Development Tools Roundtable

Tom Wiebe

Eclipse Plug-ins

Eclipse offers a wealth of plug-ins, so much so that it can be a little daunting to know what to try and what to avoid.

MyEclipseIDE offers a huge number of features for a minimal cost of $29.95 for an annual subscription and can be an excellent way to test the waters. Most of the features within MyEclipseIDE, however, are open source utilities that have been packaged by the developers, Genuitec.

Many of the included features are windows only or highly focused on Java development.

Does include decent HTML, CSS, and Javascript editors. Current Windows version includes a Javascript Debugger. SQL editor is flakey on OS X, seems to work for some, not for others (not for me).

Good starter package for new Eclipse users, you can ignore the java features if you don't need them

There is a huge number of standalone plug-ins, that can accomplish just about any task you could imagine within the Eclipse environment.

Finding Eclipse Plug-ins

The Eclipse community is so large, there are hundreds of plug-ins available and at least a few good sites listing them

http://eclipse-plugins.2y.net/

http://eclipseplugincentral.com/

Some of my Favourites

Logfile View

Tail multiple log files directly within Eclipse. Very handy to watch LassoErrors.txt or apache logs while you run/debug scripts within Eclipse

http://www.mimo.ch/plugin.htm

Database Tools

Eclipse SQL

Decent SQL Editor within Eclipse

http://sourceforge.net/projects/sql-editor-plug

Azzurri Clay Database Modeler

Great Database modeling tool, development seems to have slowed on it, only supports Mysql 4.0 syntax (along with a variety of other databases via JDBC) but, does work great with Eclipse 3.1 and Java 1.5

http://www.azzurri.jp/en/software/clay/index.jsp

Free (Pro version available in Japan?!?)

AnyEdit tools

Adds some handy text manipulation features to Eclipse Editors. One less reason to open another editor. Converts tabs to spaces, html entities, capitalization in a small, simple tool. Extends existing Eclipse editors.

http://andrei.gmxhome.de/anyedit/index.html

Source Code Management

Eclipse includes excellent CVS integration right out of the box.

CVS VersionTree offers a graphical look at your cvs repository

http://versiontree.sourceforge.net/

Subversion support provided by the Subclipse plug-in, developed by the same people who developed subversion itself, also excellent integration

http://subclipse.tigris.org/

Plug-in for many other SCM systems (perforce, Visual Source Safe, Clearcase, etc) available at http://Eclipse-Plugins.y2.net

HTML, XML, CSS and Javascript Editors

The Eclipse project itself provides the Web Standard Tools, which provide HTML, Javascript and CSS editors. They offer code completion, syntax colouring, formatting and basic validation for HTML, Javascript and CSS files. Many other tools are built upon this platform.

http://www.eclipse.org/webtools/wst/main.html

XML editors are many in number, especially for Eclipse, given it's Java heritage and the common use of XML configuration files by nearly every Java Framework.

I like XMLBuddy for editing XML files, unlike most, it's simple and to the point and, pretty much works like you'd expect a text editor to work. There's a free version that offers basic XML editing capabilities or, the Pro version ($ 35.00 US) adds XPath features and an XSLT editor amongst other things. The developer is very responsive to queries as well.

Standalone Apps

This list is primarily Mac oriented but I've tried to include Java and cross platform apps where possible, so there'll still be something there for Windows and Linux users.

Text Editors

While Eclipse is an excellent environment, it is not primarily a Text editor. Sometimes, it's preferable to work in a standalone editor for expediency's sake. As well, if you 'just don't like Eclipse' as some are bound to do, you can still use it for project management and debugging and do your primary editing in another program by choosing the "Edit in System Editor" from the contextual menu when opening a file. This setting is remembered on a per-file basis so, once you open a file this way, it will always launch the system editor when you open it, until you choose to open it in one of Eclipse's editors (Also via Contextual menu)

BBEdit is still the trusty old standby it's always been. My 'go to' editor. I find, however, that it tends to get used less and less these days, for smaller and smaller tasks. I think this has a lot less to do with BBEdit itself and a lot more to do with the veritable cornucopia of other editors available now.

