewing downloaded documents or Web sites off-line is another popular use of off-line browsers. Considered the best of the batch is WebWhacker by ForeFront Group Inc.

In a nutshell, when connected to the Internet, WebWhacker can download (or whack) entire Web pages or entire Web sites including all HTML text, graphics and hypertext links and save them to a local desktop PC or server. All whacked Web pages can then be browsed or read off-line with standard Web browsers independent of an Internet connection. Firsthand experience has proven this software application to be everything it was promoted to be.

WebWhacker requires a Windows (3.11 or 95 or NT) or Mac computing environment with minimum of 4MB RAM (recommend 8MB RAM) with 2MB of hard disk space for the program. However, the whacked files will require considerably more hard disk space with the downloading of .JPG and .GIF, so plan on needing at least 10MB of disk space. WebWhacker also needs a Spyglass SDI standard Web browser such as Netscape Navigator, Internet Explorer or Enhanced Mosaic 2.0 to grab and view HTML documents. You will have to identify the file name and provide the location for the browser application (executable file, EXE) on your computer.

WebWhacker can be purchased from the ForeFront Group Inc. Web site <http://www.ffg.com> for a list price of $69.95 and the software is then downloaded from the Web site. Site licenses are also available. Free demo versions are also hosted on the Web site. However, just recently retail vendors like Egghead have been offering WebWhacker for $49.95 so call ForeFront Group (800-653-4933) to negotiate a price.

To begin whacking, a group must be created and opened. You can then add Web documents to the group by keying in the URL or visiting Web sites and "grabbing" the URL. URLs can be retrieved individually or the whole group can be whacked after you have compiled the sites. The level of whacking (or the number of links followed) can also be specified with the default being first level (the base page). Be careful, though. Multiple levels can result in huge files being downloaded. Experience has proven the best approach is to visit each site before whacking and determine the amount of information to each level. Once the Web sites have been retrieved by WebWhacker, a table of contents is created which is viewable from your Web browser. Another option is to simply open the whacked group on your hard disk (C: directory/filename.html) or floppy disk with your Web browser program, select the first HTML document in the series you want to display and then just follow the links.

Our experience has revealed some shortcomings to WebWhacker. While it can retrieve image-mapped graphics they are not "clickable" in off-line mode. Image-mapped graphics usually require communication with the CGI (Common Gateway Interface) bin program on the host computer to complete the link. Since no live connection is present that link is not made. Well designed Web pages should provide underlined titles (alternative titles) which are linkable.

Although understandable, another limitation is WebWhacker cannot "grab" URLs that are behind a login screen. Currently Whacker cannot carry on a dialog with any host system which requires a password or account name, it simply goes to the Web site and retrieves HTML documents. After some experience using WebWhacker and becoming familiar with the "whacker" language, it is a relatively easy and a very powerful software tool to use. "Have you whacked your files?" is a familiar question for folks around here who are preparing demonstrations or training sessions. We have considered downloading with WebWhacker the entire library Web site onto the public Web PCs, so that in the event that the campus network is down, users can still cruise our site. Tools such as WebWhacker are making the Web a much friendlier place to play.