

# /reviews

Our pick of the best net-related software out now

» If programs were ... canine movie heroes

- ★★★★★ Lassie
- ★★★★★ Beethoven
- ★★★★ Hooch
- ★★★ Einstein
- ★ Scrappy Doo

Custom search platform

## Yahoo SearchMonkey

Now you can decide how your website's search results appear

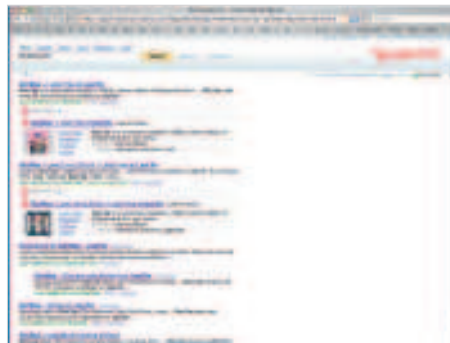
Web	<a href="http://developer.yahoo.com/searchmonkey">developer.yahoo.com/searchmonkey</a>
Price	Free
System	Web connection

With SearchMonkey, Yahoo hasn't just created an SEO platform on steroids, it's opened up its search API to almost endless developer specialisation and enhancement. And in the process it might – repeat might – be offering the first serious challenge to Google on its home ground.

If that doesn't work, or Yahoo simply implodes, SearchMonkey could still be good for the web, because it introduces a convincing argument for site owners to start including semantic information in their data. Why? Because through technology such as microformats and RDFa data tags, SearchMonkey really shines. Or maybe swings would be more appropriate.

At its most simple level, the SearchMonkey API provides developers with a way to create add-on search tools. These tools can then be used by the public to enhance their searching experience.

For example, a keen watcher of television programmes might use an application that



**Versatility** SearchMonkey has the capacity to massively improve search experience on a user-by-user basis

automatically gets thumbnail images, start and finish times and channel info from a listing site, then displays the results in tabulated form instead of the standard text and link we're used to.

Yahoo is essentially enabling you to act as a middle man between its search and your public.

### Limits

Obviously, this system has its limits. First among these is the fact that, for a search application to be

totally convincing, the site it's retrieving data from needs to be using either microformats or one of the RDFs enabling you to employ SearchMonkey's built-in data manipulation tools.

The alternative is to scrape the information with a Custom Data Service. In essence, this is an XSLT code snippet that searches for and converts data objects into a form acceptable by the SearchMonkey machinery. If that sounds potentially complex, then you're starting to get the picture.

That said, with some basic XSLT and PHP, a new search application can be driving smarter traffic in minutes. A little more work and you can effectively turn Yahoo search into a nascent platform. The potential is exciting, even if the results so far aren't all that great.

All new SearchMonkey Applications start with a visit to the Yahoo developer network – more specifically, to the online Application Dashboard. Here you christen your app before moving on to the real meat of the job. The first big choice is whether to use a fully Enhanced result, or a simpler Infobar.

The Enhanced result totally changes the returned search information according to your specifications. Thumbnail images and relevant information are taken from a data scrape or semantic hook-up.

## \* Alternatives

### Google Ajax Search API

Web	<a href="http://code.google.com/apis/ajaxsearch">code.google.com/apis/ajaxsearch</a>
Price	Free

While not an exact equivalent of the Yahoo approach, Google enables you to embed its search capabilities in your own web page and supplies a set of handy JavaScript methods with which you can represent the resulting information. It works with maps, video and general searches.

★★★★★

### MSN Live Search SDK

Web	<a href="http://search.msn.com/developer">search.msn.com/developer</a>
Price	Free

Microsoft has gone for a similar approach to Google's Ajax Search API (see left), supplying eager website developers with a handy Ajax interface to its search technology. Using MSN Live Search SDK, a hybrid engine can be presented on your site.

★★★★★

### Mahalo Greenhouse

Web	<a href="http://greenhouse.mahalo.com">greenhouse.mahalo.com</a>
Price	Free

The new trend for social search engines represents an opportunity for anyone who can come up with a reliable way to provide decent results in a friendly manner. Mahalo's Greenhouse even promises to pay you if you're good enough.

★★★★★

# \*Resource description framework

What makes SearchMonkey the cleverest critter in the search tree?

