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Netscape's New Browser Is the Best One Yet

Netscape Communicator is an all-in-one Internet tool that makes it easy to send Internet E-mail, chat, read newsgroups--and yes, browse the Web.

Michael J. Himowitz

According to the old saw, there are two things you should never see being made--sausage and legislation. Let's add another item to that list: software.

The insane browser war between Marc Andreessen's Netscape and Bill Gates's Microsoft has exposed millions of us to the digital equivalent of sausage-in-progress--the beta release. A few years ago no self-respecting publisher would have inflicted these crash-prone programs on the public. But today both sides figure that if you invest enough time sweating over the free beta version, you're likely to adopt the finished product.

The latest sausage is Preview Release 3 of Netscape's Communicator, an improved and repackaged version of Navigator Gold, the company's flagship Web browser. But here's the surprise--for once, a beta version passes the taste test.

Communicator is one product sliced into five components, each accessible from an icon bar that floats on your screen. This means you don't have fire up the browser if all you want to do is read E-mail--a nice touch that saves time and memory. The standard version of Communicator now includes four familiar pieces: the Navigator Web browser, a much improved E-mail client called Messenger, a newsgroup reader known as Collabra Discussions, and an easy-to-use Web page editor called Composer. To spice things up, Netscape has thrown in Conference, a potentially nifty but buggy program that hooks you up to another user for an Internet phone call, a chat session,

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or joint Web browsing. (The final package will also add something called Netscaster, which automatically receives information from content providers over multiple "channels"--turning your browser into the equivalent of a TV, for what that's worth.)

Starting in June, the finished Communicator will sell for $59. For now, you can get the Preview for free from Netscape's home page (www.netscape.com). The 12-megabyte download can take a while, but the software installs flawlessly, preserving bookmarks, mail files, and other settings from earlier versions of the browser.

Netscape veterans will find Communicator a tad frustrating at first. It's as if an impolite guest had rearranged your kitchen cabinets overnight: You reach for a coffee mug and wind up with a can of vegetable soup. Sure, you'll eventually figure out where everything is, but you'll spend a lot of time cussing until you get used to it.

The Navigator browser, for example, now includes some unfamiliar icons at the top of the screen, and the menu structure has changed entirely. The Options button--which once provided quick access to menus that allowed you to change your preferences for appearance, network connections, mail, and news--has disappeared. It's now hidden in the Edit menu. Overall, too many important commands are now buried deep down in menus that can be reached only after a slew of mouse clicks.

But once you get used to the makeover, you'll find that Communicator is a winner. Start with the fact that this is one-size-fits-the-whole-family software. You can set up individual profiles for yourself, your spouse, and your kids. Click on your profile, and you get your own bookmark files and E-mail.

Of the dozens of improvements to Navigator, the most welcome is better bookmark management. In the past, every time you added a Web page to your bookmarks, it wound up at the bottom of the list. To keep things orderly, you had to open a separate bookmark window and drag the link to the right folder. Navigator 4.0 lets you put it in the proper folder the first time around. If you're a bookmark pack rat like me, you'll appreciate the change.

Even the new Navigator toolbar is more versatile. You can create a personal toolbar, so that icons representing your favorite Websites sit at the top of your screen, a single mouse click away. Browsing is also more efficient, thanks to informational balloons

that pop up when you pass the cursor over the Forward and Back buttons. The new balloons show what page you'll be going to--hold down the mouse button for another second, and you get a history list that lets you jump two or three pages in either direction with one click. By June, Navigator will also automatically install "plug-ins" that let you view different types of graphic or animation files when the program encounters one that it doesn't recognize. In the past, you had to find the Web page of the company that produced the plug-in, download it, install it manually, and reload your browser--a royal pain in the neck.

We've come to expect better browsers from Netscape. What makes Communicator truly noteworthy are the new E-mail features. Netscape's E-mail used to be a quick-and-dirty add-on to the browser, but Messenger is now a grownup program. Messenger makes it easy to send full Web pages as E-mail, as long as the person you're addressing is also using an E-mail system that recognizes them. Messenger also filters your mail to different folders based on the sender, subject, header information, or content. For instance, I subscribe to two mailing lists, one for investigative reporters and another for online newspapers. With Messenger, I divert mail from each list into its own folder. That way, I know that all E-mail that goes to my regular in-box is personal. Stand-alone E-mail programs have had filters for years. Their inclusion in Communicator makes the program an all-in-one tool for serious Internet users.

Other Communicator features are less useful for the average Web surfer. Page Composer, for example, is a program that simplifies the process of creating Web pages. If you don't have one, Netscape's page templates can help you get started, and a streamlined publishing process makes it easier to make changes to your Website than before.

The flakiest piece of Communicator is the Conference feature. The idea, I guess, is to turn your PC into a two-way talking machine, but it's such a memory hog that I could get it to work on only one of my three computers--a Pentium with 32 megabytes of RAM. Thus frustrated, I was forced to try it out by blindly dialing other users who had registered with Netscape. After many, many tries, someone finally answered. But I never could get a decent voice connection, despite hours of fiddling around with microphone and sound settings. So don't throw out your telephone just yet. On the other hand, keyboard chat, which lets you exchange messages by typing into a little box that pops up on your screen, worked quite nicely. It should be a great hit with corporate users and teenagers trading up from AOL.

Despite the snafus, Communicator has the look of a very fine

program. But unless you get your jollies dealing with bugs and crashes, stay away from the beta version and get the real thing when it's ready in a month or two. By then, Communicator will be a treat.