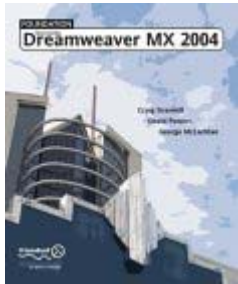


Books Reviewed: Foundation Dreamweaver MX2004, Defensive Design for the Web.

Two very different books arrived on the Chateau DMXzone doormat today; one is the newest incarnation of friends of ED's beginner's "Foundation" series, [Foundation Dreamweaver MX2004](#); the second is a new New Rider's "general usability book", [Defensive Design for the Web: How to improve error messages, help, forms, and other crisis points](#). Let's have a look at the one that is probably of more immediate interest to the majority of DMXzone members.



- [Friends of ED](#); March 2004
- Craig Grannell, David Powers, George McLachlan
- 313 pages
- \$34.99 US

I've always liked friends of ED books – not least because I used to work for a sister company before they were bought out by Apress. The Foundation series has always been their biggest-seller, as it combines a comprehensive overview of a tool for the newcomer (either newbie to Dreamweaver, or newbie to this particular release) with a considered, intelligent tutorial style. Quality used to be an issue for friends of ED; fortunately this book marks a return to form. The marketing guy who sent me the book explained that friends of ED were bored at reading the same dry, rushed-out books written on beta code that always accompany a new Dreamweaver release and so took the decision to wait until the community and its authors had a decent chance to sue the software in the real-world before writing the book. Happily, as well, Macromedia released a new update to DMX 2004 that made it a lot faster and more stable, hopefully attracting more customers who'd held off from buying due to the quality issues in the first DMX2004 release, although this book doesn't address features added with the updaters, like the return of the timeline.

The authors of this book are professional developers David Powers and George McLachlan, and pro artist and designer Craig Grannell. Unlike many DW books, it doesn't only concentrate on the processes and technical procedures of Dreamweaver development; it acknowledges that you're using DW as a **tool** and the end-result is a **site** that has to look good and be attractive to whichever audience you're designing for. I found that refreshing in itself – throughout the chapters, there are aesthetic questions considered and it's never forgotten that you're designing for **people** rather than the dubious joy of squirting code up to a web server somewhere.

Interestingly, unlike previous friends of ED Dreamweaver books which used Access and ASP as the default server model to teach with, this book uses PHP and MySQL – the most popular combo for web sites across the world. The authors write "we chose PHP because ... it's free, it's cross-platform, running on Windows, OSX and Linux, it's easy to learn and ... there are a large number of resources available".

The book is structured around a case-study – a promotional site for photographic images of Iceland. (It's a shame that the book's only in black and white, as the images look great – but if monochrome keeps the cost down, that's OK by us, right?). The reason for the case-study approach is the same approach as we use at DMXzone for our articles (and our series [Ideas to Implementation](#)) – recognising that the easiest way to learn something is by doing it, and making it as relevant to the real-world as possible. So there's a short one chapter on the Dreamweaver IDE (if you're completely new) and then it's straight in with the learning curve.

The chapter breakdown is here:

1. Introducing Dreamweaver MX 2004
2. Introducing our Case study
3. Working with Dreamweaver
4. Creating a Layout
5. Beginning Page Layout in Dreamweaver
6. Internal Page Layout in Dreamweaver
7. Creating a Template
8. Adding Content
9. Working with Code
10. Introducing dynamic content with PHP
11. Getting interactive with forms
12. Pages that think for themselves
13. PHP/MySQL: the real dynamic duo
14. Secure Login and Registration
15. Case Study: Content Management System.
16. Dreamweaver Extensions

I won't go through every chapter individually; most notable are chapter 9 which builds the site using CSS rather than nested tables, chapter 10 which handily gives instructions on installing PHP and Apache Server on different operating systems, Chapter 11 which looks at forms, and some simple ways to protect them from malicious scripts, chapter 13 which helps set up and run MySQL, chapter 14 which looks at website security.

The reason I highlight these are because many beginner's books don't touch on security at all (which can lead to a lot of very good sites written by beginners being open to hacks) and because, in a beginner's book, I always like to see installation explained in the author's own voice, as that's the style that the reader has become familiar with (rather than being sent off to a URL – and, frankly, many open-source developer sites are not terribly beginner-friendly). Also of note in chapter 16 – Dreamweaver Extensions – which name-checks DMXzone!!

I liked this book very much; the style was bright and breezy enough so that it never got boring (and I've read a lot of beginner's Dreamweaver tutorials in my time). It hangs together as a book, too; we were shown a lot of DMX 2004 books last year that were written in a rush, hardly edited, and which were 90% of the previous MX edition of the book with a few new screenshots. The learning curve in this book is fast, but not frightening, and it covers all the basics but distinguishes itself by including information on design, the user experience and security which you don't usually see in books aimed at the beginner, but which I believe most definitely *should* be included. The premise behind the case-study is that web sites should be styled using CSS –which is great, but the book doesn't really cover much CSS – just enough to get the case-stud up and running.

