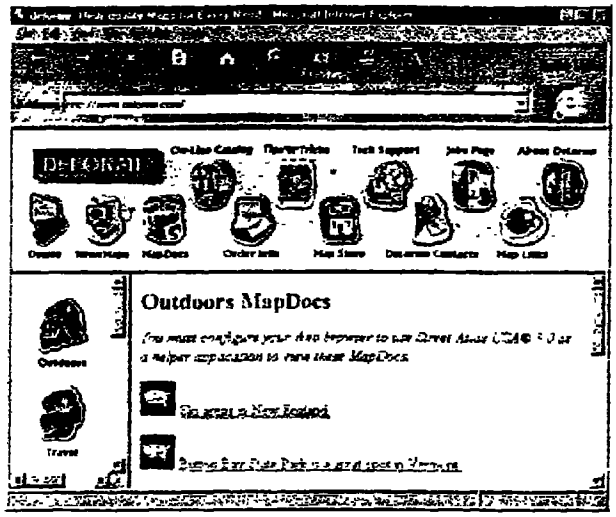
Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0, Netscape Navigator 3.0

by Scot Finnie

The Browser Battle Rages On: Isn't competition great? With giants Netscape and Microsoft openly battling to build the best Web browser, the rest of us only stand to come out ahead. In the latest round of the contest, both companies have produced even better versions of the two most popular and most powerful browsers available: Netscape's Navigator 3.0 and Microsoft's Internet Explorer 3.0.

Internet Explorer 3.0



- New, intuitive interface
- Will display borderless frames
- Support for Netscape plug-ins
- Speedy performance

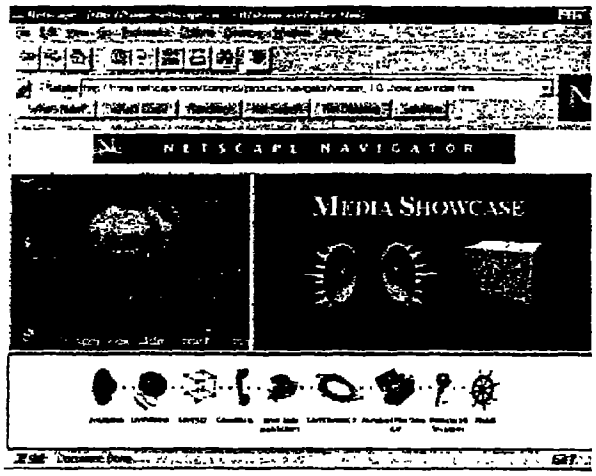
Free

VERDICT: ★★★★★

A worthy competitor to Netscape's Navigator -- and it's free.

Microsoft, (800) 426-9400

Netscape Navigator 3.0



- Built-in support for streaming audio and video, Java, and VRML, plus hooks for hundreds of free plug-ins.
- New CoolTalk utility includes a Net phone with data-sharing and text-chat features.

$49 est. street price

VERDICT: ★★★★★

The best browser keeps getting better.

Netscape Communications, (415) 937-3777

On paper, the packages are much alike. Both include extensive support for many of the same new Internet technologies, controls, and plug-ins. Take a closer look, however, and you'll see many differences. Microsoft's efforts will present a serious challenge to Netscape in the future. For now, however, the top browser is still Netscape's -- barely.

Refined and Reliable Netscape had something to prove about reliability given the numerous peccadilloes of Navigator 2.x. But our early tests of a prerelease version of Navigator 3.0 make it clear that the company succeeded in hammering out the bugs.

Navigator 3.0 runs fast and true. Have you had trouble with Navigator's cache? Netscape's new LiveCache system makes better use of RAM to support CD-ROM content. It also progressively caches partially loaded content, making it easier for you to pick up where you left off.

Although Navigator 3.0 represents a major upgrade, it's really an enhancement of the already great version 2.0. The big news is its support for new Web file formats and technologies, plus one or two significant add-on modules. There's built-in support for streaming audio, streaming video (both AVI and

QuickTime), and 3-D VRML, plus security password certificates. We've tested them all, and they work as advertised. The VRML support is particularly impressive.

