

P e t e r E i s e n b u r g e r
NetObjects Fusion
Webdesign Application
1996–2011/24

Essays. Reviews.



NetObjects Fusion

Web design application

An overview by Peter Eisenburger

NetObjects Fusion (NOF) is a web design tool, developed and distributed by NetObjects, Inc. from 1996 to 2001, by Website Pros (since 2008 called Web.com) from 2001 to 2009, and again by a new vendor called NetObjects, Inc. from July 2009 until about 2024.

NetObjects Fusion has a graphical user interface and generates HTML- or (since release 11) XHTML-code through its own proprietary database.

Origin

The origin of NetObjects Fusion reaches back to the 1980s. At Apple Computer, Samir Arora, David Kleinberg and Sal Arora did research in early information navigation applications—before the term “browser” was born and Mosaic was invented.



Screenshot of “24 Hours in Cyberspace” (1996), designed with pre-release NetObjects Fusion 1.0.

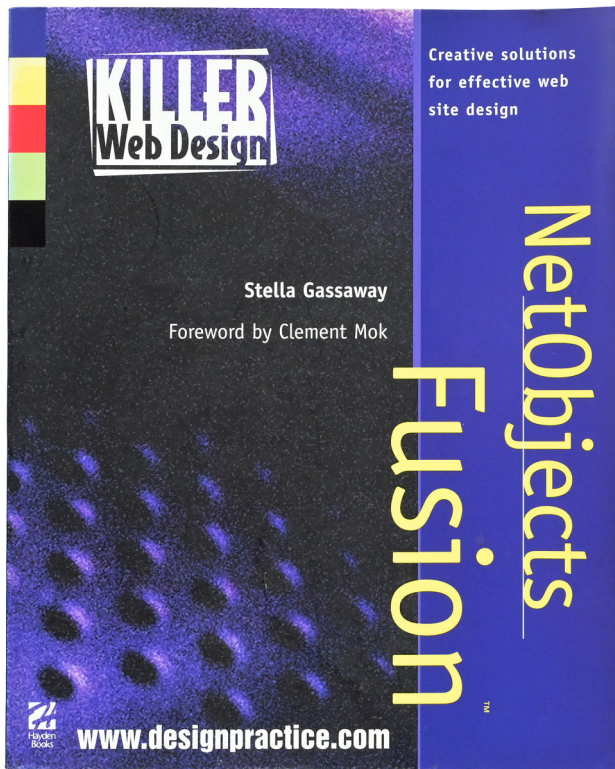
Development was transferred to the newly founded company Rae Technology, a spin-off from Apple. At Rae, the two Arora brothers and David Kleinberg developed an object-oriented environment called SOLO (Structure of Linked Objects), which was the technological basis of NetObjects Fusion.

NetObjects, Inc. was founded in 1995 with an initial investment by Rae Technology to complete development of NetObjects Fusion.¹

Reputation and market share

To accomplish the development of NetObjects Fusion and to design its interface, Clement Mok, Victor Zaud and Susan Kare, renowned interactivity designers, were contracted.

¹ Dan Shafer: BUILDER.COM – Web Business – The 1st annual Web Innovator Awards - Samir Arora, NetObjects Fusion.
Clement Mok: NetObjects. URL: <http://www.clementmok.com/career/company.asp?offset=5&CoID=6>



Stella Gassaway: Killer Web Design (1997).
The title stands for the cutting edge image NetObjects Fusion had at the time.

Hopes at the newly founded company were high² and reactions of market and IT observers to the first two releases of NetObjects Fusion in 1996 and 1997 very positive. Among other awards NetObjects Fusion received were InfoWorld's Analyst Choice award and PC Magazine's Editors Choice.

After a few years of great success, NOF fell back in market share and reputation against the competition, mainly Macromedia's Dreamweaver, though it always kept a dedicated user community. Far from reaching the heights of the first years, when sales of NetObjects Fusion peaked at \$34.2 million for fiscal year 2000 (some revenue from related products were included in this number), revenue kept on falling under the direction of Website Pros. For instance, revenue from sales of

NetObjects Fusion was \$3.86 million in 2005, \$3.58 million in 2006, \$2.44 million in 2007 (when no version was released) and \$2.5 million in 2008.³

NetObjects Fusion reached the biggest market resonance in Germany, achieving a market share of almost two thirds by end of the 1990s.⁴

² Janice Maloney: NetObjects – Web publishing software. Fortune, July 8, 1996.