SearchMonkey works best when there's semantic data available for it to extract and it likes W3C's resource description framework the best.

RDF uses established URLs such as specific ID elements and literals such as regular strings, but within an established and machine-readable framework. The idea is to encapsulate information in a three-part statement called a 'triple'. The three ingredients of a triple are Subject – Predicate – Object. This structure mimics the way we describe things in natural language. In the sentence "Socrates taught philosophy", 'Socrates' is the subject, 'taught' is the predicate and 'philosophy' is the object.

In technical terms, the subject will be a resource, usually identified by a URI. The predicate could be described by reference to some URI taken from a codified set of descriptions such as the Dublin Core and the object again could be a URI link to a definition of philosophy.

RDFa and eRDF make this system slightly less convoluted by extending everyday XHTML in much the same way as microformats, but there's no denying that this framework adds a considerable overhead to the job of actually coding websites. This is such a large problem that it's hard to believe that it won't lead to a slow uptake.

The Infobar is easier to deal with, particularly if you want the effects of your search modification to be universal, and enables you to specify the URLs for your application to focus on.

Effectively you specify URL bases that will trigger your application. So, `en.wikipedia.org/wiki/*` will result in your app being called on any English language Wikipedia pages. `www.facebook.com/apps/*` will cover Facebook applications.

Next comes the tricky part: extracting the data. This requires some XSLT but isn't too tiresome, mainly because you don't have to learn the whole syntax of XSLT or your data source, just enough to extract the data you need.

Basically, you specify a container like this: `<adjunct id="smid:{$smid}" version="1.0">`. Then use it to hold the data you capture like this: `<xsl:for-each select="//div[@class='photo']">`.

All that XSLT unpleasantness can be avoided if you have the good sense to target a site that uses either microformats, eRDF or RDFa. If so, SearchMonkey will outline the data services that are available. Then, through the magic of PHP, you decide which items you want to extract from the pages, add them to a return array and prepare to deploy them to your searcher.

By now you're probably wondering what the point of all this is. Sure, you could add RDF and/or microformats to your site, then put an application up on Yahoo that translates your site into a more useful set of results, but would that make money? Would anyone even notice it or actually use it?

Certainly Joe Public isn't going to be hammering over to Yahoo any time soon, but the simple fact is that this way of searching is superior. The search can be better customised, targeted and presented. If

Developers have never been able to tailor the first impression of their site to this degree

nothing else it helps make the argument for adding semantic content. RDF, in particular, is rather easy to add and will bring your content in line with some big players, such as Yahoo itself and LinkedIn.

SearchMonkey isn't the world's most flexible tool, and its debugging facilities are also pretty rudimentary. But it's a start. Developers have never had the ability to tailor the first impression their sites have in anything like this degree. And for those with a large community to serve, this is a great way of making your content attractive and usable.

As for Yahoo, it's clearly hoping that having a huge community of PHP developers messing around with its search API will turn up some unexpected uses and benefits, which they can then reap the benefits from.

Respect is due, then, to Yahoo for putting a tool out there that someone in the developer community might just pick up and think: "Yeah, this is the missing piece of my Microsoft-slaying jigsaw." That kind of wishful thinking might just have a lasting contribution to the web's capabilities but, as always, momentum will be the key. And without a convincing way to make it pay, SearchMonkey might only ever exist in captivity. ●

## .net rating

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>For</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊕ Relatively easy to understand</li> <li>⊕ Makes searches more useful and flexible</li> </ul> | <p><b>Against</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊖ Lacks general applicability</li> <li>⊖ Requires knowledge of semantic data formats to really fly</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

For developers, this is a fascinating development in search technology, and if it encourages the web to get semantic then everyone's a winner.

★★★★★

Turn over for more reviews >>



**Increasing your options** If you're lucky, your chosen data source will expose lots of semantic information for you to play with, just like LinkedIn does

Open source

Let's switch to...  
Microformats

**What is it?**  
A way to add semantic information to your pages with simple XHTML

**Where?**  
[microformats.org](http://microformats.org)

**Who's it for?**  
Those who want their data to be machine-readable

**How much is it?**  
It's free

**If you're one of the many developers who remain unconvinced by the Resource Description Framework and would rather use a blend of existing HTML tags to add semantic data to your website then microformats are for you.**

Microformats have two big plusses. Firstly, for anyone familiar with HTML, they're easy to get to grips with. Secondly, they don't require a huge amount of extra effort to deploy. This could be why we've seen a lot of grass-roots adoption without any top-down legislation.

