RANDOM THOUGHTS

Communications With A Purpose

The lull in the browser war is about to end

Assuming you have Microsoft's automatic updates turned on, one day in the not too distant future you'll find that Internet Explorer 6 has been replaced on your computer with Internet Explorer 7. Microsoft has been beta testing this new version since sometime in 2005. My preferred browser is Firefox (release candidate 1 is now available.) What will these new browsers and new versions of Netscape, Opera, Flock, and (on the Mac) Safari mean to the way we use the Web?

IE's interface will be changing significantly. This is true of the Office applications, too. Power users will probably have the most trouble adapting to the new versions because most power users have modified the interface to work exactly the way they want it to. With the new version, they'll have to start over.

Tabbed browsing (multiple sites open in the same browser instance) has finally come to IE. One of the goals apparently was to provide more real estate for content by simplifying the interface. There is more space now, but the menus have been replaced

by *mystery-meat* icons. Favorites and Add To Favorites at the left of the first tab. Refresh and Cancel are at the right of the Address Bar and they seem out of place there. IE 7 now offers a built-in search function and, although the default is set to MSN, you can specify the default search engine. Once the user figures out what the icons mean, it's evident that there are selections for Home page, RSS, Print, and Tools. What about the rest of the menu items (Internet Options, for example)? Those are all hidden under a » marker at the far right of the screen.

Moving or reducing the "junk" that used to get in the way gives users who are still using 800x600 screens stand some chance of seeing the content. The irony is that virtually no user has a monitor less than 1024x768 these days and converting

clear menu selections into mystery-meat icons could make the interface harder to understand.
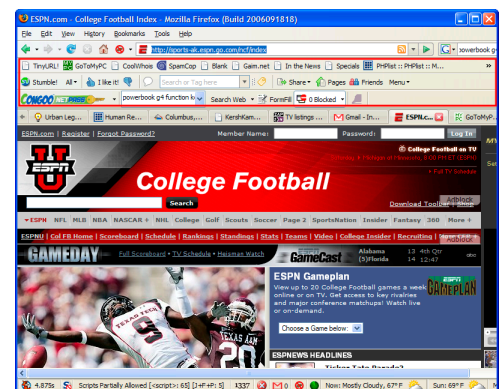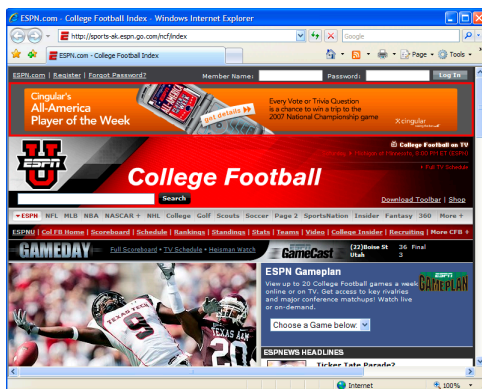
The Mozilla folks are casting out the final few bugs that will be addressed in the initial release of Firefox version 2. I didn't load Firefox beta 1 or beta 2, but when release candidate 1 came along, I decided to give it a try. By the time organizations get to "release candidates", an application is usually more or less stable and you can be certain that there won't be any big changes before the final version. What I've seen so far suggests that Firefox users will be happy with this version and that Internet Explorer users should give it a try.

In describing RC1, I said that developers are dealing with "the final few bugs *that will be addressed*" and I selected those words carefully. Most applications are released with "known bugs" that are targeted for resolution in a later version. No matter how careful a developer is, no application is ever entirely without bugs.

I also said that there won't be any big changes. Between now and the time Mozilla makes the actual release code available, they may fix a bug or two and they may disable a feature, but they won't add anything new. Disabling a feature happens only when a serious bug becomes evident late in the development cycle, there's insufficient time to fix it, and it is sufficiently serious that the application will better serve users if the buggy feature is missing. That's unusual and I don't expect it to happen here.

Firefox now includes an anti-phishing tool that is turned on by default. It checks sites that you browse to against a list of known phishing sites. Although this list is regularly updated, phishing attacks are

launched so quickly that the feature offers the option to check sites against an online service such as Google for more up-to-date protection.

By default, Firefox opens links in new tabs instead of new windows. The History menu keeps a list of recently closed

tabs, and a shortcut lets users quickly re-open an accidentally closed tab.

