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HEADLINE: 'Communicator' is the best browser around

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BODY:

WHAT A WONDROUS thing is the World Wide Web browser. It's less than five years old, but already it's one of the most-used computer applications on the planet. When you have an Internet connection, it is your window on the world.

Browsers have become the key component in the battle to control the way the Web is viewed. Many companies started out writing and distributing Web browsers, but only two that matter are left standing - Microsoft Corp. and Netscape Communications. Each new release of their respective browsers brings more features and gobbles up more disk space, memory and system resources.

Netscape was first out of the gate with its fourth-generation Web browsing software, dubbed ''Communicator. '' It is a solid hit - a great leap over version 3.0 and, right now, the best browser around, period.

Not far behind is version 4.0 of Microsoft's ''Internet Explorer,'' due for final release for the Windows 95/NT platform at the end of September. You can get a preview version from Microsoft's Web site. I'll wait until it's done to review it.

For now, it's ''Communicator's'' turn, though I will draw some comparisons here and there because the two browsers take different approaches in design.

''Communicator'' is available for almost every popular personal computing platform - Windows 95/NT, Windows 3.1, Macintosh and the myriad versions of Unix. I've tried the Windows 95 and Unix versions, and they're nearly identical.

''Communicator'' is actually a package of components built around the ''Navigator'' browser. Previous versions included a lot of these pieces - such as e-mail and a Usenet news reader - but here they're beefed up. Depending on whether you get the standard or professional editions, you also get a group calendar manager, an Internet phone, an HTML editor, a bookmark editor and Netcaster, a way to view so-called ""push'' channels.

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''Communicator'' is not for wimps. The complete Windows 95 installation of the program is a 13-megabyte-plus download, which takes nearly an hour to retrieve with a 28,800-baud mode. If you install all the features, it will sprawl across 30 megabytes of your hard drive and require at least 16 megabytes of memory.

The first change users of 3.0 will notice is a new look.

''Communicator'' borrows the seamless button-bar look from ''Internet Explorer 3.0,'' but adds some tricks of its own. For example, click and hold on the Back or Forward buttons, and you'll get a list of sites you've visited in your current surfing session.

In fact, ''Communicator'' is full of ways to retrace your cybersteps. Start entering a Web address in the location field, and the browser will fill the rest of the address in for you, drawing from a database of sites you've visited. This can be irritating if you have several pages at the same address you visit regularly, and this auto-fill feature consistently supplies the wrong one.

This version fixes several infamous problems with navigating through frames. For example, with 3.0, adding a bookmark for a page that uses frames often doesn't save the overall site - just one of the frames.

And speaking of bookmarks, the module for managing them has been greatly improved in the Windows 95 version. You can save a bookmark directly into a folder, rather than just having it move to the bottom of your list. (This apparently is not a feature in the Macintosh version.)
''Communicator'' also has the ability to see Dynamic HTML, a new design language for the Web that allows for motion and layered images. Microsoft and Netscape are battling over how this standard will be implemented, so you may run into Dynamic HTML pages that don't work quite right with ''Communicator. ''

The Usenet news and mail readers have been combined into one message center, which lets you read both news group postings and your e-mail in one place. Filing messages into sub-folders is easier via a right-mouse-button list of all your folders.

Netscape also has added automatic sorting of messages with filters. You can tell the software to look for words in certain parts of an e-mail and move it into a pre-determined folder. But if you're thinking of using this feature to avoid dreaded e-mail spam, forget it. The filters aren't sophisticated enough to beat out wily spammers who hide their addresses. There are only a handful of fields the filters check - there's no way to filter for a word or phrase anyplace in the headers, as is the case with, say, Qualcomm's ''Eudora Pro. ''

The Composer, a built-in Web page editor, remains rudimentary as it was in ''Navigator 3.0.'' It won't automate the creation of frames, for example. It's best for quick-and-dirty editing of Web pages on the fly.

Netcaster is Netscape's shot at offering a ""push'' product, and it's the only part of this package that I'd give a failing grade. I'm generally no fan of the push concept, which involves sending Web content to you, rather than you having to go and get it. Netcaster is bulky, not very easy to use, slow and very unstable. I don't think I've been able to run the Windows 95 version once without having it crater on me. Its best feature is that you don't have to install it if you don't want to.

In response to complaints from some sectors that ''Communicator'' is too big, Netscape has released ''Navigator 4.0'' as a stand-alone product, selling at retail for $ 39, while the full package is $ 69. Still, I'd recommend staying away from the browser-only version, which lacks some key features, particularly in the e-mail area. The power found in ''Communicator'' is worth the download time, and the extra cash.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

NOTES: Got a comment or question about computing? Send e-mail to dwight.silverman@chron.com, or call Houston InfoSource at 713-220-2000 and en access code 1001.

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