

# INTRODUCTORY FAN WEB DESIGN

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There are two elements to creating a successful fan website: the creative and the practical. The practical element is everything involved with actually getting your site out there for people to see: web design, hosting, updating, etc. This has generally become easier over time. The creative aspect, of course, is simply creating content for your site - but that's anything but simple!

## **PRACTICAL:**

To create a site on the world wide web requires page creation and hosting.

**Page Creation** - documents on the web are generally formatted in a special language called HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language). This is a fairly simple set of codes used to format text. For example, `<i>turns on italicizing, and </i>` turns it off again. Everything between those two codes is italicized. The codes themselves are not visible to viewers.

There are a number of books available that can teach you the basics of HTML. There are even websites that will give you the information you need. And a background in HTML can be useful in many situations online. A few hours of study can be very productive.

That said, there are also many programs which make creating web content even easier. Many word-publishing programs have a "save as HTML" option. There are many freeware programs online which you can use to format your text. Basic familiarity with Windows is all that's needed. Personally, I use both direct HTML editing (you can use any plain-text editor, such as NotePad), and for more complex items a free HTML editor called FrontPage Express.

**TIP:** Resist the urge to overdo. KISS - "Keep It Simple, Stupid", is a good principle to go by. That doesn't mean you can't be visually creative, but remember that a site with a million graphics and special effects takes longer to load, is more likely to crash or look bad on different systems, and could end up turning viewers off. Strive for elegance and ease of use. Just think about what **you** like to see in a site when you're online!

**Hosting** - Once your pages have been created, you need to place those files on a server. This is a computer which has been hooked up to the internet and registered on the internet "map". Hosting services are widely available, and are quite cheap. If you have internet access, you almost certainly have some "webpace" as part of the deal. However, you may wish to spend a bit more money by acquiring a domain of your own. A domain is the address of a website. For example, "arisia.org" is a domain. For \$20 or less per year you can have your own unique domain name, if it has not already been taken by anyone else. This can be a big help in publicizing your site; it's much easier to tell people to go to "www.runequest.net" then to "www.cox.com/users/pmaranci/runequest.htm", for example!

Most hosting services will register your domain for you as part of their service. It's possible to get a domain and a year of hosting for under \$100 per year. Unless you're running a very popular site indeed, you'll be wasting money if you spend more than \$160 per year.

Another advantage to having your own domain is that you will generally receive a number of email addresses for that domain, which you can give to fellow fans or use for whatever purpose you wish.

There are free hosts online, but these will generally not allow you to use your own domain name. They also usually have commercials, which can be annoying to the viewer and give the site a "low-budget" look.

**TIP:** Your main file should be called **index.html** . This is the default name that a browser looks for if it is given a partial address.

**TIP:** In most cases, letter case matters to web servers. INDEX.HTML is not the same as index.html or iNdeX.htML, for example. Be careful! I recommend sticking strictly to lower-case, if possible. And no spaces or unusual characters in filenames, please!

**WARNING:** it is difficult to create a web site on a free site and then later move it to its own domain. In some cases "forwarding" is possible, but in almost EVERY case you will lose readers and your ranking in the search engines. If at all possible, it's best to chose the domain you want to use and stick with it.

Once you've got your pages ready to go and have acquired webspace, it's time to put your files up on the server. To do this, you'll use an FTP program, which stands for File Transfer Protocol. There are many free FTP programs available online, and some web browsers include that ability.

The FTP program, quite simply, connects your computer to your server on the net. You can then drag and drop your files to transfer them to the server. Once they're there, your site is online and ready for viewing.

## **CREATIVE:**

You can have the most beautiful website in the world, but if it doesn't have interesting content, no one will look at it more than once. So be creative! Start building up a store of material, so that your site can debut with a bang. Try to make at least some elements of your site unique, something that isn't available elsewhere - or at least, that isn't done *well* elsewhere.

Solicit material from friends and fans. This can't be overstressed:

**The more people you can get involved working on your site, the greater your chances of success.  
And the less likely you are to burn out.**

A website can be a lot of work, and real life can intervene at the worst times. It's also quite possible to burn out, at least for a while! And if readers find that you're not putting up new material for months at a time, they will eventually stop coming back. If you're not the only one working on your site, then a dry spell or real-world emergency won't stop your site in its tracks.

One thing that can make a big difference is to get your readers involved. Put up a guest book! There are some free guestbook services online. Solicit ideas and material from your readers! Creating a mailing list! Throw a contest! Anything, as long as it's fun and interesting for fellow fans.

For my own site, I created three guest books from a free service and customized each one, so that readers could enter their own ideas on specific topics. These developed into useful online resources for other fans, and a chance for readers to become a part of the site themselves. It was also a useful and quick way for me to put up my own ideas, even when I was away from my home system and FTP software.

## **Promoting Your Site:**

Ah, you thought there were only two elements? Here's the third! Once you've created and posted your site, you need to attract readers. That's the whole reason for doing it, after all. Here's what you can do to promote your site:

1. Get Listed. Your site NEEDS to be on the search engines, and in the correct category. There are a number of services which will offer to get your site listed on dozens or hundreds of search engines. Many will promise you top listing in Google, and for less than \$100.

Run for your life. These services do NOTHING that you can't do for yourself better and for no cost - and not even much time! In fact, they may well damage your chances to be listed on the best search engines. So take a tip, and stay away. Any search engine that accepts money to give you a better listing is by definition not worth the money. How useful can they be to searchers if all they indicate is which sites throw away their money? The best and most popular search engines do not accept money.

So get yourself listed on the biggest search engines. As of 2004, that's Google, Yahoo, and the Open Directory Project. You can look into other search engines from there, but those three will cover 90 or more of all searches.

To get listed, go to the search engines and read their "Add URL" or "Add Your Site" sections carefully. See what they want, and give it to them. Most have their own specific formats, but there are a few things which it is good to have on hand, saved in a file for quick copying and pasting:

A) A list of keywords which apply to the site. List the most important ones first, so if you have to truncate the list (there are varying limits to the number of characters you can input) the most important ones will still be there.

B) 100, 200, and 250-character descriptions of the site. Make them clear, interesting, and not overly commercial. Things like "The BEST SITE for [subject]!!!" will not impress readers. Would it impress you?

Once you start this process it's a good idea to keep a list of which engines you've submitted to. It's also helpful to check them every so often to determine your standing and make sure that you're still listed.

2. Quality. Make it the best site possible. That means adding original content as often as you can.

3. Network. Find other sites with similar or related interests, and link to them. Email the site owners and ask if they will link to you. They're more likely to do so if there's content on your site that they feel will be useful to their own readers, so we're back to #2 again.

4. Network Again. In addition to web sites, there may be newsgroups that are relevant to the site. The easy way to find such groups is to go to Google Groups and do a search. Also, major portal sites such as Yahoo may have relevant groups. BUT it's important to read each discussion group for a while before participating or advertising your site. Some people are very hostile to advertising on the internet (I'm one of them), and in any case it's rude to simply walk into an area (metaphorically speaking) and immediately start advertising. The best approach is to get involved in appropriate online discussions, with a small tag - repeat, **SMALL** - listing your site's address and title as part of your signature. Later, once you've established your bona fides, you can post occasional announcements about additions to your site—which is the most effective way to reach the people who will be interested in your site.

Have fun, and good luck!