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Internet Communicator Par Excellence

More than just a browser, Netscape's Communicator makes the Internet easier than ever to use.

Pete Loshin

Netscape's Communicator, with its full set of Internet and intranet communications tools, is a sort of Swiss Army knife for Web surfers. The $49 version is a suite that includes version 4.0 of the Navigator browser, the Messenger e-mail utility, Composer (a Hypertext Markup Language [HTML] editor), Netscape Collabra (groupware), and Conference (with both voice and virtual-whiteboard conferencing). For $79, Communicator Pro adds even more: Netscape's new Constellation desk top interface ; Calendar, for workgroup scheduling; Autoadmin, for centralized Communicator configuration; and a Java-based 3270 emulation for mainframe access.

The latest version of Navigator adds HTML support for layering (which allows easy animations), style sheets for easier page design, and absolute positioning. The new </Object> tag simplifies insertion of Java applets, and AutoInstall uses digital signatures for secure downloading of plug-ins. But the big news for me was better bookmarking. To add a bookmark, you just drag the Location icon onto the Bookmarks icon and drop the URL into the main bookmark list or into any subfolder.

With Composer's one-button Web publishing you can preconfigure your Website log-on so that you can upload the current document, graphics and all, with a single click. Building links, adding graphics, and performing other important HTML tasks are all part of the GUI, as are automated table building and drag-and-drop insertion of Java applets and images.

Communicator stores mail messages and news items in their own folders in the Integrated Message Center. Enriched HTML is Composer's default for mail and news reading and writing, although you can switch to plain ASCII with a click. The Collabra groupware module supports secure discussion groups with SSL 3.0, and the Messenger e-mail module supports the Internet Mail Access Protocol (IMAP) for more flexible mail.

Using a simple fill-in form, you can have Messenger sort incoming mail based on almost any attribute. It can also search Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) directories for Internet e-mail addresses. However, Collabra's most impressive new features, such as server-side searches of newsgroups, are currently available only in conjunction with a Collabra server.

Voice output in Communicator's conferencing module was unreliable, with the sound quality alternating between excellent and poor. On the plus side, Conference includes an electronic whiteboard that should prove useful even over slower links. You can

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annotate the whiteboard screen using either the mouse or keyboard. A set of graphical tools go beyond the expected color pen and eraser to let you create straight lines and geometric shapes or drop an emphasis arrow anywhere on the board. You can save the whiteboard contents for future reference, and you can drop in graphics files or sections of your desktop to share over the whiteboard. A promised collaborative surfing feature was not implemented in the beta I used.

Communicator escalates the browser war. Its simplicity and integration of Internet/intranet tools will make it hard to beat in 1997.

Where to Find

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Netscape Communicator....................$49

Communicator Pro.........................$79 (runs with Windows 95, NT

Mac OS 7.1 or higher; and

assorted Unix flavors, including

Linux)

Netscape Communications
Mountain View, CA
Phone:    (415) 937-3777
Internet:
http://home.netscape.com/

Circle 979 on Inquiry Card.

HotBYTEs
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Ratings

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Technology          *****
Implementation      *****

Key:

***** Outstanding
**** Very Good
*** Good
** Fair
* Poor
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A Smart New Look

screen_link (36 Kbytes)

Communicator's new look includes smarter icons, toolbars you control, and easier bookmarking.