

# /reviews

Our pick of the best net-related software out now

» If programs were... Pasta dishes

- ★★★★★ Bolognese
- ★★★★★ Lasagne
- ★★★★ Macaroni cheese
- ★★ Supa Noodles
- ★ Pot Noodle

Web application

## Yahoo Pipes

Mashups are just the beginning for this well designed data wrangling system

Web [pipes.yahoo.com/pipes/](http://pipes.yahoo.com/pipes/)

Price Free

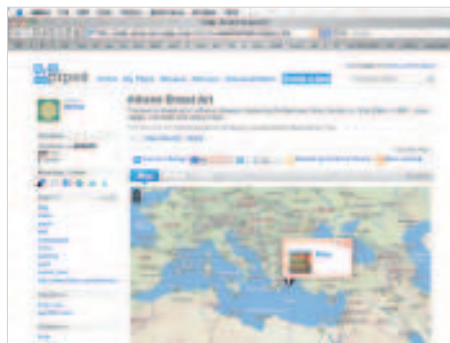
System Up-to-date browser

By enabling non-coders to manipulate the data being syndicated across the web, Pipes expands the concept of mashups in an interesting direction. And for those with a grasp of RSS, XML and other associated technology, Yahoo has delivered a fun way to experiment. After 18 months in beta, a continual commitment by Yahoo to advance the system means that Pipes is not just here to stay – it's leading the way forward.

### RSS credibility

In one form or another, RSS has been around since the late '90s but it's only in the last few years that the weight of available feeds and the usability of RSS2.0 have given the protocol enough credibility for its development to become self-sustaining.

The move towards a semantic web is excruciatingly slow, but the uses and abuses of this popular standard go some way to indicating what could be done with fully meaningful mark-up.



**Globalisation** Connecting data flows with geo-specific data to a map is a simple affair using Yahoo Pipes

Oddly, though the overall march of semantification is slow, web users are intensely recursive in their treatment of any technology. So, with repeated experiments and attempts to fit RSS into various uses, we rapidly explore the possibilities of what's currently available. Taking the standard output of an RSS feed, reading its XML components and combining these results with those from other sites was a natural progression. Mashups had an early heyday and have settled down to being a simple

fact of life on the web. Interesting but, well, a bit like hard work given the end results.

Enter Pipes. Not only has Yahoo done a great job with the underlying technology but it's also created a tool that's (almost) a joy to use. Having no coding skills whatsoever is not a problem. You can mash together a search based on user input with your favourite news feed, run that through Flickr and output the results in a number of handy flavours – JSON and RSS included.

Publish that output via Yahoo servers and the rest is up to you. Further processing could be done on this new feed, or you could simply pipe it onto the page. It's surprisingly simple to do.

The Pipes interface is easy, just drag a source module onto the work area and apply settings to it. Then drag a processing module into play, connect your source(s) and apply the settings again. Hook this up to the auto-generated output module and run your pipe.

### Basic I/O

Pipes works with more than just the standardised XML formats that make up RSS. CSV or Comma Separated Value files, raw XML data, user input, Flickr searches – each of these modules can be

## \* Alternatives

### Mashup Editor

Web [code.google.com/gme/](http://code.google.com/gme/)

Price Free

Currently in limited beta phase, the Google Mashup Editor looks like it's going to be a potential challenger for Pipes, though it may well be aimed more squarely at the developer than the casual user. Ajax-based, its coverage in terms of data resources will be interesting.

★★★★★

### Microsoft Popfly

Web [www.popfly.com](http://www.popfly.com)

Price Free

Built around Silverlight, Popfly provides tools for producing much more than just mashups. You can knock up a game, website or a mashup in a very short space of time. Though it can be a bit temperamental, this is a well rounded system with very deep capabilities.

★★★★★

### Web Mining Desktop

Web [www.metafy.com/anthracite](http://www.metafy.com/anthracite)

Price Free

Anthracite is a Mac-based data-mining solution. In much the same way as Pipes, you create a data source, run it through a number of processing instructions, then format the resulting output. It has the advantage in terms of the size of dataset it can handle.

★★★★★

# \*Playing nice with others

Create your own code in KML and other formats

For those who like to run up their own code, Pipes still has plenty to offer. Not only can Flash and Flex developers grab the resulting feeds in compatible cross-domain formats, but also seemingly esoteric outputs such as KML and serialised PHP.

The key to Pipes having a bright future is its interaction with the various other technologies on the web. Handling RSS is all very well, but it's the details that often swing a deal. Sometimes you just need additional data.

KML is a good example of this. A flavour of XML specifically designed to work with Google Earth and later maps, KML data can both be read by pipes

and output from them. That means that, of course, that you can plug your pipe's feed into a Google map and get a usable result.