Cool Talkin' CoolTalk is probably the single most visible addition to Navigator 3.0. It's a separate Internet telephone program, similar to VocalTec's Internet Phone, that lets you converse with another person either point-to-point or via a Netscape host-server connection. In addition to two-way audio communication, CoolTalk provides competent software and data-sharing (whiteboarding) tools, as well as a text-chat feature.

There are two significant advances in Navigator 3.0 that won't be readily apparent to most users, but they could improve the Internet experience. For example, Netscape reworked its Java and JavaScript support for greater reliability and wider compatibility. Even better, the company added an object-integration framework, called LiveConnect, that allows live objects such as Java applets, JavaScripts, and plug-ins to interact and synchronize with one another.

Navigator 3.0 also includes minor but welcome interface tweaks, such as completely reworked context menus in Bookmarks. There's also a nifty little icon next to the Location (URL) field that you can drag off to the desktop, a folder, or the Bookmarks window to create an instant URL shortcut icon of the current Web page. You can also (finally) customize the windowpane arrangements of the Mail and News programs.

Webmasters and Net surfers alike will appreciate improvements to Frame navigation, including support for the Back button within a frame. There are also new HTML tags like background colors for tables, and new attributes for embedding audio and video.

Serious Challenger Meanwhile, Microsoft's Internet Explorer (or MSIE, as it's known on the Net) is also extremely ambitious. Version 3.0 might just as well have been called version 4.0. That's no accident: Netscape has a significant lead in the browser world, with 75 percent market share, and Microsoft is the only company with any real chance of competing. To get ahead, Internet Explorer 3.0 has to match or beat Navigator 3.0 feature for feature, and in many ways it does.

Internet Explorer 3.0 looks dramatically different from previous versions. Microsoft paid close attention to the interface, giving it a drag-and-drop-configurable toolbar with buttons that light up as the pointer hovers over them. These enhancements add up to an extremely usable application -- and usability is where Microsoft's browser skips ahead of Navigator.

Top Performer Internet Explorer 3.0 brings a raft of features that improve performance, including better support for multiple connections and background downloads. In a simple side-by-side comparison of the prerelease versions of the two browsers, Internet Explorer 3.0 had a slight performance edge when opening uncached Web pages. Another surprising new touch is a pair of excellent bundled add-in programs: Internet News (a newsgroup reader) and Internet Mail (an e-mail utility). Both are first-rate apps that we prefer by a small margin to their Netscape counterparts.

Microsoft also added Navigator 2.0-compatible frames that support the use of the Back button within frame pages. New attributes deliver customizable frame borders, including invisible borders and floating frames, letting users improve their Web-page designs without facing performance penalties.

Early Look Many of the major features that Microsoft announced for Internet Explorer 3.0, such as support for Java and third-party plug-ins, weren't operational in the prerelease version we tested but will be included in the final release. Existing Navigator plug-ins will work with Internet Explorer 3.0, and Microsoft is working on a setup routine that will detect and automatically configure plug-ins already

installed on your PC. That's a trick Netscape should copy. Internet Explorer also includes an Internet phone that lets users share applications over the Net, and a shared whiteboard conferencing tool that supports multiple-point (more than two-person) conferencing. These two features could help Microsoft leapfrog Netscape.

Another big feature of Internet Explorer 3.0, ActiveX, was in the prerelease version -- but few pages on the Web have yet to take advantage of this technology. Built-in ActiveX controls let browsers view charts, timed events, automatic event-launchers, and 3-D animation. ActiveX components will work in concert with Java applications. In theory ActiveX is a boon, but we'll reserve final judgment until we've seen it fully applied.

Close Choice Until now Netscape's Navigator has dominated the browser market. With version 3.0 of Internet Explorer, however, Microsoft poses a serious threat to Netscape's lead. Microsoft may even beat Netscape at its own game: Internet Explorer 3.0 costs nothing, while Navigator, after years of being free, now costs $49 per copy. Ultimately, however, the battle of the browsers will be decided by content. If either LiveConnect or ActiveX builds serious support, people will want to use the browser that best supports the prevailing standard. But for now, the lead is still Netscape's.

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