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Browsers in the Ring -- Heavyweights Microsoft and Netscape square off again with a new round of beta upgrades

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Another chapter in the browser wars has unfolded. Both Microsoft and Netscape Communications have revamped their Internet client suites. We looked at the most recent beta of Microsoft's Internet Explorer 4 with the much ballyhooed shell integration and Netscape's Communicator suite.

In many ways, these client suites are similar. Both of them include a browser, mail and news reader, online conferencing and HTML-page composition tools. Both offer new features to make it easier to work off-line and there are nice ease-of-use enhancements in all of the applications.

You'll also find some of the same improvements in both browsers. Topping the list is Dynamic HTML, which lets Web designers create pages that modify themselves on the fly and other enhancements including absolute positioning and layering of objects. At the moment, the Dynamic HTML implementations vary a bit and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has yet to adopt a standard. Until the dust settles around these Dynamic HTML issues, you'll want to avoid it or use it only on intranets with homogenous clients.

Mercifully, both Netscape and Microsoft offer combined E-mail and newsgroup clients. Given that newsgroups are just public inboxes, the consolidation makes sense and encourages users to create public conversations in newsgroups where they are more appropriate. Both clients support IMAP4, which lets users create message stores, complete with hierarchical folders, in their mail server, rather than relying on the monolithic inbox offered by POP3.

Among other implications, IMAP4 makes it easier to synchronize local mailboxes on a notebook with your LAN-connected desktop by using the IMAP server as a store for all your mail. Although IMAP4's functionality

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makes this possible, you'll want to take a long look at whether this architecture makes sense for your organization. Not only are there migration issues, but you should also ascertain whether current IMAP4 servers offer you enough administrative control to keep these centralized message stores afloat.

Both suites also support LDAP directory searches and come preconfigured for popular Internet directories like Four11 and Bigfoot (among others)

Both vendors have embraced HTML messaging as an alternative to plain text or RTF messages. Within an organization, this works fine (within the constraints of what HTML can do). Externally, recipients that can't read HTML pages (at least in their E-mail clients), will receive a plain text representation of the message from both products and you can opt to include the HTML page as an attachment or alternative representation.

Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0 Beta

As expected, the IE 4.0 browser sports some nice enhancements. A highly customizable toolbar, a URL address box that automatically fills in the address of sites you've recently visited, and Fack and Forward buttons that you can expand to see a list of where you've been and jump directly to some more distant page than what immediately preceded the current location.

Microsoft has also added a nifty search pane. When you open this pane (essentially just a narrow frame on the left side of the browser window), you see a simple search page from Microsoft's Web site. You enter a search phrase and target one of the five popular search engines they support. The search pane then displays a list of hits.

When you click on one of the returned links, which appear in the search pane, you see the page in the larger pane to the right. If it's not the page you were looking for, you can immediately choose a different one from the search pane which remains on screen. Intranet users will probably opt for a better search page than Microsoft's, and the returned links can be a little hard to decipher in the narrow column that the search pane provides, but it's definitely a cleaner way of searching for a page.

Managing your favorite links is also easier, but the real improvements to managing your links happens in the background. First, IE will now automatically check your favorite Web sites and notify you (through E-mail or on IE's toolbar) that the site has changed since you last visited it. It will also download portions of the site so you can browse off-line. IE affords a fair amount of control over how often it checks sites and how much information it automatically downloads. This technology also makes it possible to browse your "favorite" Web sites off-line-very handy for notebook users or those offices that need to worry about connect-time charges.

All of this background activity is managed by a task scheduler. In addition to your mailing list and newsgroup subscriptions (and any MS Plus! system agent tasks that you had already installed), you can add Shortcuts to other programs to this folder. Say you want to print out budget summaries at a given time or on a given day, you just create a Shortcut to print your worksheet and schedule it accordingly.

Going Into Your Shell

For the truly brave, however, Microsoft offers new shell integration features. The idea is a simple one. Instead of using one interface to manipulate files and Shortcuts on your computer or network server and an entirely separate application to browse the Internet, you use the same interface to browse any computer, including your own. In its current form, this has some jarring consequences.

We're all accustomed to clicking on an object to select it and double-clicking to open it. Of course, to open a link in your Web browser, you just click on it once. With IE's shell integration, clicking on a file just once will open it, which can be frustrating if you selected a file with the intent of renaming it. Worse, the shell integration doesn't change your common dialogs (opening, printing, and saving files) so you'll have to continue to double-click in these dialogs to open a folder or file. In all fairness, you can disable this most irritating aspect of shell integration. Despite these annoyances, shell integration has some powerful advantages.

Consider the possibility of having a Web page automatically appear when users navigate into a particular folder on your file server.

With the integrated shell, Windows will automatically load a particular HTML document whenever a user opens any folder (rather like Web servers that automatically load "index.html" when ever HTTP users access the directory). The beauty is that you don't need to load a Web server to deliver the HTML page and users see the page without ever loading a separate Web browser.

Shell integration also allows the desktop to become a Web page. Alternatively, you can put ActiveX controls on the desktop itself. This can be very handy for corporate reminders, stock tickers, and other Web tidbits. Of course, many users seldom see their desktops once they've loaded their applications, but it does add a useful dimension to the otherwise static desktop.

Be forewarned, however, that shell integration is the least stable part of the current IE 4.0 beta and Paul Balle, product manager at Microsoft, admits that this "is a work in progress."

Microsoft has also implemented NetShow, a broadcast multimedia client, as an ActiveX control for the new browser. With a compatible server installed, clients can now watch or listen to multimedia broadcasts. In the

same vein as audio streams like RealAudio, NetShow lets clients receive broadcast multimedia streams from servers capable of IP multicast and RTP.