³ According to the Annual Reports, "licenses" in the balance sheet represent only NetObjects Fusion sales.

Website Pros Reports Record Second Quarter 2006 Financial Results.

URL: http://websitepros.com/html/aug_3__2006.html

Website Pros Reports Record Third Quarter 2006 Financial Results.

URL <http://ir.websitepros.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=217706>

Website Pros Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2006 Financial Results.

URL: <http://ir.websitepros.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=229060>

Website Pros Reports Second Quarter 2007 Financial Results.

URL: <http://ir.websitepros.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=258014>

Website Pros Reports Fourth Quarter and Full-Year 2007 Financial Results

URL: <http://ir.websitepros.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=293601>

Web.com Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2008 Financial Results.

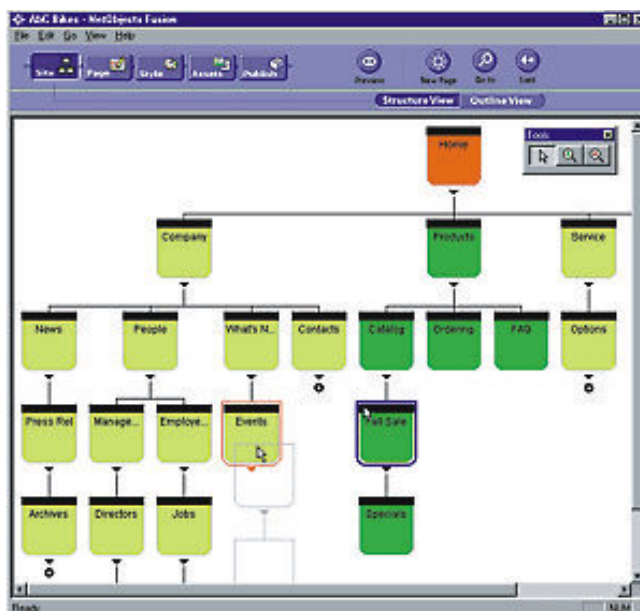
URL: <http://ir.web.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=364546>

⁴ Mark Vernon: Eliminating risk is key to SME success: Interview: Samir Arora of NetObjects. Financial Times.

URL: globalarchive.ft.com/globalarchive/article.html?id=010620001434&query=samir+arora



Page view in NetObjects Fusion 1.0.



Site view in NetObjects Fusion 1.0.

Interface

Strictly speaking, NetObjects Fusion is not an HTML editor but an HTML generator. NOF comes with a graphical user interface reminding of desktop publishing applications like Pagemaker (now InDesign). The user has pixel-level control on a WYSIWYG page layout. User actions on pages get written into a proprietary database, which generates HTML code.

The software was targeted at users who have a traditional print design, authoring or journalistic background. The developers of NetObjects Fusion intended to give them an interface and a workflow they are used to.⁵

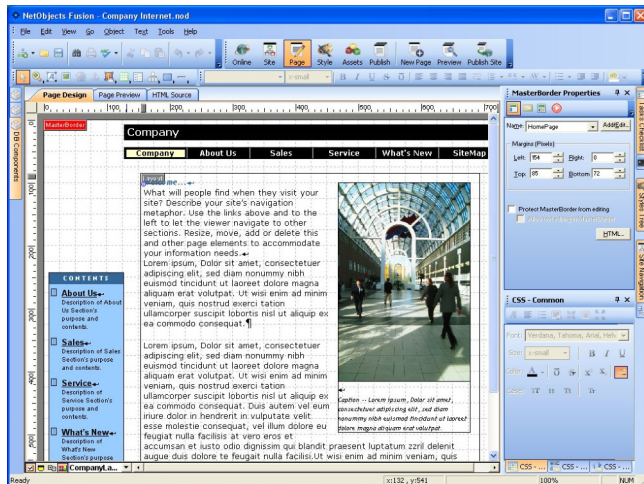
After the first use of a pre-release version in 1996, photojournalist Rick Smolan said:

“NetObjects was the only tool that would enable a team of the world’s top picture editors and writers to become instant Web page designers. It let them do what they do best—edit and write—and automatically generated finished, sophisticated Web pages that millions of people were able to see only minutes after they were designed.”⁶

On the other hand, the NetObjects-specific graphical interface proved to be a barrier for programmers who wanted full access to HTML. An external editor is needed to change HTML that NetObjects Fusion has generated. Manually changed HTML code cannot be imported back to NetObjects Fusion.

