



Augmenting Browser-Based Development

BY DON RIMA

Do you remember when Microsoft* came out with FrontPage? The intent, among other things, was to make life easier for Web developers. Overnight, people who didn't have a clue what the Web was at one time were now becoming their own Webmasters. The intent was to provide a lot of deep functionality in an easy-to-use integrated development environment (IDE). Many others used tools like Dreamweaver for more serious development, and a lot of FrontPage users eventually migrated to Dreamweaver as their IDE of choice.

Ever think this could come to the System i* platform? Perhaps it has. This month, I'm reviewing WebSmart from BCD (www.bcdsoftware.com).

Installation

After a couple downloads from the Web, I was in business. Post-install configuration wasn't painful, and I was off to the walk-through in short order.

Ease of Use

Frankly, this is one of the larger products that I've examined. I won't tell you that I've hit all of the functionality or played with each and every feature; that would be like saying I learned WebSphere* and was a guru in a month. And we all know that doesn't happen.

What I can say is that you need to do the walk-throughs with support staff like Marcel Sarrasin, and you need to go through the provided learning programs. I recommend you read the users' guide a couple times before you even open the reference manual. Remember how the RPG manuals were back when the AS/400* server first came out? We had a reference guide and a users' guide, and they were substantially different in content and approach. But we learned what was where and quickly used both effectively. Same concept applies here.

You'll find that you'll be writing basic stuff within a day or two. As with learning any new IDE and language

Spotlight Profile

Product: *WebSmart*

Company: *BCD Software*

Version: *5.27*

URL: *www.bcdsoftware.com*

Overall Rating: *3.835*

(and there's a language involved here—see the Functionality section), it will take a little time and effort, but given all the helps, programming aids, etc., you should be good to go. Product users say that their programmers were at an RPG programmer equivalent level in a month and guru in three—obviously, your results may vary.

Documentation

Documentation is nicely done for the base product; there are some extended how-tos in the online knowledge base. I made some suggestions for a couple minor changes. They're both well done, but spending time with the users' guide will make a smoother learning curve.

Certifiability

Everything I played with seemed to work as advertised.

Functionality/Usefulness

With FrontPage, which I mentioned earlier, you have a lot of nice macro work done for you so you can request functionality, and the utility will import/prompt this functionality for you. WebSmart has many of the same capabilities, which helps with the development and learning curves. Much of this is documented in the manuals, but there's also a selection of base routines available from which you can cut and paste, some of which are on BCD's Web site. It's not a sourceforge in depth, but it's nice, growing and useful.

I expect you'd be building simple file-maintenance and inquiry programs literally within hours of your installation and walk-through. More complex stuff will

The Rima Report

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq

Category	Points	Weighting	Overall Score
Certifiability	4.00	.100	0.400
Installation	3.90	.150	0.585
Ease of Use	3.80	.150	0.570
Documentation	3.70	.150	0.555
Functionality	3.80	.150	0.570
Usefulness	3.80	.150	0.570
Support	3.90	.150	0.585
Total	26.90		3.835



KICK THE TIRES: WebSmart would be on my short list of products to evaluate for browser-based development on System i* hardware.

(Points given are on a scale of 0 to 4, with 4 being the highest. Each category is assigned its own weighting from the total of 100 percent.)

depend on what you want to do. To that end, there's also a development language called PML, which the tool translates to RPG and compiles. This becomes your application. Actually, everything you do is done in PML and HTML, compiled and that's what you run when you launch it from a browser.

A set of demo applications is also shipped. These are used by the marketing folks to show you functionality, but if you look inside them, they're good how-to samples. And if you want to jump-start your learning curve, look at those first. A new visual, interactive debugger should be available soon.

What you're going to find when you get into this is that WebSmart is part of a suite of products that can give you a browser-based interface with some really nice pictorially available display features of charts that you could never touch in the old 5250 world. In short, your applications don't look like they're 5250 screens that have been run through a GUI converter; they look, feel and act like real Web.

Now, I'm sure you're going to ask, "What about my current software code investment? What can I do with it?" In short, there's a migrational add-on option tool, but it's not for blanket code conversion. I recommend treating your current environment and WebSmart environment as two separate entities. You can call programs in your current program set from WebSmart—that's not an issue. But don't plan on cranking your current code through any converter and expecting a migration. It's not there and not supported from that standpoint. What you can do is rewrite your applications from the utility perspective and if you have some extensive code blocks in RPG, convert those and cut/paste them into your new environment. That would be easier.

Am I suggesting dropping your current investment for WebSmart? No. I'm suggesting that you use both to augment each other and pull the best from both options you have available.

Support

I've not seen anyone as concerned that a user understand its product as BCD's Sarrasin was. BCD's support group often uses Web-meeting capabilities, which allow them to show you in real time, on either your box or theirs, whatever you need to do. This beats dealing with a voice-only response and being told over the phone which buttons to push. Having tech support suggest a Web-based meeting to introduce a product is a great idea. I'd like to see this approach more often in tech support. I give Sarrasin an Extra Mile award for tenacity and patience.

Summary

I intentionally used the term "augment" in a previous paragraph. Frankly, I like that term in this context. Clearly, you can drop everything and rewrite cold turkey, but that's just not reality. This product presents a nice browser front-end capability and lets you keep your back-end code investment while wowing the user base. I don't like writing marketing copy, but there's some really nice presentation-level options here, and you don't have to worry about dealing with all of those annoying database interface drivers as you do with some of the graphical tools. **i**

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