

## WebWorks Publisher 2000 Review

**Q**uadralay's WebWorks Publisher converts FrameMaker files into online formats, such as HTML, Windows online help (WinHelp), and HTML Help. This capability is now essential because technical documentation is commonly delivered to customers in multiple formats. Technical writers need the ability to deliver content from printed documents in online formats.

Scriptorium Publishing uses WebWorks Publisher to convert FrameMaker content to WinHelp, HTML, and HTML Help formats. We are certified as WebWorks Publisher trainers and have worked extensively with this new release (we had early access to the software). This review discusses our impressions of WebWorks Publisher 2000.



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## Improvements in WebWorks Publisher 2000

Improvements and new features in this version fall into the following categories, grouped in order of importance to our work:

- WebWorks Help template
- Graphics
- Improved documentation
- Xref tab
- Template improvements

Quadralay has added two other major features, which we are not currently using:

- Multilanguage support
- FrameMaker + SGML element mapping support

### WebWorks Help template

Quadralay has jumped on the cross-platform, cross-browser HTML-based help bandwagon with its new WebWorks Help template. WebWorks Help provides a familiar tripane window (see Figure 1). On the left, tabs give you quick access to the table of contents, index, full-text search, and favorites. On the right, content is displayed.

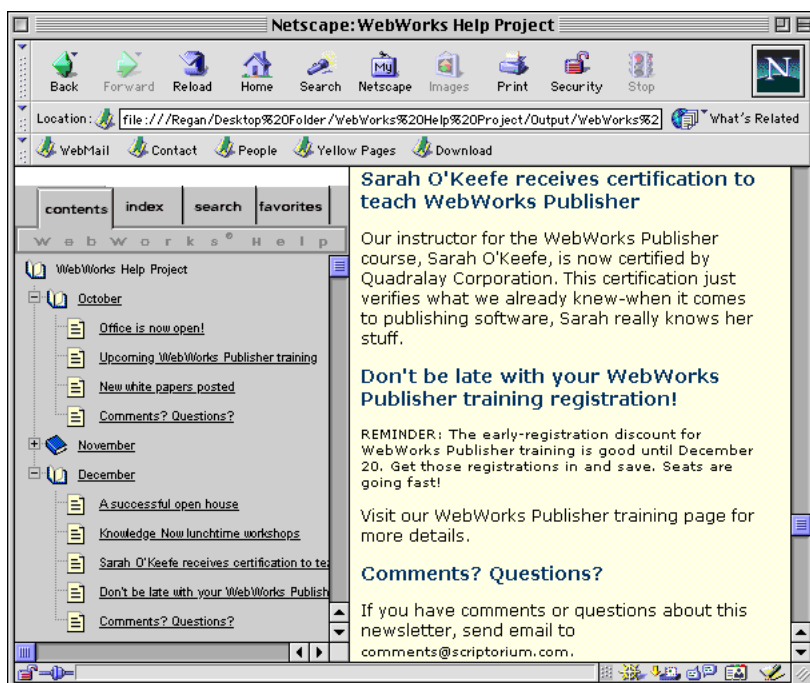


Figure 1: WebWorks Help in Netscape Navigator version 4

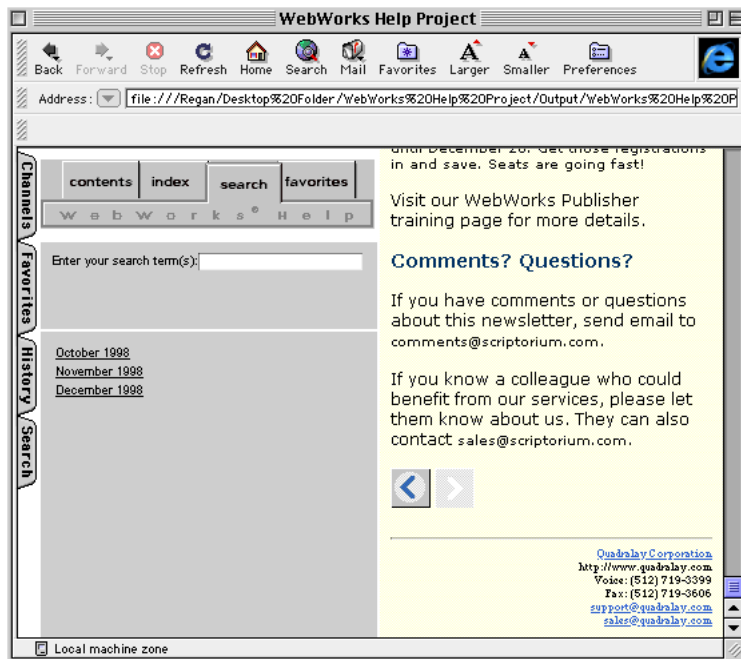


Figure 2: WebWorks Help in Internet Explorer version 4

WebWorks Help is JavaScript-based and works in Internet Explorer 4.x (and higher) and Netscape Navigator 4.x (and higher).