⁵ Daniel Will-Harris: Site Seeing. URL: http://www.efuse.com/Start/dot_com__siteseeing.html

⁶ Janice Maloney: NetObjects – Web publishing software. Fortune, July 8, 1996.



Page view in NetObjects Fusion 10.

Views

The workspace of NetObjects Fusion offers different views of the project, similar to project management software.

In Site view, the web project is laid out and structured (NOF is a site-oriented HTML editor). The visualization technology of NetObjects Fusion has been patented.⁷ In hierarchical tree structures pages can be built and arranged. The folder structure on the web server can follow this layout or can vary—leaving the site structure only as a logical structure.

In Page view, the desktop publishing model is most obvious. The user operates with a draw-based layout editor very similar to DTP or CAD software. Toolbars offer text, image, table and other choices to design a page. Since version 8, basic bitmap editing capabilities have been integrated into the image tool.

All objects can be placed accurately with pixel-level control on the page, can be aligned or evenly distributed with the same distance from one another. To enable pixel-level control, the first versions of NetObjects Fusion generated complex hidden tables and blind GIFs leading to a code that was denounced as “bloated” by purists. Supporters claimed that customers do not care about “beauty of code”. However, with version 11, NetObjects Fusion moved along to CSS-based layout to control all objects on the page. According to the vendor, the code generation had been completely re-written to this end.⁸ Another application from NetObjects, Inc., the Team Fusion Client (coming with the NetObjects Authoring Server), had used CSS-driven layout at least since 1999.⁹ NetObjects Fusion release 11 still offered

With later versions, more and more so-called “insertion points” have been implemented where pieces of HTML can be inserted into the NOF-generated code (like between HEAD tags or inside BODY tags). Release 11 came with HTML inspectors for every object on the page and with limited possibilities of editing code in the Code view. Code generated by NOF was still excluded from editing in Code view.

⁷ NetObjects Files Patent Applications.

URL: <http://www.netobjects.com/company/html/pr08aug96.html>

⁸ Website Pros Releases NetObjects Fusion 11. Black Letter Publishing.

URL: http://www.biosmagazine.co.uk/article_print.php?id=5943

⁹ Ted Brockwood: NetObjects Authoring Server Suite 3.0. Web Developer's Journal.

URL: http://www.webdevelopersjournal.com/software/netobjects_authoring_suite.html

table-based layout as an option to maintain upward compatibility for complex projects built with earlier versions.

Page design is divided into an interior layout and an outside masterborder area.

Masterborders allow designers to have the same set of objects on a given number of pages.

A tab on page view starts an integrated browser (Microsoft Internet Explorer) to show an immediate preview without leaving NOF. Thus NetObjects Fusion cannot be installed without Internet Explorer.

Style view offers pre-installed or online offered sets of designs with banners, navigation bars, backgrounds, text styles and so on. Styles can also be completely user-defined and based on Cascading Style Sheets.

Other views are Asset view, in which image and media files are managed; Publish view, which allows local previewing or remote publishing with a built-in FTP module; and Online view, which has been added with release MX (6), to get access to third-party modules, tutorials or customer support.

Strengths

The user interface of NetObjects Fusion has been praised as elegant and user-friendly by users and observers.¹⁰ The changed and extended interface of the versions since release 10 was reviewed less favorably.¹¹

NetObjects Fusion turned out to be flexible for small to medium sized projects. For instance, novices are able to build a small site with styles that come shipped with the product, and set up a simple online shop with the built-in e-commerce engine. Experts can take advantage of NOF's layout capabilities and use it as a mere front-end for PHP/SQL databases or advanced e-commerce solutions. According to Web.com, NOF 11 allowed users to connect to any "commercially relevant databases".¹²

Gordon Benett: NetObjects Authoring Server & TeamFusion Client 3.0. Intranet Journal.
URL: <http://www.intranetjournal.com/reviews/noas30.shtml>.

¹⁰ Daniel Will-Harris: Dot Com: Siteseeing – how to build a better web site using NetObjects Fusion.
URL: http://www.efuse.com/Start/dot_com__siteseeing.html
Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA): Gold Industrial Design Excellence Award (IDEA) Winners 1995-1999.
URL: <http://idsa.org/whatis/seewhat/idea98/winners/netobjects.htm>

¹¹ Tom Arah: NetObjects Fusion 11. PC Pro, August, 2008.
URL: <http://www.pcpro.co.uk/reviews/216273/netobjects-fusion-11.html>

¹² Reuters / Prime Newswire: Website Pros Releases NetObjects Fusion 11.
URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS122669+04-Jun-2008+PNW20080604>

Third-party support was one of the highlights in earlier times, but seems to have been discouraged by Website Pros' policy to offer their own components. Many formerly popular components by third-party vendors like Coolmaps or Bitmotion have been discontinued or remained in the state of just maintaining compatibility to new versions of NetObjects Fusion without further development.