Most cross-domain solutions such as PHP, pure JavaScript and Flash-compatible data feeds require an ability to write code on the part of the pipe's creator. Then, once created, that pipe can be cloned or picked apart by anyone. This is all about to change.

The idea that we could have an internet where the clever data-related stuff can be done without a degree in software engineering is teetering on the verge of becoming a reality.

configured to provide raw source material with varying degrees of accuracy.

For example, a pipe from a user-generated keyword Yahoo and Wikipedia search can be filtered to exclude certain results, sorted by date and spat out as a regular RSS feed. A URL can be constructed using the URL Builder and data can be extracted from other forms of XML based on this construction. The permutations are almost endless.

The really cool thing about this is that your effort is not directed at getting to grips with RSS or attempting to debug other people's code. Instead it's based on what would work well together – possible uses for data in new forms, and spotting patterns. In other words, all the things that make web development fun.

There's a more practical side to all this too. Whatever it is you want to mash up, be it maps and apartments for sale or even photos of food and restaurants, Pipes is the way to do it. It's fast, hassle free and gives you a range of flexible outputs to play with. Even if you're desperate to start hacking away with your own commands and filters, Pipes

gives you a way to skip the boring stuff. And for anyone whose needs are as modest as mixing up several blogs and removing duplicates for producing a custom news feed, Pipes can do it in a few minutes.

It's the democratisation of the mashing-up process that's exciting, because too much knowledge can be a dangerous thing. If you don't know the problems inherent in scraping XML data or the difficulties caused by geocoding, you won't be put off by them.

## Learning materials

There's still some learning to be done if you want to make the most of Pipes. But having said that, the materials out there are brilliant. To get you up and running from no knowledge at all to producing output that you find interesting should take no more than a couple of hours.

A basic knowledge of coding principles would help as you'll need to be creating loops to put your results through, fine-tuning filters, and so on. But even this isn't essential, as the instructions for

Pipes is just one of those things that's so easily picked up that your interest takes over

each of the modules are all kept in one place and, fortunately, none of the tutorials are more than a few paragraphs long.

You'll do most of your learning as you build your own pipes and take other people's apart. Many problems are already solved, like trimming random XML down into recognisable RSS, or outputting data in a form that's usable with Google Maps. Pipes is one of those things that's so easily picked up that your interest takes over, and before you know it you'll have made a dozen feeds, each one slightly better than the last.

With the next generation of web service being aimed squarely at mobile devices, geocoding is going to be a focus of interest for some time. GPS-equipped devices can update the network with your whereabouts on a regular basis. The concept of a feed designed to respond to incoming data from your handheld computer or phone will soon be added to the list of available pipes.

In fact, services such as Yahoo's Fire Eagle are already working on this, and could, when hooked into Maps and Pipes, result in potentially compelling apps. And most of this can be done without a single line of code being written. ●

## .net rating

For

- ⊕ Fun to use
- ⊕ Rapid results
- ⊕ Expanding set of varied outputs

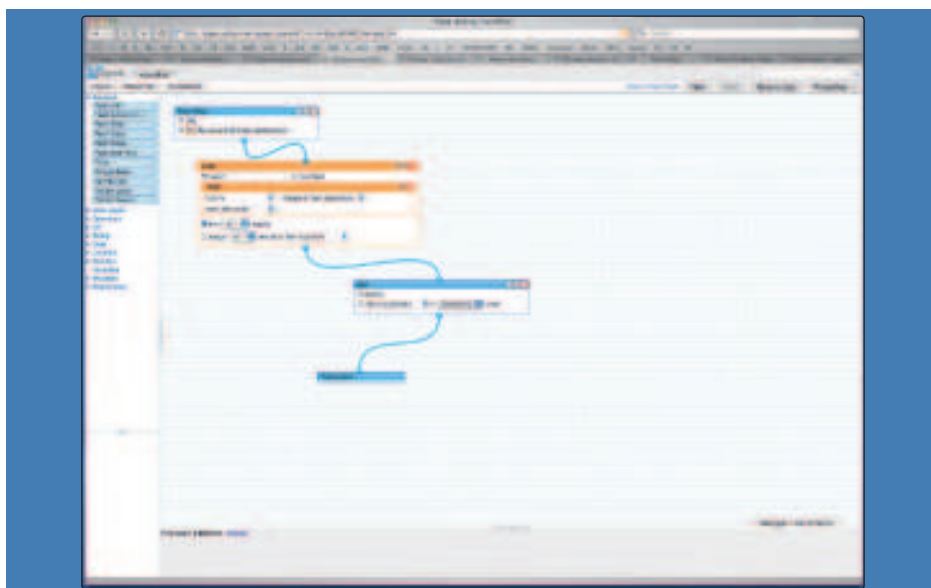
Against

- Can seem inflexible

Pipes cuts out the difficult part of working with syndicated data and supplies a smart way to prototype data-driven services in minutes.

