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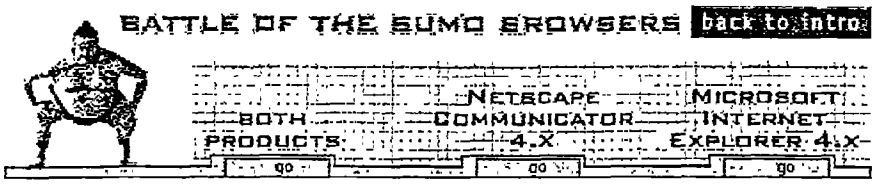
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Editors' Choice

CNET recommends Netscape Communicator 4.05

In the months since the 4.0 browsers shipped, a lot has changed. Both vendors are closer to supporting the emerging Document Object Model that will allow true browser-independent dynamic HTML. Microsoft has made a push toward cross-platform compatibility by delivering Solaris, Win16, and Mac versions of IE 4.*x*. Netscape has gone even farther by opening its source code to the public. We've also seen the browser makers take swift steps to fix a number of bugs.

In short, both browsers are better than they used to be. But Netscape Communicator is our new choice. We originally gave our Editors' Choice award to Internet Explorer based on its innovative features and fast performance. Over time, however, our experiences--and those of our readers--showed that the demands IE 4.0 places on systems can cause some serious problems. We saw and heard reports of video errors, resource shortages, and--in a few cases--system failures that forced Windows reinstalls. IE 4.01 is less risky, but it's not completely stable yet. So we pick Communicator 4.05 as our choice for Windows 95/Windows NT 4.0, despite IE 4.01's superior feature set and its performance edge.

It is worth noting that the Mac, Windows 3.1, and Unix versions of IE are basically free of the problems that plague the Windows 95 version. Like

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all browsers, they have their quirks, but since they can't manipulate the operating system to the same degree as their Win95 counterpart, the potential for damage is considerably smaller.

If you're on Windows 3.1 with limited resources, IE 4.*x* is a little easier on your system, and its mail program is tough to beat. Like its IE for Mac cousin, IE 4.*x* for Windows 3.1 has no built-in HTML editing or online conferencing tools, so you'll have to go with Communicator if those things are important to you. If you're really strapped for resources, you might find that an alternative browser like Opera is just what you need.

If you use a Macintosh, yours is a tough choice. Internet Explorer uses less RAM, renders HTML more quickly, and performs significantly better with Java. Its mail client is vastly superior to Communicator's as well. If you're a home user who doesn't need conferencing or Wysiwyg authoring, we'd suggest going with IE. If, on the other hand, you're in a corporate setting and online conferencing and integrated HTML editing are important to you, Communicator is your only choice.

Microsoft has made a noble push into the UNIX market, and we have every reason to believe that'll continue. As it now stands, though, IE only supports Solaris--and only as a Preview release. While we're waiting on the true arrival of IE 4.*x* for UNIX, Communicator is still the only real choice.

Go to "Overview: Netscape Communicator 4.05"

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Browsers

WINNER Communicator 4.x

It's getting harder to remember this far back, but just two years ago, these two browser suites were really just browsers. And while both suites now sport tons of nonbrowser features like email and conferencing, they are--at their cores--still all about browsing the World Wide Web.

The latest thing in Web browsers is dynamic HTML. With it, you can create the kinds of multimedia-enriched, dynamic Web pages previously only possible with a plug-in, a Java applet, or an ActiveX control. Unfortunately, the standards for dynamic HTML are still in flux. Until the W3C comes out with the official standard, we're stuck with incompatibilities between IE 4.x's version of dynamic HTML and Communicator's.

While they may not yet agree on dynamic HTML, both browsers have undergone some user interface enhancements. Both products finally have toolbars you can turn on or off with the click of a mouse. And both now support our beloved IntelliMouse, which makes scrolling through long Web pages so much easier (although Microsoft supports more of its features than Netscape does).

It's nice to see that as both Netscape and Microsoft beef up their browser suites, they haven't forgotten about the browser itself.

Browsers	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
User interface		
Context menus	Yes	Yes
Tool tips	Yes	Yes
Configurable toolbars	Some	Yes
IntelliMouse support	Yes	Yes
Search enhancements	No	Search Bar
Offline browsing		
Browsable cache	No	Yes
Subscriptions	Yes	Yes
Notification	Yes	Yes
HTML support		
HTML 3.2	Yes	Yes
HTML editor	Composer	FrontPage Express
Cascading style sheets	Yes	Yes
Dynamic HTML	Layer tag	Yes
Full screen mode	Yes	Yes
Layers	Layer tag, style sheets	Style sheets

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Mail and news

WINNER Internet Explorer 4.x

In many ways, messaging is the most important part of the Internet. Email is currently the most common and direct form of push technology--we get hundreds of little pieces of information dropped into our electronic in-boxes every day. And newsgroups offer a wealth of information and opportunities for community-building, both on the public Usenet and in private newsgroups. But this incredible ocean of information is getting more difficult to navigate. With varying degrees of success, Netscape and Microsoft have added features to their mail and news clients to address the deluge.

