

More than just a browser

Microsoft's new Explorer 4.0 will change the way you use the Internet / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

WHEN MICRO-soft Corp. finally posts a preview of its new Internet Explorer 4.0 Web browser in the next few weeks, there's going to be a flood of people who will try to download it. My advice is that if you can wait a few months for it, you should.

Internet Explorer 4.0 brings fundamentally new breakthroughs to the Windows 95 operating system, but it's really not ready for general use. The preview will be made available so that software developers and Web site creators can get a feel for the program's new features and everybody can be ready when the program makes its official public debut.

Microsoft originally planned March 17 for the big kickoff, but that date has been pushed back a few days (or weeks) until the company's developers make sure the now infamous security problems with Internet Explorer 3.0 have been vanquished from this new edition.

Last week I spent an afternoon at Microsoft's campus in Redmond, Wash., hanging out with Joe Belfiore and Dave Fester, who are two program

managers on the new technologies that will show up when IE4 ships.

They managed to impress me. Internet Explorer 4.0 is much more than just a new Web browser; it's a complete facelift for Microsoft's Windows 95 operating system, shattering the very idea of a Web "browser" and bringing the Internet directly to the desktop.

Perhaps the most important upgrade Windows users will get with IE4 is the integration of the Windows 95 shell with the Inter-

net Explorer browser. Now there's no difference between clicking through files and directories on your computer and browsing the World Wide Web. It all seems like a single program.

This means you can click through a series of directories on your disk and, when you want to go back to where you were, you just hit the "back" button. It also means you can set bookmarks anywhere: on the Web, on your local disk, or on your company's file server.

As a side effect, companies that want to run a small intranet no longer have to buy a Web server: They can simply use the file sharing that's built into Windows.

If you're interested in new features, you'll be thrilled with

dozens of nifty little gizmos that are built into IE4 for making Web browsing more productive. For instance, there's a new mode for searching the Web with search engines like Yahoo, AltaVista, and Lycos. Before you do your search, Explorer's window splits. On the left side you type your search query and see the list of links. You then click on the link that you want: The right-hand side of the browser jumps to that page. This makes it possible to quickly scan through a bunch of Web sites, looking for what interests you.

Internet Explorer 4.0 has built-in support for "off-line browsing," which lets IE4 monitor your favorite sites on the Web and download the pages automatically while you sleep. If anything on those sites has paged, IE4 will notify you. But this is not some quick hack: Microsoft has created an entire Web-based framework for

downloading data in bulk from Web sites to end users. The framework is so flexible that the PointCast Network has said it plans to abandon its current client and use Internet Explorer 4.0 instead.

Yet another new technology is the Internet Explorer 4.0 "Active Desktop" – a system that lets you place HTML files, images downloaded from the Web, Java applets, and ActiveX controls directly on the Windows 95 desktop.

In my daylong demonstration, Fester showed me how to use Active Desktop to create a stock tickertape that resides in the Win-

dows 95 taskbar. You can save a picture from a Web site on your desktop, and then

program your computer to automatically update the picture every day. Or you can have your computer's desktop be the front page of The Boston Globe's on-line service.

There's lots of other programs that ship with the IE4 package, including a "lite" version of Microsoft's FrontPage Web-site building program; a network conferencing and application sharing program; and a RealAudio competitor that supports both streaming sound and video. And there's an improved e-mail client that's pretty hot.

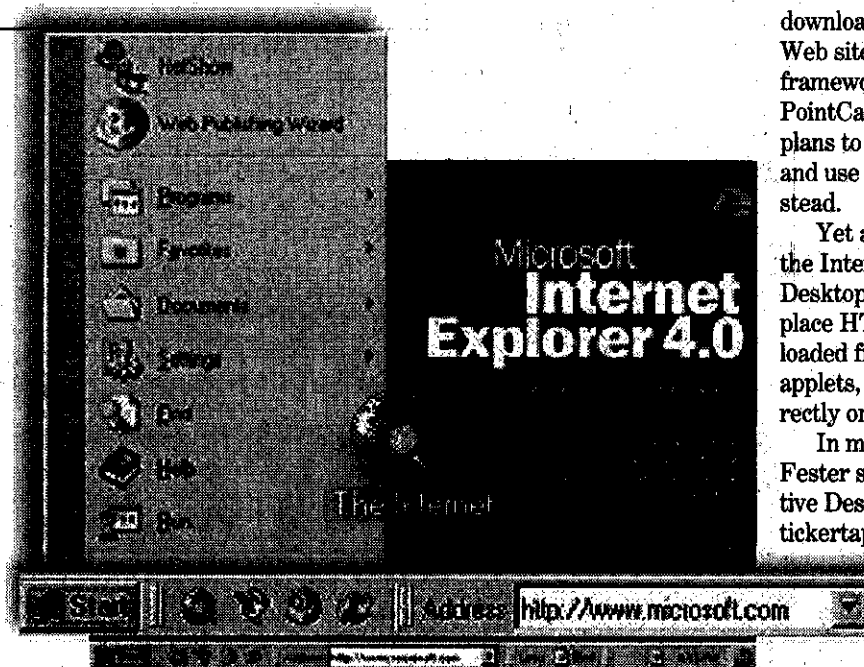
Finally, IE4 will be the first Web browser to implement Dynamic HTML, a new extension to the Web's authoring language that will make it possible for Web sites to create animations and Web pages that come alive – and to do it with files that are much smaller and take less time downloading than the approaches being used today (Java applets and animated GIF images).

The result will be a snappier, much more engaging Web-surfing experience for everyone.

Netscape's 4.0 Communicator really can't compare to Internet Explorer 4.0. Communicator is, after all, just a browser, e-mail system, news reader, and collaboration tool. IE4 extends the very underlying operating system to new heights.

And, best of all, it's free.

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