★★★★★

Turn over for more reviews >>



**No code required** The system works by layering data sources and filtering processes with a simple drag and drop interface. Anyone can learn this in a few hours without using code

Open source

Let's switch to ...  
Firefox Web Developer Add On

What is it?  
Firefox Web Dev toolbox  
Where?  
chrispederick.com/  
work/web-developer/  
Who's it for?  
Web developers who  
want to save some time  
How much is it?  
It's free

Creating web pages can become extremely tiresome, particularly when you feel that you've pretty much finished and it's just a question of ironing out a few creases. Chris Pederick has produced a genius toolbar extension that helps ease those final steps to perfection.

The Web Developer extension collects together a set of debugging and editing solutions and puts them all within easy reach. CSS causing problems? View and edit your work directly through the browser. Trouble working out what's wrong with those tables? Just hit the outline button.

The list goes on almost endlessly – measuring, checking, editing, and more. Having such a wide range of basic utilities on hand is going to save masses of time.

Many of these tools are available elsewhere, but the real beauty is that you don't need to search for them. Whether you're inspecting the DOM tree or searching for broken links, this will help you sleep better at night.

Website creator

# Site Grinder 2.0

From Photoshop to XHTML without a single line of code

Web [www.medialab.com](http://www.medialab.com)  
Price \$129 (Regular) \$349 (Pro)  
System Windows or OS X; Photoshop 6 or later (including Photoshop CS3) or Photoshop Elements 3 and later

MediaLab has worked hard to deliver a plug-in capable of generating an entire website based on little more than a well-ordered and labelled Photoshop layers palette. For designers with a coding phobia, or anyone wanting a way to rapidly prototype site designs in Photoshop, it's a valuable tool.

Okay, so you're not going to be creating a site that wins awards for its technical savvy, but by the same token, you'll be putting up a set of standards-compliant XHTML pages, with CSS styled text, rollover buttons, pop-ups and so on.

The workflow is simple, but, if after creating the site you need additional features, or just feel the need to tweak, simply open the generated site in your editor of choice. "Job done", as Gordon Ramsay might say. ●



**Simplicity itself** Photoshop to XHTML with a button press. The results are very faithful to your design

.net rating

- |              |                                |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>For</b>   | <b>Against</b>                 |
| ⊕ Simple     | ⊖ Somewhat limited technically |
| ⊕ Reliable   | ⊖ Lacking flexibility          |
| ⊕ Affordable |                                |

An efficient way to automate simple site creation from your Photoshop designs. The ease of use makes up for its lack of flexibility.

★★★★★

Also available

Adobe Dreamweaver [www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver](http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver)  
There's a good chance you'll want to take the output of your SiteGrinder session and run it through a more broadly capable and flexible application. Dreamweaver seems the natural option given that it caters well for the code-wary while still keeping the faith.

Site creation and hosting tool

# Google Sites

The no-fuss way to build a Google-hosted website

Web [sites.google.com](http://sites.google.com)  
Price Free  
System Web connection

It's not the world's most elegant web design application, but Google Sites provides an easy-access site creation tool ideal for collaboration projects where looks are of secondary importance.

Anyone who's ever used one of those online website creation tools that come 'free' with your hosting will be familiar with the initial process when setting up a Google site. However, once you've chosen a theme and general layout, things start to get more interesting.

Aside from the regular image, calendar and spreadsheets, you're given the opportunity to add a bewildering array of gadgets: stock tickers, weather forecasts, games – you name it, there's a gadget for it.

And of course, the basic hosting is completely free. There might be a limited storage capacity with that option, but for something like a team wiki or a simple collaborative blog it's more than enough space. ●



**Basic tool** Design awards are unlikely, but your site can have plenty of gadgets to keep visitors distracted

.net rating

- |            |                |
|------------|----------------|
| <b>For</b> | <b>Against</b> |
| ⊕ Simple   | ⊖ Ugly         |
| ⊕ Free     | ⊖ Poor storage |

You'll find it hard to apply all those design skills you've worked hard for to a Google site, but a modest collaborative project would be served well by the tool.

★★★★★

Also available

Yahoo Geocities PageBuilder [geocities.yahoo.com](http://geocities.yahoo.com)  
Geocities has been knocking about at the back of Yahoo's sock drawer for a long time now, but it does still have a very nice-looking control panel. Unfortunately, that is where the fun ends and all the Java-related torture begins.