For desktop conferencing, Microsoft bundles the much talked-about NetMeeting. It includes all the technologies you would expect: A shared whiteboard, a chat session, application sharing, and audio and video feeds, if participating clients are so equipped. All of this works through well-known conferencing protocols which should allow you some welcome flexibility in choosing conference server software.

The integrated newsgroup and mail client is a stripped down version of Outlook client in Office 97. While it lacks some of the flexibility of the full-blown Outlook client, Microsoft included a simple rules system to automatically store, forward, delete, reply to, or ignore messages. The most notable omissions are the ability to connect to non-Internet mail servers and the entire scheduler and personal information manager feature sets.

Rolling out and maintaining a suite as complex as this one presents some real administrative challenges. Later this year, Microsoft will release an administration kit that should let administrators lock down user preferences and manage software updates. As of press time, the administration kit was not available.

The Internet Explorer Suite also includes FrontPad, a less powerful version of the FrontPage HTML layout tool and the Personal Web Server, Microsoft's small-scale HTTP server.

Netscape Communicator 2.0 Beta

Netscape's Communicator is now much more than just a browsing package. However, the company didn't just bundle a bunch of new applications with its old Web interface. The new browser sports some welcome advances in its interface.

Bookmarks are now accessible from a drop down list on the toolbar and you can add your favorite links to the newly customizable toolbar. Instead of just adding a link to your ever growing list of bookmarks, you can choose to file it directly in one of your bookmark folders.

You can also create Windows 95 Shortcuts to the page, much the same way that Internet Explorer manages your favorite links. Like Microsoft's product, the back and forward buttons can display a list of recently accessed pages so you can quickly jump to other pages.

Netscape consolidated its mail- and news-client as well. Incorporated in the new client is Collabra's discussion group reader. Netscape also broke the interface into two separate windows, which is unusual, but has benefits. When you first launch the mail-newsgroup client, Netscape displays a tree with your mail folders and newsgroup servers. If the

newsgroups points to a Collabra server, you see a friendly hierarchy of folders instead of the standard comp.languages.pascal newsgroup names.

With the Collabra server, it's easy to delegate administrative or moderating authority for individual discussion groups to different users and remove that burden from your IS group. That alone, can make internal discussion groups much more useful.

Switching Folders

Double click on any of these mail or newsgroups and a conventional two-pane window appears with the messages listed above and the content of the current message below. To switch folders, you must return to the tree-view window or choose a folder from a drop-down list in the toolbar. Surprising, the two-window navigation works well and leaves more room on the screen for the contents of a message.

The message composer uses HTML as its default format, but will send plain text with an optional HTML part if your recipients don't support HTML mail. Like Internet Explorer, you can easily query LDAP directories.

You can also encrypt mail using S/MIME, although some of the functionality is missing from the current beta. Notably, you can use Netscape's Certificate Authority to centrally manage public-key certificates.

Netscape also added rules to help you manage your incoming mail. This rule feature is a bit more powerful than the one Microsoft has instituted. You can extend this rule capability through Java plug-ins to handle truly complex rules or to have multiple actions taken with each message.

Netscape added a very straightforward calendar application that you can use alone, or with a calendar server. Workgroups with calendar servers can easily find the best time for meetings with many attendees and the package supports meetings with a nice agenda tool, so you can track more than just the time and place of meetings. All in all, a very capable corporate calendar solution.

Netscape's teleconferencing tool also includes a whiteboard and audio support. The whiteboard offers some layering of objects which makes erasures, in particular, a little less unwieldy. For example, you can erase an annotation over a graphic without destroying the underlying bitmap. You can also point conference attendees to a particular Web page with ease.

The whiteboard supports OLE objects so users can see live application objects, although we had trouble getting it to work in our beta. The product lacks video conferencing support, but most users aren't equipped for video capture in any event.

Along with an administration tool, which manages software updates and user configurations, Netscape added a terminal emulator with a very simple interface to the suite.

Naturally, Netscape bundles Composer, their HTML page design tool. It includes some nice direct manipulation features, like drag and drop, but most corporations don't have many employees creating Web pages.

So Which Is Better?

As with most software, the answer to this question depends on what you need. Both suites build on open industry-standard technology throughout, which in and of itself is a major boon.

As far the browsers are concerned, you can't go wrong with either one for straight Internet access. Their basic feature sets are quite similar and you'll probably find your choice dictated by which interface your users are more familiar with.

Microsoft offers some nice twists, however, including subscriptions, which despite its simplicity is a very handy tool. Although the jury is still out on the current implementation of shell integration, it offers some compelling advantages. Obviously, you need to carefully consider the impact on your users before tinkering with the Win 95 shell.

On the other hand, Netscape's Collabra and calendaring tools give it some important advantages. With a Collabra server, you can create much more friendly looking newsgroups and easily delegate authority for the content to different individuals in the your organization. The calendar application is an excellent tool with a clear corporate spin.

Microsoft offers some interesting calendar and agenda features, but you'll have to buy the full Outlook 97 client, which does not come with Internet Explorer, to get any calendar support.

Internet Explorer 4.0; Microsoft Corp.; One Microsoft Way; Redmond, WA 98052-6399; 800-426-9400; 206-882-8080; Price: no price for beta; Communicator 2.0; Netscape Communications Corp.; 501 E. Middlefield Rd.; Mountain View, CA 94043; 800-NETSITE; 415-254-1900; Price: no price for beta.

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