After reading this book, you won't be up to professional level (you need [DMXzone tutorials](#) to do that!); I'm not sure that after reading it, you'd be ready to make a huge site using PHP although, in fairness to the authors, they don't claim that it will – but it will give a newbie a full grounding in the mechanics of making PHP/ MySQL sites with DMX 2004.



- [New Riders publishing](#), March 04
- 37 Signals, Matthew Linderman, Jason Fried
- 245 pages
- \$24.99 US

Oh dear. The nice lady from New Riders is going to put a horse's head in my bed, or at the very least stop sending me free books. This thin paperback would be an interesting series of 3 or 4 articles, of the type we commission and publish as premium content on DMXzone, but doesn't make a good book. The reason is simple: it's over-extended.

The premise is a good one – show developers or (more likely) Site managers how to ensure that error messages, navigation and other "meta-content" (e.g., information about how to use the site rather than content of the site) are as helpful as possible, so that site visitors don't just charge off to a rivals' site.

These are always tricky books to pull off, as there's no code and it's all "touchy-feely stuff" that most code-monkeys are frankly rather suspicious of – and also, Jakob Nielsen and Steve Krug seem to have cornered the Usability market long ago; is there anything left to say?

As an example of my belief that this is actually an excellent pamphlet that's been stretched and fattened up into a mediocre book, here's the table of contents:

1. **Understanding "Defensive Design":** making mistakes well.
2. **Show the problem:** display obvious error messages and alerts.
3. **Language Matters:** Provide Clear instructions
4. **Bullet-proof Forms:** Create friendly forms that are easy to complete.
5. **Missing in Action:** Overcome missing pages, images or plug-ins.
6. **Lend a helping Hand:** Offer help that's actually helpful
7. **Get Out of The Way:** Eliminate obstacles to conversion (e.g., unnecessary ads, registration, navigation etc)
8. **Search and rescue:** Deliver the right results with smart search engine assistance
9. **Out of Stocks and Unavailable Items:** Make sure unavailable items don't become dead ends.
10. **The Contingency Design test:** See how your site rates

Do you see my problem with the book? Everything is already upfront in the table of contents; you can fill in the blanks yourself because there's little here that needs significant further explanation. There's a few useful tips in the chapter about forms - for example, we're advised to remove the reset button; no-one ever uses it, and there's a good half-page suggesting disabling the submit button with JavaScript once it's been pressed rather than sternly order people to press it once and wait . But surely it wouldn't have hurt the authors to provide the code snippet that does this (after all, every browser has standardised JavaScript), or at least a link to some code on the web. Having read these good ideas, you've still got to go googling around or write the script.

Because the book makes no assumptions about the type of site that you're running, the server or the technology you're using, it can't show you **how** to achieve the entirely sensible goals for good "defensive design" that the authors have identified. We're told to make custom 404 page-not-found pages, and this takes seven pages in the book. But no-where is there a link to how to achieve this on Apache, in IIS or whatever - instead there are several comparison pages with screenshots of sites that do a good job and sites that the authors believe do a bad job.

Yet a minute-long [Google search on "custom 404"](#) pulls up the following link first to <http://www.plinko.net/404/custom.asp> which contains the following information:

[Why you need a custom 404](#)
[What makes a good 404 error page?](#)
[Force Internet Explorer to display your error and not its own](#)
[Using your log files to catch 404s](#)
[Using redirects](#)
[Using robots.txt](#)

And instructions on how to create a custom page-not-found page for the following web servers:

[Apache](#)
[WebStar](#)
[iPlanet](#)
[Microsoft IIS](#)
[Roxen](#)
[thttpd](#)
[Lotus Domino](#)
[Netscape Enterprise Server](#)

Of course, you may never have known that custom 404 pages were possible – and so this book has made you aware of that. Good. But it seems to me to be only half-doing its job by explaining in 7 pages with 6 screenshots **why** you should make the effort, yet doesn't supply a link to the above free information, or just duplicate this public-domain information itself.

In short: this book would possibly be useful if bought by an employer for a team in order to jog people into thinking about the end user's experience (I know we always always do.. but there's always some *other* guy who forgets, right ;-). I can see a project-leader buying this book and using the information contained in it to make a step-by-step list of things for the software testers/ Quality assurance/ usability testers to check out, and the resulting site would doubtless be better for it. But for the solo freelancer, I'd suggest that there are other, better books (including many from the New Riders stable) that are more deserving of your hard-earned 25 dollars.