Limitations

Scalability was a known problem of early versions of NetObjects Fusion. Depending on complexity and the user's working method, a single project might have reached its limits of performance and handling at a few hundred pages. Bigger sites had to be broken into several projects causing higher managing efforts, especially for links and menus. Newer releases proved to be more robust. With release 11, relying on improved database connectivity and the allowance to integrate XML-files into any objects on pages, scalability was not seen as an issue any more by the vendor.¹³

The lack of direct access (since release 11: the limited access) to HTML was seen as a critical flaw by many web developers. However, NetObjects Fusion was not designed to this end.

In a comparison, NetObjects Fusion, once representing the cutting edge of web design, could only be placed in an intermediate position between simple tools like Namo and the advanced Dreamweaver 10 years later.

Developments since release 9 (2005): CSS, XHTML, nPower, Essentials

Since the acquisition of NetObjects Fusion, Website Pros kept a steady pace of new releases with enhanced functionalities. Engineering had been outsourced to Romania.¹⁴ In an effort to cut costs, in 2008 the company now called Web.com "terminated the outsourced software development" and decided to "use existing in-house resources to assist with the future development" of NetObjects Fusion.¹⁵

Beginning with version 10 (2006), NetObjects Fusion improved compliance with modern web standards. NOF 10 came with full W3C and CSS 2.1 compliance and a major overhaul of the user interface. However, CSS could be applied only to text formatting while page

¹³ Reuters / Prime Newswire: Website Pros Releases NetObjects Fusion 11.
URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS122669+04-Jun-2008+PNW20080604>

¹⁴ NOF-Club Interview mit Stephen M. Raubenstine. URL: <http://www.nof-club.de/werner/interview/wsp/>
Archive.org: <http://web.archive.org/web/20031128171754/http://www.nof-club.de/werner/interview/wsp/>
URL: <http://www.ejobs.ro/user/locuri-de-munca/netobjects-romania-programator-c/49123/arch>

¹⁵ Web.com Annual Report 2009. URL: <http://ir.web.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=1144204-09-12695>
Web.com Quarterly Report 2009. URL: <http://ir.web.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=1144204-09-24190>

design stayed table-based. Release 11 (2008) offered CSS-positioned layout and publishing with XHTML 1.0 compliance. Enabling typical Web 2.0 sites, a collection of AJAX widgets like accordions and tagged panels had also been introduced with release 11.¹⁶

Starting with release 9, Website Pros also distributed NetObjects nPower, a collaborative content management solution, to use with NetObjects Fusion. The development of nPower was stopped after the two releases for NetObjects 9 and 10.

In November 2007, the basic version NetObjects Fusion Essentials was introduced for free download.¹⁷ Essentials was identical with NOF release 7.5.

In March 2009, Web.com announced that “the Company is evaluating strategic alternatives for the NetObjects Fusion license software as the Company no longer considers the NetObjects Fusion license software product core to its predominantly subscription business model”.¹⁸ The words “looking for strategic alternatives” usually describe the search for a buyer.

Addendum: The re-established vendor “NetObjects, Inc.”

In July 2009, a vendor also called “NetObjects, Inc.”, which had nothing in common with the original company except for the name, acquired all NOF-related assets from Web.com for approximately \$4.0 million.¹⁹

The new NetObjects, Inc. under the management of Steve Raubenstine, ex-vice president of Website Pros / Web.com, released three versions: NOF 12, 2013 and 2015, which all had considerable improvements, but did not regain notable market share.

A new beta version NOF 2016 was tested by German users but proved so unstable that tests were halted. Obviously, it was not possible with the application—in technical terms or at justifiable costs for rewriting the code—to generate modern responsive websites that adapt seamlessly to different screen resolutions, especially to mobile devices.

At some point in the year 2018 or 2019, the new company NetObjects went out of business without further notice. As of 2024, the sites netobjects.com and netobjects.de were still online to sell full and upgrade versions of NetObjects Fusion 2015 but have been shut down since then.