If you can only have 1 text editor for everything, BBEdit is still likely your best choice but many of the other editors excel within their various specialties.

Of note, the very cool SubEthaEdit, which allows multiple users to edit the same file. It also offers syntax colouring for LassoScript files, amongst many other languages, via Adam Randall's excellent LassoScript mode.

http://codingmonkeys.de/subethaedit/index.html

A recent addition to the editor pantheon is TextMate. It is an interesting product (Mac only) that makes rather bold moves with common user interface guidelines. With its file management features, snippets, macros and more, it approaches the features of an IDE. I have only played with it a bit but, while it's very different, it also felt nearly instantly familiar to me. It is a product to watch.

http://macromates.com/

TextWrangler is the replacement for BBEdit lite and, provides a much closer experience to that of BBEdit itself than lite ever did. Probably 80% of the functionality of BBEdit, for free! Definitely worth checking out if you haven't got the full version of BBEdit, Also handy to install on extra workstations and servers, where you might want a decent GUI editor but not want to purchase extra BBEdit licenses.

http://www.barebones.com/products/textwrangler/index.shtml

Database Tools

There is a plethora of tools available here, especially for MySQL.

From MySQL themselves come MySQL Administrator and MySQL Query Browser (both cross platform).

MySQL Administrator provides nearly complete GUI control of a MySQL Server, virtually eliminating the need to ever use the command line in administrating your MySQL server. Also provides backup functions, a must have

http://www.mysql.com/products/tools/administrator/

MySQL Query Browser is used to create, execute and optimize SQL queries. It is nice, free and cross platform. However, I find that some of the third party SQL Browsers are much nicer to use.

http://www.mysql.com/products/tools/query-browser/

Aqua Data Studio is something of a Swiss army knife of database browsers. A very well written Java app, it runs anywhere, talks to nearly every DBMS out there and is generally very full featured.

It is free for personal use or, $149 for commercial use.

http://www.aquafold.com/

DBVisualizer is another Java SQL editor that, like Aqua Data Studio, connects to virtually every DBMS out there. Worth checking out just to see it's interface, which is the best I've ever seen on a Java app.

Has integrated charting features, very nice for quick reports.

CocoaMySQL is very popular open source MySQL interface amongst Mac users, although the original developers seem to have stopped work on it since 2003 at this point.

http://cocoamysql.sourceforge.net/

Development seems to have been picked up by a third party though, an example of open source software working at it's best.

http://www.theonline.org/cocoamysql/

YourSQL is very nice, simple, free tool to build and query your MySQL databases, a native cocoa app under regular development, YourSQL has become my favourite tool to use in creating databases. Its feature set is much smaller than the other tools listed here but it is just fast and simple. Definitely worth having in your toolkit

http://yoursql.ludit.it/

PHPmyAdmin — If you need to manage a remote MySQL installation and don't want to allow direct access to MySQL over the network, PHPmyAdmin is the ticket. A feature rich web app for managing MySQL.

http://www.phpmyadmin.net/home_page/index.php

Command line tools

Too many to list them all, if you are on a Mac, install DarwinPorts and browse through the available programs. If you are on Windows, most of the unix command line tools will build and run under Cygwin.

http://darwinports.opendarwin.org/

http://www.cygwin.com/

Summary

There are almost as many interesting development tools out there as there are developers. Given the opportunity, I suppose most carpenters would become expert hammer makers as well. In software, everyone can be a hammer maker.

There is no 'Best Tool' out there for any one task. Use what you are comfortable with. There are general-purpose tools like Eclipse or BBEdit that work well for a variety of tasks. It is very useful to maintain a good working knowledge of a tool like this. Often, even if there is a 'better' tool for the specific task you are working on, using something like Eclipse for HTML editing eliminates the need to learn yet another tool.

Sometimes though, a tool will provide functionality that isn't available elsewhere, such as SubEthaEdit, or just work so much better than the alternatives that it its worthwhile to keep another program around for a specific type of job.

Variety is the spice of life, don't be afraid to experiment with new tools. You never know what might lurk around the next corner.