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From: sokolsky@netscape.com (Donna Sokolsky)
To: srunser@netscape.com

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Netscape Communicator

Netscape Communicator Ups the Ante

By John Clyman (04/06/97)

With Communicator Preview Release 3, now available for download from www.netscape.com, Netscape Communications Corporation has upped the ante once again in its bid against Microsoft to drive the evolution of Internet client software and, eventually, the direction of the computing desktop. Netscape's public release of the newest, feature-rich version of its fourth-generation Internet client package comes before Microsoft has issued even the initial "platform preview" of Internet Explorer 4.0, which has suffered repeated delays. Slated to ship in its final form this quarter, Netscape Communicator combines the Navigator 4.0 Web browser with the Messenger email client, Composer Web-page editor, and Collabra newsreader. There's also a Conference module that supports voice collaboration, whiteboarding, and collaborative Web-site walkthroughs. A professional version of Communicator, also available at Netscape's site, adds a Java-based 3270 terminal emulator, the Netscape Calendar client, and AutoAdmin support for enterprise-wide configuration and administration. The basic and

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professional versions of the product are expected to be priced at $59 and $79, respectively.

We tested the Communicator beta for 32-bit Windows operating systems; a Power Macintosh version and a Windows 3.1 version (without the Java support) are currently available as well. In addition to fleshing out the capabilities provided in Preview Release 2, Communicator Preview Release 3 adds a handful of key new features: the ability to download fonts on the fly, enhanced security capabilities, and improved Java performance. (In some of these areas the improvements won't become apparent immediately, however, because the tools that developers need to exploit them aren't yet available.) Preview Release 3 also takes further steps in polishing the software's new interface, which improves dramatically on that of the previous-generation product.

What's New

Support for download-on-demand "dynamic fonts" means that users can finally see pages typeset as their designers intended, regardless of what fonts they do or don't have loaded on their systems. By referencing a PFR--that's Portable Font Resource--file, HTML authors can then specify any typeface they wish in a FONT FACE tag or in a CSS style sheet. If the user doesn't already have that font, it's downloaded from the server--although page rendering continues with a default font to prevent frustrating long delays. (Over a high-speed LAN connection, we found the time required to download the font definition was typically less than a second.) The font isn't actually installed in full on the machine, but it is cached by the browser so that subsequent uses are instantaneous. In a smaller improvement, Preview Release 3 also corrects a variety of minor HTML rendering bugs that had caused some existing characters and pages to display improperly.

Preview Release 3 also takes major strides forward in its implementation of security capabilities. Two of its more significant enhancements are support for Secure MIME

email and object signing. With S/MIME, mail can be digitally signed with a certificate verifying the identity of its sender; if both the sender and recipient have certificates, the mail can be encrypted, thereby all but eliminating the possibility that it could be read in transit. Object signing provides similar capabilities for dynamic content such as Java applets, JavaScript code, and Navigator plug-ins; users have the opportunity to verify that they trust the source of code and that it has not been corrupted or altered, then determine how much leeway to grant it. Among other benefits, object signing lays the foundation for automatic installation of plug-ins, eliminating what has historically been one of the more convoluted aspects of using Navigator.

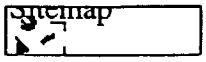
Also in Preview Release 3 is a new just-in-time (JIT) Java compiler that puts Navigator's Java performance slightly ahead of that of Internet Explorer 3.0, according to our JMark 1.01 test suite. (We've put our JMark tests online so you can test your own Web browser,too.) Netscape also reports that Preview Release 3 supports most JDK (Java Development Kit) 1.1 functionality, though we did not specifically test that claim.

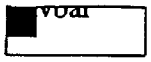
Other Enhancements
Numerous other enhancements in Communicator build upon the capabilities introduced in Preview Release 2 and elevate the suite substantially above what was available in version 3.0. To find out more, follow one of these links:

- HTML Support
- Java Performance
- Netscape Composer
- Netscape Messenger, Collabra, and Conferencing
- Application Integration and User Interface

Netscape Communicator Preview Release 3

List price: Free preview (expected price, $59; Professional version, $79)
Netscape Communications Corp.
http://www.netscape.com





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