

Review: Thunderbird innovates, but Web mail wins

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This screen shot provided by Mozilla, shows a new version of Mozilla's Thunderbird Web email. (AP Photo/Mozilla)

The last time I relied on email software for personal messaging, George W. Bush was starting his second term, Pluto was still a planet and the Motorola Razr was America's most popular mobile phone.

I embraced Web email a year after Google's [Gmail](#) came along in 2004. Until then, Web email had been inferior to stand-alone desktop programs. Gmail's revolutionary approach to email prompted [rivals](#) to innovate. As a result, Web email now surpasses desktop software in many ways, particularly as people want their digital lives to travel with them as they connect from multiple devices and locations.

So I was skeptical when a new version of Mozilla's Thunderbird came along. I had all but abandoned it years ago. I was surprised to see how much had changed and improved when I gave Thunderbird a fresh look.

Although it took me a while to get used to, I'm a big fan of Gmail's way of grouping related messages into conversations. Before, you could group related messages into threads, an approach Thunderbird still uses. But messages you receive end up in one folder, and your replies are in another. With Gmail's conversations, it's all together in one stream, arranged chronologically regardless of who wrote what.

I've found that I can stay on top of communications more easily with Gmail's approach, because I can see at a glance which messages I still need to read and reply to. The old way seems cluttered and awkward.

I can also dispose of entire conversations I'm bored with more quickly - with a single click of the trash icon. Deleting messages one by one seems so last century.

Thunderbird doesn't support conversations, but it offers many other features that make it better than Web [mail](#). Made by the same organization behind the popular [Firefox browser](#), Thunderbird makes checking email almost as simple as surfing the Web.

One of my favorite features is the use of tabs. When you click to read a message, it opens in a new tab, just as new Web pages do in a [Web browser](#). I can have several messages open at once and easily switch from one to another. I can copy juicy gossip from one message and paste it in another, for instance. Sure, you can open Gmail in a new browser tab, but that gets you the inbox, not the message you just opened.

And when you close Thunderbird, it remembers the messages you have open, so that you can continue where you left off the next time. Again,

your starting point with Gmail is the inbox, whether you like it or not.

Thunderbird also has more options than Gmail for searching old messages. With Gmail, I'm largely limited to searching by keywords and a few attributes, such as whether the message has an attachment and what appears in the subject line. Even those options are hard to find - I didn't discover them until I went looking for them for this review.

With Thunderbird, I can narrow my search more easily. I can specify that all messages coming from Bob Smith be excluded rather than included, for instance. I can also have results sorted by relevance; with Gmail, search results come back with the most recent messages on top.

Thunderbird also does away with one of the most annoying aspects of desktop software - configuring the email account by entering the names of your service provider's servers for sending and receiving email. Thunderbird has information for the major providers built-in. All you have to do is enter your email address, and the software figures out the rest.

But Thunderbird falls short in a few ways.

One of Gmail's major innovations was to ditch folders in favor of labels. An e-mail from Dad about an upcoming football game might be properly filed away under "family," "sports" or "events." With folders, you had to choose one or create multiple copies of the message. With labels, you can choose them all. Thunderbird has a system for tagging messages with multiple attributes, but it is clunky and won't always move with you when you access the account from another computer.

I also wish Thunderbird would use tabs for composing messages and not just reading them. To write messages, you have to open a new window, which clutters your computer desktop.

That's one way innovation spurred by Gmail kicks in.

Yahoo's Web mail service offers tabs just like Thunderbird, and it works with messages you compose, too. That feature came in 2005, a year after Gmail's debut.

While I'm at it, Microsoft's Hotmail has a few neat features I recently discovered. There's a folder that's automatically created containing any message with a photo attachment or a link to an online photo album. There's a similar one for messages containing tracking numbers for FedEx and other shipping companies - a convenient way to automatically organize your online shopping receipts.

With so many advantages, Web mail wins for day-to-day use.

Nonetheless, I can see Thunderbird being useful when I travel and don't have continuous access to the Internet. Having [desktop software](#) allows me to read and write messages offline; replies get sent the next time I connect. A few months ago, I wrote about Gmail's offline [email](#) effort and some kinks it still needed to work out. Thunderbird is more reliable for now.

Thunderbird is also good for those times when you need to find some tidbit of information buried in a message from 2007. Searching through Gmail returns too many [messages](#) that you'd have to sort through.

I'll keep Thunderbird on my laptop for when I need it, but I won't need to run it routinely.

More information: The most recent version of Thunderbird, released Dec. 20, is available for free at:
<http://getthunderbird.com>

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