eview by Jeff Frey

Title: WebShocker
Version: 1.0.1
Developer: RecoSoft
Price: $39.95
Contact Info: http://www.recosoft.com/
Genre: Animated GIF Tool
Requirements: Mac OS 7.1 or later, 4 MB free RAM

rabbing Attention on the Net

Active content. It's the current web craze. Moving pictures, sound effects, background music — it's all meant to capture the surfer's attention and keep their focus on the page. Perhaps the easiest way to add active content to a website is via animations. Animations typically come in three varieties: QuickTime movies, Java-based image flippers, and animaged GIF images.

The format which has been most pervasive of the three (and least intrusive) is the animated GIF. The animated GIF is simply a series of GIF images strung together to make what amounts to a flip-book animation — the images are flipped on and off the screen in order.

Animated GIFs provide a low-cost method of implementing animation on your web pages. In order to create these animated GIF images, you need a tool to stitch the separate images together, add timings to each frame, and specify the animatory parameters. WebShocker, a new product from

RecoSoft, is one such tool.

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pplications which creates animated GIFs are by no means new
to the computing scene. I've been using a tool called GIFBuilder
for years to create my animated GIFs. The drawback to most of the
other animated GIF tools available is their lack of a drawing
interface. GIFBuilder, for example, offers the user only tools to
create an animation — any touch-up work must be done in
another application.

WebShocker, on the other hand, offers a set of drawing tools
which can be used to create or modify the images in the animation.
If you've ever used another graphics application, like Photoshop
or GraphicConverter, you will recognize most of the tools shown
in the WebShocker palette at right. The typical selection and lasso
tools are available along with a Photoshop-like "magic wand."
Drawing tools include a pencil (for work on a pixel-by-pixel basis),
a spray can, a fill tool, a brush tool, and an array of geometric shapes.

For those who are going to design personal web pages and have no need for
more powerful graphics applications, WebShocker may provide enough
tools to design the graphics. For those who are more heavily into web
design, the tools within WebShocker will not be enough for creating alluring
images for an animation — I always create web images in Photoshop since it
has far more tools than WebShocker offers.

UI = Grand Universal Interface

I'll be the first to admit that in my programming endeavors I may go a bit off
the deep end when it comes to creating a good user interface. I purchased
Mac OS 8.5 for one reason alone: the modern look and feel of the Platinum
Theme. I just love it! And those wonderful floating tool palettes defined by
the OS… they look great! One thing I dislike, though, is launching an
application and seeing a flat, black and white floating palette like the
WebShocker one shown above. With Apple making strides to unify the
appearance of applications, I want to see the applications I use stick to
those guidelines. WebShocker's appearance can be described as
"Windowsesque." Take, for instance, the window which shows all of the

individual frames in the animation:

 realize that this isn't a large issue for most people, since a program which does what it is supposed to do without crashing has become the standard for which most pine. Being a programmer myself, though, I've come to expect a programmer to put as much work into making a friendly interface as making the core application itself. None of the interface elements in WeBshocker will show balloons when balloon help is turned on. Many of the buttons are ambiguous as to what action they perform — a little help from the program would be welcome and helpful.

All is not lost, though. WebShocker does support drag-and-drop, so adding images is as easy as dropping each individual image file on the Frame Window (graphic above). One interesting fact, though: the animation will not resize to accommodate the size of the image(s) you add. Whatever image size you choose when creating the image is the size of all frames in the animation.

I like the fact that the frame window shows a preview of each frame. As I stated earlier, I've always used GIFBuilder to create animated GIFs, and that program lists only the name of each frame (typically something like "Frame 1"). It's a definite plus to be able to see the contents of a frame right within the list of frames.

mage Effects

WebShocker can apply a wide variety of transition effects to animated GIFs. By default, the frames in an animated GIF simply pop up in sequence: one

image appears, pauses, and then is replaced by the next frame, and so on. WebShocker allows you to add special effects to your animations, much like slide transitions in PowerPoint. One effect is to slide the previous image off the "screen" while the new image slides on. You can dissolve the new image in atop the old, wipe the new image in with a star-shaped swoop, or zoom the new image down on top of the old. WebShocker does a wonderful job of creating the effects — you select the two frames to which you wish to apply the effect, and choose Effect from the Frames menu. Perhaps the only problem I have with the effects in WebShocker is that it takes 20 to 30 seconds for the effects window to appear on my 233 MHz G3.

Many of the transition effects I've seen in web pages today originate with Java programs. The Java code must load first, causing the computer's Java virtual machine to start up in the process. After initializing, the Java applet must load the necessary images. All this overhead just to get the web browser to animate an image? WebShocker adds no Java code for its effects — it just creates the in-between frames and adds them to the animated GIF. Avoid Java — go GIF.

iewing the Finished Product

When you've finally added all of your images, created the in-between effects, and set the timing for each frame, you're ready to view the finished product. Viewing your animated GIF within WebShocker is easy — just look to the animation window:

f you can work a VCR, you can work this window. When you click the right-pointed arrow, the animation begins. The large black square stops the animation. The other buttons can forward or reverse both one frame at a time and to the beginning or end of the animation. If you like to preview your images within a browser, you're out of luck — WebShocker offers no "Preview In…" feature. You'll have to save your GIF and open it manually.

he Value of WebShocker

WebShocker has one simple purpose: ease the task of creating animated GIFs. It accomplishes its purpose and goes beyond that by adding drawing and effects capabilities. Though it doesn't accomplish this with the Mac OS style buttons and windows, that single drawback should not influence the choice of this product. Overall, the single most important feature that I've found in WebShocker is the effects tools. Transition effects are something I can't do in Photoshop, so they're a welcome addition to my web-design tools. The ability to draw images directly in WebShocker could be important to those without access to some higher-level graphics design applications.

Pros: Excellent transition effects between frames, visual preview of frames within frame list.
Cons: No support for balloon help or tool-tips, slightly clunky look, speed issues.

WebShocker gets four out of five stars for a job well done. With a little time spent learning how to use the program and playing with the controls, the balloon help and non-standard UI issues are lessened. To the programmers at RecoSoft: add those two elements and I might give WebShocker a straight five!

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