The Session Restore feature restores windows, tabs, text typed in forms, and in-progress downloads from the last user session. It is activated automatically when the browser must be restarted (following an application update or installation of an add on). It is also activated if the browser crashes. Users will be asked if they want to resume their previous session.

Although installing version 2 disabled many of the extensions I rely on, there's a relatively easy solution. The *Nightly Tester Tool* that's designed for testers who download the nightly Firefox builds can mark any extension as *compatible* with version 2. If the extension really isn't compatible, it won't work; most are compatible, though. In my case, all of the Add Ons appear to work as expected.

The Nightly Tester Tool also works with Themes, but interface changes will probably make most themes somewhat problematic. For example, the new Close icon that appears on the active tab will not appear with old-style themes even though they have been made "compatible".

Right-clicking the tab bar allows the user to reload the current tab or all tabs, to close all but the selected tab, and to bookmark the current tab or all tabs. The number of options and settings continues to increase, which makes the application even more flexible. ß

Built to last

Remember the Mars Rovers? "Opportunity", a robot about the size of a golf cart, has been wandering around Mars for 1000 days. Scientists would have been happy with 9 months of service and that's what Opportunity was designed to provide. It's been running for 10 times that period and is now standing at Victoria Crater, the Martian equivalent of the Grand Canyon.

The second rover, "Spirit", is also still going strong. They are working on opposite sides of the planet to collect data about rock formations, soil, and atmosphere. Peering into Victoria Crater has geologists excited because the depth gives a vision into the planet's past.

In 1000 days, the rovers have logged less than a total of 10 miles. At a maximum speed of 44 yards per day, Opportunity has traveled a little less than 6 miles and Spirit has traveled a bit less than 4.

The most recent problem scientists solved was a software update. Tasks were assigned by days. Days were numbered. The counter in the software had enough space for 3 digits because few expected the rovers to run for more than 100 days and even the most optimistic figured 300 days would be the best they could expect. With the rovers now passing 1000 days in service, the counter had to be expanded. ß

TypeIt4Me types it for me

Although most of my work is done on a Windows machine, TypeIt4Me is one of those programs that makes me wish that the Mac was my primary work machine. The program watches keyboard activity and if I type "bbl" followed by a space it will be expanded to Bill Blinn. So it's a keyboard expansion program.

TypeIt4Me goes beyond what a similar program for Windows users (Smart Type Assistant) does by being able to expand an abbreviation to text that includes both formatting and images.

A feature added to the most recent version eliminates the need to create two abbreviations for each noun – one singular and the other plural. If I define "bkm" to expand to "bookmark", then I can type "bkms" and TypeIt4Me obligingly expands it to "bookmarks". This feature is turned off by default because it will cause problems for people who upgrade from the previous version, which didn't have the feature.

Microsoft Word users know that the application automatically corrects "teh" with "the". Text processors and other applications don't. TypeIt4Me adds this capability to every program. Knowing that I often write "hopsital" when I mean "hospital", I defined an abbreviation that automatically corrects this error in any application.

Users may define several lists of abbreviations for use by various people or in various applications. If you're a programmer, for example, you could have a special file of abbreviations that create constructs in C++, another file for Perl, and yet another for Javascript.

TypeIt4Me can insert the date and time in whatever format you like. I defined "dtm" to insert the date and time this way: *Thursday, 24 August 2006, 20:20:27*, which can save quite a bit of typing.

Although the program's previous limit of abbreviations (2700) isn't one that a lot of people ran into, the new version has no limit and each abbreviation can contain up to 32,000 characters.

You can download the shareware version and give it a try. New users will pay $27. Users of previous versions can upgrade for $9 or, for those who paid after July 1, 2005, the upgrade is free.
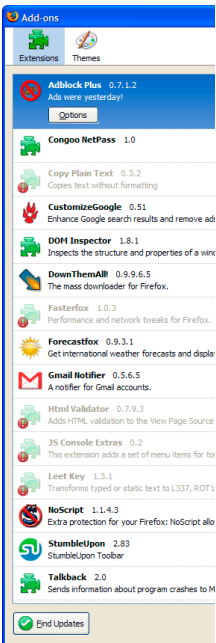
Overall: TypeIt4Me is the best way for Mac users to make typing take less time. I wish it would come to Windows computers.

Mac users who want to take a look at the program can download the shareware version for a free trial by visiting www.typeit4me.com. ß

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"To recruit and retain competent employees, a manager must select qualified applicants, promote from within whenever possible, and make equitable selections for advancement."