

Internet Explorer 7.0 makes waves

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After winning the browser wars and vanquishing its chief competitor, Netscape, the folks at Microsoft decided it was time to take a break from improving its industry standard browser. Without competition the company felt that there was no need to release any new updates. But an upstart open-source group funded in part by Mozilla (the same folks who originally created Netscape) created a new browser called "Firefox" that sparked the brand-new browser wars. While the folks at MS won't admit that Firefox spurred them into action, it's hard to deny that the new beta release of Internet Explorer 7.0 doesn't have more than a passing resemblance to the Firefox browser.

"Microsoft welcomes competition because it drives innovation which benefits customers. That's a good thing," said a spokesperson for Microsoft. "Ultimately, customers will choose the browser that best meets their needs, and we are confident that most will continue to use

Internet Explorer when they evaluate factors such as end-user functionality, site and application compatibility, developer extensibility, enterprise manageability, and security backed by the processes and engineering discipline employed by Microsoft."

Maybe it's the new interface, or the fact that it's been over three years since the last major release of I.E., but the new version just "feels" different and fresh. It could be the idea that MS has finally added tabbed browsing to Explorer -- one of the key features that made me go with and stick with Firefox -- I always felt Explorer was the better browser, but I became addicted to my precious tabs. Another nice addition to I.E. 7.0 is it now handles bookmarks (or as I.E. calls it "favorites") the same way as Firefox does. Instead of exporting all of your bookmarks as individual folders, I.E. now places everything into a single html index file. Which can be imported into Firefox, and you can now import Firefox bookmarks into I.E., which makes moving between both browsers painfully simple.

"I.E. 7.0 is the right product, though late in the market. This demonstrates Microsoft's approach to the Internet browser market as being more laid back and reactionary rather than leading the development of new features," said Razvan Neagu, president and chief executive officer of KOMOTION Inc., developer of Web Gallery Wizard.

One of the major complaints about I.E. has been its lack of compliance with Web standards, part of the problem is, as stated before, it's been three or four years since there was a major release of I.E. And in that time Web development standards have progressed exponentially. While playing around with I.E., I noticed that some Web sites didn't display properly in the new release, while they displayed perfectly fine in the current version. I'm hoping against hope that these are isolated incidents and not a sign of the future, and an indication that 7.0 still has a way to

go to be completely standards based.

A spokesperson for Microsoft said "The IE7 beta 2 preview for Windows XP, which was released to Windows XP testers on 1/31, is considered feature complete. We do however expect to continue development work based on tester feedback and expect to do additional design work and enhancements to application compatibility and fit and finish. At this point we are targeting to release the final product in the second half of 2006."

Another main draw of the new version of I.E. is all of the new built in security features, starting with its new anti "phishing" filter. The new trend in e-mail spam is for scam artists to create fake websites that resemble popular sites like eBay, PayPal, etc. in attempt to get users to submit their personal account information. I.E. 7.0 anti-phishing filter successfully warned and blocked these sites from showing up. While this is a fantastic new feature, it has a major drawback, the validity of Web sites appears based on whether or not a site has a valid SSL Certificate or not, and you would be surprised at the number of websites that don't have these certifications. Eventually, I had to deactivate the filter, although you can change the settings in the tools menu.

"IE's top priority is security. While we made great progress with support for CSS 2.0, we knew that we would have to trade off full compatibility with CSS 2.0 for additional work on security," added the Microsoft spokesperson. "We will not pass CSS 2.0, but certainly will evaluate doing that in the future."

Other new security features include ActiveX Opt-In. This is a malware protection feature that disables nearly all pre-installed ActiveX Controls, and helps prevent potentially vulnerable controls from being exposed to attack. Users can easily enable or disable ActiveX Controls as needed through the Information Bar and the Add-on Manager. Cross-domain

script barriers. This feature limits the ability of Web page script to interact with content from other domains or windows to help users keep their personal information out of potentially malicious hands. This new safeguard further protects users against malware by limiting the potential for malicious Web sites to manipulate flaws in other Web sites, or cause users to download undesired content or software onto their PCs.

International Domain Name Anti-Spoofing. In addition to adding support for International Domain Names in URLs, Internet Explorer 7.0 also notifies the user when similar characters in the URL are not expressed in the same language -- even when the characters look similar across several languages -- thus helping protect the user against sites that would otherwise appear as a known trustworthy site.

When a new version of I.E. is released everyone has to take notice, it's impact on Web development and business owners can't be underestimated.

"Business strategy always needs to take into account market forces and competitive threats; so, the direction that Microsoft takes is very important," said Neagu. "Unless you're a 100-pound gorilla yourself, you don't want to compete directly with Microsoft. So, there are really two strategies. You can either add value to the marketplace by working with their products, or you must make sure you're in a space that is either small enough or removed enough from Microsoft's strategic interests so that you minimize the possibility of conflict.

"With our product, Web Gallery Wizard, we maximized both of these strategies. We took advantage of Microsoft's solid .Net framework for rapid development, and we targeted digital photo enthusiasts offering functionality which is underserved by the big players in the market."

For end users, Internet Explorer 7.0 provides end users with plenty of

new eye-candy, including a streamlined, yet, cluttered new toolbar, and some interesting new features like the ability to group your favorite Web links into a "tabbed group," a live RSS bookmark feature, which automatically updates your bookmark pages when your favorite website is updated -- which Firefox incorporated into it's browser last fall, I didn't get it then, and I pretty much don't get the point of the feature now. I.E. 7.0 also has added more options to it's Web search toolbar, more robust page zooming, and totally changed the look of it's favorites folders.

I've been waiting years for a new I.E. 7.0, while I love all the improvements and changes; it feels like all MS succeeded in doing is catching up with the Firefox folks - which isn't a bad thing but I expected much more innovation.

"Microsoft remains committed to IE and will continue to be engaged in building on what is a great browsing experience for our customers," said a spokesman from Microsoft. "While our timeline is ultimately determined by when a quality build is produced, our development team has also been extremely busy working on IE for Windows Vista in tandem with their work on IE for XP, which has caused a slight delay because delivering Windows Vista (including IE 7 in Windows Vista) is our main priority right now. We continue to invest significant resources into the development of IE and expect to release beta 2 of IE for XP in coming months."

Internet Explorer 7.0:

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/ie/ie7/default.mspx>

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