The idea is to wrap your data in an additional tag, usually a `<span>` with a special class giving it a semantic value. For example `<span class="name">` indicates that the item this span covers is a person's name.

There are already a number of specs out there for common requirements, so by using microformats, your site and its data can be meaningfully represented to a well targeted audience. You know it makes sense.

Theme generator

# Adobe Kuler 2.1

Colour with confidence comes in three flavours – because you're worth it!

**Web** [kuler.adobe.com](http://kuler.adobe.com)

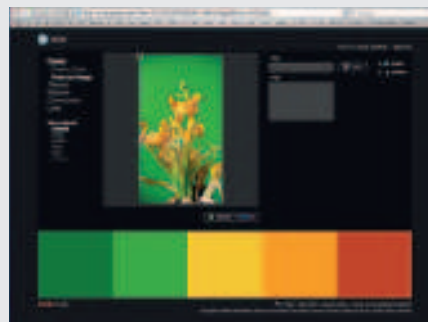
**Price** Free

**System** Web connection, or the desktop version requires Adobe AIR

**Sometimes it's easy to forget that designing websites can be fun. Adobe's colour theme generation and exploration tool reminds you of this.**

The app can be used via the website, by downloading the AIR desktop version, or directly through Illustrator CS3. Kuler extracts a set of compatible colours from your photographs which you can then tweak and build upon. You can also annotate and tag them before making them available to the Kuler community, where you can rate other's themes and even receive an RSS feed on the most popular.

This is a really addictive system, particularly for Flickr users, as Kuler can log in and import your photos for colour extraction. Adobe has also made a set of APIs available so that application developers can make use of Kuler's capabilities, tailoring colour palettes to image choices. ●



**Personalise** Import photos from Flickr to act as the basis for your latest colour scheme

**.net rating**

<b>For</b>	<b>Against</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊕ Great fun to use</li> <li>⊕ Provides meaningful colour schemes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊖ Has one or two minor bugs still being worked out</li> </ul>

**A great little utility that encourages colour scheme experimentation and enables you to get feedback from a really helpful community.**  
★★★★★

Also available

**ColorSchemer**  
[www.colorschemer.com](http://www.colorschemer.com)  
Putting the classic colour wheel at the centre of the design process, ColorSchemer works on harmonising and contrasting your colour choices. It also has a photo-based scheming module.

Development environment

# Expression Web 2.0

A well designed and capable web IDE

**Web** [www.microsoft.com/expression](http://www.microsoft.com/expression)

**Price** \$299

**System** XP or Vista, PC with 700 MHz or faster processor, 512MB RAM

**Microsoft seems to be coming round from the technical and commercial doldrums and Expression Web 2.0 shows what this new mindset can achieve.**

Okay, not totally new, but certainly different: pared down and focused. This is a functional, well designed web development tool. A key new feature is the ability to work with and preview PHP, but ASP 3.5, first-rate XML handling and some nice CSS tools all pull together seamlessly.

That really is the central selling point. Expression Web does not – like so many MS products – demand that you get to know its latest dumb way of doing things. Instead, it offers a smooth environment from which you could easily see yourself developing some excellent, standards-based websites.

Plenty of thought has obviously gone into this package, so if you prefer your IDE unobtrusive and capable, then this is one to look at. ●



**Functional** Expression Web 2 manages to juggle your design requirements without becoming intrusive

**.net rating**

<b>For</b>	<b>Against</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊕ Enjoyable to use</li> <li>⊕ PHP-capability</li> <li>⊕ Good for ASP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊖ Might require that you buy the rest of the Expression Studio</li> </ul>

**Microsoft has found the right balance between capability and usability here. The unintrusive interface will make anyone feel at home.**  
★★★★★

Also available

**Adobe Dreamweaver CS3**  
[www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver](http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver)  
The industry standard for good reason. Adobe's Swiss Army knife of web design is easy to use and reliable, but it's no longer the only horse in town. The granddaddy of all web development tools fits better than most with other Adobe necessities.