If you are required to deliver HTML-based help and want all the goodies from HTML Help (collapsible TOC and full-text search) without the browser and platform restrictions, this template is worth its weight in gold.

Alexia Prendergast's documentation department at Seagate Software (Durham, North Carolina) developed a similar help system. She notes that "we spent a lot of time developing what amounts to the same functionality. Months. If we had had this to start with, we could have just refined it, rather than starting from scratch." She feels that Seagate's final product is cleaner and more automatic than WebWorks Help but points out that "we had to basically become developers to do the JavaScript and Java stuff in our version of the tripane. Here [in the WebWorks Help template], it's all built in for you. You can focus on your content, not on developing the template and the conversion process."

In our testing, the template was robust and worked well. We did notice that performance degrades significantly as the files get very large. When we converted an 800-page book, performance was acceptable as long as the HTML files were chapter-size. When we created separate HTML files for each major subsection, load time became unacceptably long.

Quadralay promises improvements in the JavaScript code in an upcoming point release, and in fairness, we should note that our project was absolutely enormous. When we converted a more reasonable 200-page book, load time was quite fast, even when we created lots of tiny HTML segments.

One feature currently missing from WebWorks Help is context-sensitive help. Quadralay plans to add this.

## **Graphics**

The graphics conversion now uses anti-aliasing, which greatly improves the readability of callout text in graphics. In addition, if a particular graphic is imported by reference into multiple locations in a file, WebWorks Publisher processes that graphic once and uses the resulting image in all the places where the graphic was referenced. Graphics processing is still time-consuming, but the results are much improved.

## **Documentation**

The documentation provided with WebWorks Publisher 4.0 was abysmal. This gave Quadralay lots of opportunities for improvement. The new documentation is task-oriented, provides several examples, and is actually useful, although it needs a technical edit. We wish that Quadralay would do more to make their documentation a showcase for their product. The help files (which contain the user manual) released with WebWorks Publisher 2000 contain some rookie mistakes, such as sudden unintended font switches, huge screen shots, and a table of contents listing that uses a font that's much too big (and inexplicably doesn't use the new collapsible TOC format). It looks very much as though the user manual was converted at the eleventh hour, with no time left to tweak it.

## **Xref tab**

One troublesome conversion issue is managing cross-references. The formats that are useful in print (for example, "see page 37") are not meaningful in online delivery. Until now, the easiest solution was to rework the cross-reference formats to eliminate page numbers before converting the FrameMaker files.

In this new version, WebWorks Publisher offers a more elegant solution. Quadralay has added an Xref tab to the Properties window (see Figure 3). For each FrameMaker cross-reference format, you can substitute another, more appropriate format, so you can change

cross-references globally without having to modify the FrameMaker files.

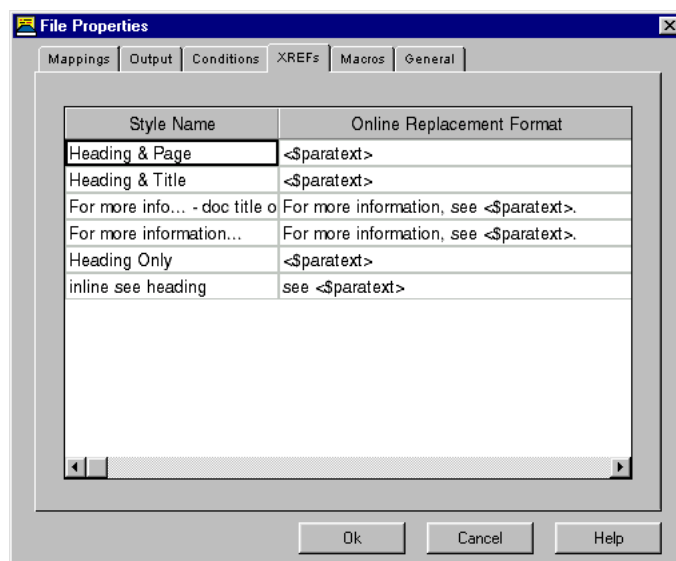


Figure 3: XREFs tab

We were a little surprised by the fact that this tab uses FrameMaker building blocks (instead of WebWorks Publisher macros) because this is completely inconsistent with the rest of the WebWorks Publisher interface. Nonetheless, the cross-reference mapping feature is extremely useful and quite easy to use.

