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Browser Comp on the Bleeding Edge

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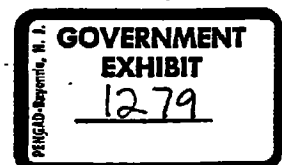
The browser market went through a shakedown, and two superpowers emerged. Mosaic dropped out, choosing to focus its efforts on browsers for the PDA, pager, and set-top box market. NetManage and IBM (for OS/2) are offering their browsers as a mere courtesy, and America Online has jumped in with Microsoft, bundling Internet Explorer on the Win 95 platform.

You may have guessed already that Netscape and Microsoft are the ruling giants, commanding more than 90 percent of the browser market share. But it's not just about browsers any longer: The two companies are packaging additional features and applications designed to make the Web the center of the computing environment. Netscape Communicator, with Navigator 4.0 as its browser, is a whole suite of applications, from discussion threads to a group calendar. And Microsoft is adding an HTML hyperlinked desktop to Internet Explorer 4.0.

This review will focus on the bare-bones features of the various browsers. In addition to the 3.0 and 4.0 versions of Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer, we're including browsers from America Online, NetManage, IBM, and a relatively new addition from the Norwegian company, Opera Software.

**THE BROWSER MARKET
HAS BEEN WEEDED
BACK, MAKING WAY FOR
HARDIER STOCK.
WILL THE NEW CROP
STAND UP TO THE LAST?**

We ran each browser on every available platform through ZD Benchmark Operations' BrowserComp 1.1, which tests support for all of the basic HTML 3.2 tags, as well as advanced tests such as Java, frames support, and sound. (You can test your own browser using BrowserComp at www.zdnet.com/zdbop/browserc/browserc.html). For complete results of our compatibility testing, go to the ZDI MegaSite. Besides support for advanced features, we also looked at simple features such as ease of use, look and feel, bookmark



features such as ease of use, look and feel, bookmark organization, and plug-in compatibility. For more information about the background of browser development, visit www.icomputing.com/zdlabs/browser/browser1.html to see the results of our first browser compatibility test.

Netscape Communicator and IE 4.0 were in beta when we reviewed them, but both browsers satisfied all the basics of HTML 3.2 support except for one minor tag in each--Navigator failed Link turns red, while Explorer choked on Line no-shade; it's likely both companies will address the problem by ship time.

Testbed

We tested on five Dell Pentium 166 workstations with 32MB of RAM and 2GB hard drive, an Apple 8500/180 with 32 MB of RAM and 2GB hard drive, and an SGI with 64MB of RAM and 2GB hard drive. The operating systems were Windows 95, NT 4.0, and 3.11, OS/2 Warp 3.0, Mac OS 7.5.3, and Irix 6.2.

Each browser was run through ZDBOp's Browser Comp 1.1.



TOP

NetManage has clearly abandoned the browser market; the company is not working to improve its product further, but we included it here because it is bundled with NetManage's connectivity products. Web Explorer for OS/2 is a token attempt at a browser, but we included it for purposes of comparison with Opera and Netscape 2.02. Finally, we included America Online for its sheer number of users.

THE PLATFORMS Windows 95 and NT users have a wide choice of browsers. Navigator 3.0, 4.0, Internet Explorer 3.0, 4.0, America Online, NetManage, and Opera 2.12 all run on the 95 and NT platforms. Windows 3.x users also get diversity, sans IE 4.0. Mac users are offered Navigator 3.0 and 4.0, AOL, and IE 3.02, with IE 4.0 support promised later this year. OS/2 users get slim pickings--IBM's Web Explorer 1.2 and Navigator 2.02--but thanks to Opera Software there's a competent browser to be had. Netscape 2.02 isn't reviewed in the body of this article, but it is included in our features chart and our BrowserComp testing. Netscape plans on bypassing Navigator 3.0 for OS/2 entirely and providing Navigator 4.0, for which Netscape has written its own code for Java support. Finally, on the Unix platform, Netscape offers both 3.0 and 4.0, and Microsoft plans to extend IE 4.0 to Unix in the future.

Netscape was clearly the best performer, turning in solid results across all 14 of its supported platforms. It has a common interface on the Mac, OS/2, Unix, and Windows (95, NT, and 3.x) and did consistently well with HTML tag tests. Internet Explorer is available only on Windows and Mac platforms with IE 4.0 available only on 95 and NT. IE 4.0 did very well in our tests on Windows 95 and NT, a marked improvement over IE 3.02, now supporting blinking text, right-aligned images, table alignment, and unordered lists.

THE PRODUCTS

PRODUCT	PLATFORM
<u>America Online</u>	Windows 3.x, 95, NT, Mac
<u>Internet Explorer 3.02</u>	Windows 3.x, 95, NT, Mac
<u>Internet Explorer 4.0</u>	Windows 95, NT 4.0
<u>Navigator 3.0</u>	Mac 68K, Power PC, Unix, Windows 3.1, 95, NT
<u>Navigator 4.0</u>	Mac, Power PC, Unix, Windows 3.1, 95, NT
<u>Opera 2.12</u>	Windows 3.1, 95, NT, OS/2
<u>Web Explorer 1.2</u>	OS/2
<u>WebSurfer 4.6. 5.0</u>	Windows 3.1, 95, NT

ZOE SAYS:



Navigator 3.0 and IE 3.0.

I'm still sticking with Navigator 3.0 and IE 3.0. However, I am looking forward to the release of both IE 4.0 and Navigator 4.0, which provide absolute positioning of text and graphics using different tags to achieve the same result.

DENNIS SAYS:



Navigator 3.0.

What a headache it would be to have different browsers on my multiple-platform environment. However, while Opera currently lacks a Unix version, I like the fact that it gives me unique features in administering the client enterprise-wide.

IKE SAYS:



IE 3.0.

I choose IE 3.0 due to its support of Netscape plug-ins and ActiveX controls. However, I'm looking forward to the release of Netscape Communicator, as it will come equipped with Composer. It should give me the from-the-hip Web page editing I need, on demand.

WHICH ONE TO CHOOSE As with any class of products, your operating system or computing environment should weigh heavily as you decide upon a browser. If you're running Windows then it's a fair shake between the browsers from Navigator and Microsoft, but Internet Explorer is free. That's hard to beat.

Mac users might want to choose Communicator, as it's the most advanced browser in the lot. Unix users should choose Communicator hands down because it seems Netscape is the only commercial browser company that pays attention to that platform, although, as we mentioned, Microsoft does plan to develop IE 4.0 for Unix. OS/2 users should check out Opera. Slightly better than Navigator 2.0 in the compatibility tests, its advanced user interface renders it the browser of choice.

FINAL ANALYSIS: NAVIGATOR 3.0 Out of all of the browsers currently shipping, it rates highest in HTML compatibility across all platforms. While Navigator 4.0 and IE 4.0 have made huge strides in improving their browsers, at press time they were still in beta, making it unwise to cast final judgment on the products here. However, both performed exceedingly well on the browser compatibility tests. Navigator has an advantage in the number of third-party plug-ins written specifically for it; of those, IE supports most, but more importantly, version 4.0 of IE has support for ActiveX controls whereas Navigator will continue to rely on plug-ins.

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