SOFTWARE REVIEWS

Authorware Professional. Version 2.0 Macromedia Inc. 600 Townsend Street, San Francisco, CA 94103; 415/442-0200; 800/288-4797; fax, 415/442-0190. $4,995.00, list price; $995.00, educational price; upgrades from earlier versions begin at $395.00. System requirements: Macintosh or IBM-compatible with Windows.

Health sciences education is experiencing a major reevaluation, and, as a result, alternatives to traditional teaching methods are being explored. Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) is in high demand to enhance curriculum and to provide an alternative to lectures. Despite the diversity of educational software available in today's market, many instructors need tools that are structured in their own teaching styles. Authoring software allows this flexibility. One of the most advanced authoring systems available is Authorware Professional. It is a powerful and versatile multimedia design tool for producing interactive CAI applications quickly and easily.

A program is created by using a few icons from a palette and placing them on a flowline; no programming background is needed. Included in the palette are icons for displaying, animating, interacting, calculating, mapping, flagging, importing movies, playing sounds, and controlling external devices. Each of these tools is very powerful individually; however, Authorware is still more robust in combining a variety of media with user interactions and branching by means of approximately 200 system variables and functions and an unlimited number of custom variables and functions. Variables and functions can consist of anything from the time of day to graphics. Interactions are available in ten types, including push buttons, "hot spots," movable and clickable objects, text responses, and key-strokes. When an application reaches an interaction icon along the flow line, it waits for a user interaction and then branches to the flow line, subroutines, or other files linked by the author. This lends the author the capability to build a complex program quickly and without scripting. The authoring and delivery environment is integrated, and, therefore, it is very easy to jump between the two.

Response tracking is an attractive feature for authors who are interested in collecting data. Authorware provides the author with the capability of tracking user interactions. Various aspects of the user's performance are stored; e.g., response time or correct or incorrect responses. These data in turn can be calculated for use by the author or used as variables for more interactions.

In addition, Authorware allows for multiplatform delivery. Applications can be developed on the Macintosh platform and, with some limitations, for delivery on a Windows platform. Authorware has specific equipment requirements for authoring and delivering the CAI. For the Macintosh, 10-megabyte hard disk storage is required. The minimum delivery hardware set-up will dictate the development hardware needs. For the Windows platform, a 25-megahertz or faster personal computer with an 80386 microprocessor or better is required for authoring. End users must have a 16-megahertz personal computer with an 80386 microprocessor, a minimum of four megabytes RAM (8 megabytes are recommended), a hard disk with 10 megabytes storage, mouse, Microsoft Multimedia Extensions (included in Windows 3.1), sound card (if using sound option), VGA monitor with sixteen or more colors, and Windows 3.0 or 3.1.

Anyone can learn to use Authorware in a matter of hours. However, to make full use of the variables and functions, a considerable investment in time is necessary. Included in the package is a thorough tutorial that provides an excellent walk-through of the software capabilities. It also introduces basic instructional design theory, encouraging the author to follow a systematic approach of analysis and evaluation throughout the development process. Other documentation is very clear and well indexed for easy reference. There is a separate guide for cross-platform development providing suggestions for easier porting to the Windows platform.

Authorware Professional is an excellent tool, recommended to librarians or instructors interested in developing courseware, from simple presentations to high-level interactive computer-assisted instruction.

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AskRx. Version 1.1. Camdat Corporation. 1111 Bayhill Drive, San Bruno, CA 94066; 800/771-7448. $295.00, single user (excludes Patient Clipboard and prescription writer); $595.00, single user/CD-ROM; $975.00, network (two to five users); $1945.00, network (six to ten users); $2450.00, updates. System requirements: IBM-compatible with Microsoft Windows, CD-ROM player if using CD-ROM version, color monitor recommended.

AskRx is a drug information software program that uses the United States Pharmacopeial Dispensing Information (USP DI), volume 1, as its data source. It provides information on more than 6,000 brand name, generic, and over-the-counter drugs available in the United States and Canada. Drug information also can be accessed by