### Template improvements

The most important template improvement is that page templates can now be stored in external files. This makes it much easier to work in a dedicated HTML editor (such as DreamWeaver) and then use the resulting page in WebWorks Publisher.

The WinHelp template has been completely overhauled; it now supports RTF styles, and the appearance of online help from the “out-of-the-box” WinHelp template is much better.

The HTML templates include additional code that checks your source text for colors and fonts and provides HTML output that matches. If you want your HTML output to look as much as possible like the original source files, this may be useful to you. We find this to be an annoyance because we don’t want huge numbers of <FONT FACE> and <FONT COLOR> tags cluttering our HTML documents.

The new HTML templates also provide improved handling of bulleted and numbered lists with the SmartList tags.

## **Multilanguage support**

WebWorks Publisher is now available in an International Edition. This version promises support for double-byte character sets. We have not evaluated this functionality, so we asked John Pitt, who writes documentation on contract for a commercial embroidery software company in Australia to give us his impression. His manual is produced in nine languages (English, Japanese, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Italian). Until now, he has produced online help in English and Japanese only, using RoboHelp and HDK. But with WebWorks Publisher International Edition, he has produced online help for all nine languages directly from the FrameMaker files “with surprisingly few problems.”

## **FrameMaker+SGML element mapping support**

In WebWorks Publisher 2000, Quadralay introduces element mapping support. FrameMaker + SGML users can now map their elements instead of mapping paragraph tags. However, Quadralay acknowledges in the release notes that this feature has some “issues” and says that fixes are on the way. Once the element mapping problems are resolved in a maintenance release, we will take a closer look at this feature.

## **Things still needed**

With the improved documentation, Quadralay has addressed the most glaring omission in the version 4.0 release. We hope that now they will turn their attention to improving the interface. The current interface is functional, but it is confusing and often unforgiving to a beginning user. Examples of these difficulties include:

- The difference between project-level mapping and file-level mapping is subtle and often confusing.
- Especially in the Style Designer, tab and subtab structure is disconcerting. Beginners usually miss the subtabs at the bottom of the window, and once they find them, it’s not immediately clear that the subtabs are subordinate to the main tab (that is, each tab has different subtabs).
- The effect of the Cancel button is unclear in the Style Designer. (What if I’ve modified three or four tags and then click Cancel? Does it cancel only the last change made or all of them?) The interface needs an Apply button to prevent this all-or-nothing dilemma.

- The modal Style Designer and mapping windows are annoying. (You have to exit one to display the other.)
- There is no direct access to Style Designer from mapping windows.

## Bottom line

WebWorks Publisher is a must-have tool if you need to convert FrameMaker files to HTML, WinHelp, or other formats. The larger your source files, the more time and money this software will save you. Quadralay has responded quickly as new online formats are developed; for example, they provide support for preliminary versions of JavaHelp and OracleHelp and have committed to delivering updated templates for those formats when they are officially released.

WebWorks Publisher is difficult to learn, in part because working with it requires a deep understanding of FrameMaker, the target format tags (such as HTML), and Quadralay's macro language. The macro language, though, is what makes the software so powerful. You can access almost any piece of information about your FrameMaker files through a macro, and then set conditional macros for how to process the information. The software documentation improvements should make the learning curve a little easier.

We would like to see significant improvements in the interface. But despite the interface problems, WebWorks Publisher delivers. It's a flexible, powerful tool that makes it possible to use FrameMaker files as the cornerstone of a single-sourcing strategy. Because you can eliminate manual postprocessing of output files with WebWorks Publisher, you gain enormous time savings for larger sets of files. We have worked with projects that included up to 5,000 pages, and with consistent FrameMaker formatting, we can process those projects in about a week. (This time includes developing the conversion template; once the conversion template is set, processing time drops to less than a day.)

## Contacting us

Scriptorium Publishing Services, Inc. excels at transforming complex technical ideas into clear, concise documents. Our clients, who range from start-ups to Fortune 500 companies, rely on us for the full spectrum of technical publishing services—everything from turnkey documentation to specialized technical editing and

consulting. Our expert, talented staff thrives on working with challenging new technology in a deadline-driven environment.

We are certified as WebWorks Publisher trainers and offer training and consulting services for FrameMaker and WebWorks Publisher.

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