

The Mozilla Web Browser

By Robert Spotswood

An Alternative to Internet Explorer

When you think of surfing the web, does Internet Explorer (IE) spring to mind? If so, you are not alone. It is certainly the most popular web browser, but it isn't the only one. Nor is it necessarily the best one. Today I hope to introduce you to one of the alternatives, Mozilla.

A Brief History of Mozilla

After the Netscape 4.x series, Netscape (later acquired by AOL) decided to release it's browser source code on March 31, 1998 and create the next generation, standards compliant, web browser (and email client). That project would eventually become Mozilla (<http://www.mozilla.org>). Because the project is now open source, anyone can take the Mozilla source code and create their own browser (and email client).

The modern Netscapes (6+ series) are in fact, the same basic code as Mozilla. All Netscape did was take Mozilla, add in some proprietary stuff, including some plugins, and rename it as Netscape. Therefore, anything you see that works with Netscape 6 or better will also work with Mozilla. In fact, Netscape 7.1 is essentially Mozilla 1.4.

This article will only discuss the browser portion of the Mozilla suite. The Mozilla suite also includes a mail client, and a few other programs. The latest version of Mozilla is 1.4, For those wanting just a browser, a browser only version of Mozilla is available called Firebird.

As a further note, all of those who want new features (and maybe security enhancements??) for IE, according to Brian Countryman, Program Manager in Internet Explorer, "...there will be no future standalone installations. IE6 SP1 is the final standalone installation..." (see <http://www.microsoft.com/technet/treeview/default.asp?url=/technet/itcommunity/chats/trans/ie/ie0507.asp>). If true, you must upgrade your operating system to get a newer version of IE. Also, IE has been dropped on the Mac. For those not ready to upgrade, Mozilla is a sensible choice. Also, while IE will run only on Windows, Mozilla runs on Linux, Windows, Mac, and others.

What makes Mozilla so Great?

Mozilla has many great features and improvements missing from IE that can make your web surfing easier and more enjoyable. In fact, one webpage, <http://www.xulplanet.com/ndeakin/arts/reasons.html>, lists 101 things Mozilla can do that IE can't. I won't cover them all, only the more popular and useful items.

Tabbed browsing

Do you find it annoying to have to switch windows when you're looking at multiple web pages at the same time?. I do and so do many others. This why tabbed browsing is perhaps the favorite thing in Mozilla not found in IE. Once you do get used to it, working with IE becomes much more cumbersome. Tabbed browsing allows you browse multiple windows within the same window. Anyone familiar with spreadsheets and how you can have multiple sheets within one window will understand.

I use tabbed browsing when I'm reading one page and see an interesting link, but don't want to loose my place. Simply open the new link in a tab. This is especially useful when filling out forms. The back button doesn't work "properly" in many cases. But looking something up in new tab allows you to come right back to the form without having to retype everything.

Tabbed browsing is also very useful for dial-up users. While reading one page, you can get the next page loading. While it's true using multiple windows, you can do this in IE, navigation this way is much easier, especially since Mozilla tells you when it's done loading.

Pop-Up Blocking

We all know them and hate them. There are add-on products for IE that will block these annoyances, but why bother? Mozilla includes this as part of the browser. This blocks only unrequested windows, so sites that use pop-ups constructively still work fine. You can also exempt some sites from the blocking and even have Mozilla play a sound when a window is blocked. That sound can be very satisfying. :)

In addition to pop-up blocking, Mozilla can also disable websites from using javascript to play with window sizes. You can block sites from raising or lowering windows, resizing windows, hiding the status bar, changing the status bar text, and more. Mozilla gives you control over your browser, not some website.

Easy Zoom

Are you tired of websites with very tiny print? The kind where you need a magnifying glass to read. Well, Mozilla gives you a way around that. You set the minimum font size and all text on all web pages will be at least that size regardless of what the website says. Further, you can zoom in or out by any amount you want. IE only has 5 levels of zoom.

Security

As of August 5, 2003 there are currently 21 unpatched vulnerabilities in IE, assuming you are current on your patches. Mozilla has none. Some of the IE vulnerabilities have been known for months and exploits are out there (<http://www.pivx.com/larholm/unpatched/>). One of those vulnerabilities involves SSL, so if you're trusting IE to keep your bank account/credit card safe, you could be in for a rude surprise.

Most Mozilla security bugs are fixed the same day they are reported. For instance, Michael Jennings reports: "...At 9:01 AM on Sunday, the author of this article used [Bugzilla](http://mozilla.org) [mozilla.org], Mozilla's defect reporting web site, to report the defect. At 9:10 AM, 9 minutes later (*9 minutes on a Sunday!*), the author received an email saying that the defect had been already been fixed..."

Mozilla does not suffer from drive-by-downloading as IE does. This is a term for where you only have to visit a web page for the webpage to download and install software all without any prompts. I'll give you one guess how desirable such software is. That's right. Using IE, your computer can be compromised just by looking at the wrong webpage, or email. Not so with Mozilla.

Disadvantages

Mozilla isn't perfect. There are drawbacks. First, it is a separate download (<http://www.mozilla.org>) of about 12MB. If you want Java support, that's another download. Flash and shockwave are still more additional downloads. Still, if you have broadband, it's not a big deal. Dial-up users can always have a friend burn a CD or bring your PC up to HAL-PC.

The biggest drawback, however, is there are sites out there that are programmed to work only with IE. A few sites even will refuse you entry unless you are using IE even though they work with Mozilla at least partially. The prefbar addon for Mozilla allows you to easily impersonate IE and can help with such sites. This isn't a failing of Mozilla, but a failure of

the webmasters to follow the web standards. However, you, as a Mozilla user, still have to deal with it.

Sites that use ActiveX, which is a security disaster (ActiveX is what makes the drive-by-downloading and a host of other problems possible), won't work properly with Mozilla, although there is an obscure plugin to support ActiveX in Mozilla. Considering the security aspect, this really is more of a benefit.

Conclusion

As Mike Healan, author of The Spyware Weekly, puts it: "For those of you that have never used Mozilla and are still using that Microsoft browser that comes bundled with every copy of Windows, you really are missing out. The tabbed interface by itself makes it worth switching."

<http://www.spywareinfo.net/july1,2003>