¹⁶ Reuters / Prime Newswire: Website Pros Releases NetObjects Fusion 11.
URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS122669+04-Jun-2008+PNW20080604>

¹⁷ NetObjects Fusion Essentials: Free Web Design Software.
URL: <http://www.netobjects.com/html/essentials.html>

¹⁸ Web.com Annual Report 2009. URL: <http://ir.web.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=1144204-09-12695>
Web.com Quarterly Report 2009. URL: <http://ir.web.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=1144204-09-24190>

¹⁹ Web.com Group, Inc. Quarterly Report for the quarterly period ended June 30, 2009.
URL: <http://ir.web.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=1144204-09-40519>

Support

User support was granted by the company itself over various online channels and by an active user community. Newsgroup support²⁰ was regarded as one of the better ones in the software industry. Websites like www.fusedocs.com, www.gotfusion.com, www.beyondfusion.com, www.nof-schule.de, or www.nof-club.de, offered third-party support. Daniel Will-Harris published www.efuse.com with a broad range of articles and tutorials on web design from 1997 to 2001. Most of the examples were based on NetObjects Fusion.

As of 2025, the only remaining online support is a section of Thomas Frei-Herrmann's German Mobirise Forum.²¹

Versions

All versions have been released in English and German. The given release year is for the English versions.

NetObjects Fusion 1 (1996) (Windows/Mac)²²

NetObjects Fusion 2 (1997) (Windows/Mac)

NetObjects Fusion 3 (1998) (Windows/Mac)²³

NetObjects Fusion 4 (1999) (Windows)²⁴

NetObjects Fusion 5 (2000) (Windows)²⁵

NetObjects Fusion MX (2001) (Windows)²⁶

NetObjects Fusion 7 (2002) (Windows)

NetObjects Fusion 7.5 (2003) (Windows)²⁷

NetObjects Fusion 8 (2004) (Windows)²⁸

NetObjects Fusion 9 (2005) (Windows)²⁹

NetObjects Fusion 10 (2006) (Windows)³⁰

²⁰ NetObjects Online Newsgroups. URL: <http://www.netobjects.com/html/newsgroups.html>

²¹ <https://www.mobirise-tutorials.com/Forum/viewforum.php?f=10>

²² Review: <http://www.webdevelopersjournal.com/software/fusion.html>

²³ Review: http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/c/w/cwc5/html/web_technologies.html

²⁴ Review: http://www.webdevelopersjournal.com/software/netobjects_fusion.html

²⁵ Review: <http://www.webmastertechniques.com/Reviews/netobjects5.html>

²⁶ Review: <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,1895,222632,00.asp>

²⁷ Review: <http://www.itweek.co.uk/personal-computer-world/software/2043567/netobjects-fusion>

²⁸ Review <http://www.webreference.com/authoring/fusion>

²⁹ Review: <http://www.pcw.co.uk/personal-computer-world/software/2149503/netobjects-fusion>

³⁰ Review: <http://www.pcpro.co.uk/buyer/reviews/102364/netobjects-fusion-10.html>

NetObjects Fusion 11 (2008) (Windows)³¹

NetObjects Fusion 12 (2010) (Windows)³²

NetObjects Fusion 2013 (Windows)

NetObjects Fusion 2015 (Windows)³³

Selected Books

The publishing of books covering NetObjects Fusion has decreased over the years with shrinking market share of the application. The following list offers a selection.

Timothy Webster: NetObjects Fusion Handbook. Indianapolis: Hayden Books, 1997, ISBN 1-56830-327-0.

Stella Gassaway: Killer Web Design: NetObjects Fusion. Foreword by Clement Mok. Indianapolis: Hayden Books, 1997, ISBN 1-56830-340-8.

NetObjects (2005). NetObjects Fusion 9 User Manual. Website Pros, Inc. ASIN B000FDVK9C.

David Plotkin. NetObjects Fusion 11. How to Do Everything. New York: McGraw-Hill 2009. ISBN 978-0071498494.

Further reading

Peter Eisenburger: Samir Arora. Rae Technology. Rae Assist. NetObjects, Inc. (PDF) Essays. Reviews.

URL: <https://www.eisenburger.de/texte/index.html>

³¹ Review: <http://www.itreviews.co.uk/software/s635.htm>

³² Review: <https://www.expertreviews.com/uk/software/50572/netobjects-fusion-xii-review>

³³ Review: <https://www.netzsieger.de/p/netobjects-fusion> (German)

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