It looks like we may have finally arrived at a common solution for Internet address books: Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP). An LDAP server can store user information, such as phone numbers and snail mail and email addresses. Netscape's Messenger and Microsoft's Outlook Express both act as LDAP clients, so corporations standardizing on LDAP servers can easily set up one consistent, up-to-date address book that everyone in the company can use. In fact, Web sites such as Four11 run LDAP servers that the public can access.

We're less pleased about HTML-formatted messages. With both Messenger and Outlook Express, HTML has become the standard way to send formatted messages. You can send out plain text messages for anyone still running HTML-ignorant email packages and newsreaders. But anyone who gets an HTML message in a text-only client isn't going to be happy as they try to separate the content from the code.

Neither Messenger nor Outlook Express is really ready to be a full-enterprise messaging client like Lotus Notes or Novell Groupwise. But both are clearly superior to their predecessors and show the promise of standards-based messaging.

Mail and news	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Mail		
IMAP	Yes	Yes
LDAP	Yes	Yes
Offline reading	Yes	Yes
Offline reply	Yes	Yes
Inbox Direct support	Yes	Yes
Filters	Yes	Yes
Multiple in-boxes	Yes	Yes
Create HTML mail	Yes	Yes
Nested folders	Yes	Yes
News		
Multiple news servers	Yes	Yes
Offline reading	Yes	Yes
Offline reply	Yes	Yes
Automatic threading	Yes	Yes
Filters	Yes	Yes
Message security		
Digital signatures	Yes	Yes
Encryption	Requires certificate	Requires certificate

Go to "Mail and news: Netscape Communicator 4.05"

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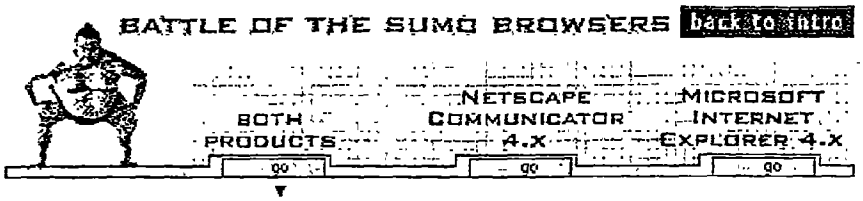

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Authoring

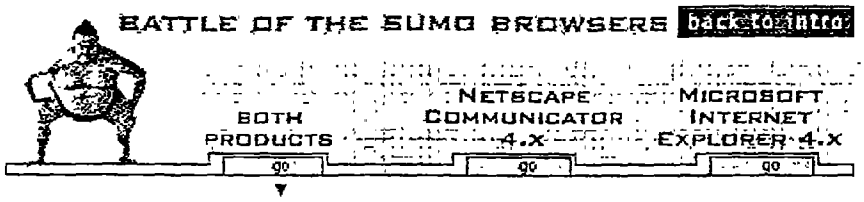
WINNER Communicator 4.x

You're never going to confuse the HTML authoring tools included with either of these browser suites for a serious Wysiwyg HTML editor that can create and maintain an entire Web site. The HTML capabilities are there largely to support messaging--both Netscape Composer and Microsoft FrontPage Express help you create formatted email messages and newsgroup postings.

As such, they support only the basics of HTML editing: tables; text formatting, such as headings and fonts; and image and link insertions. Neither authoring tool supports advanced features like style sheets or frames. For those, you'll need a standalone HTML editor.

Authoring	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Wysiwyg HTML editor	Yes	Yes
HTML in email	Yes	Yes
Tables	Yes	Yes
Frames	No	No
Objects	No	ActiveX, Java
Image editing	No	No
Style sheets	No	No

Go to "Authoring: Netscape Communicator 4.05"



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Push

WINNER Tie

We're still not sure that push technology is really the next big thing in Internet browsing. But clearly both Netscape and Microsoft have decided to make a go of it--they both include push support in their respective browser suites.

The companies' different approaches to push clearly show their divergent philosophies. Netscape's Netcaster is a Java- and JavaScript-based add-on for the version of Navigator 4.*x* that comes with both the full Communicator suite and the standalone browser. Netcaster's separate nature means Netscape can eventually deliver its push solution to all the platforms where Navigator 4.*x* runs.

Microsoft has decided to marry its push solution much more intimately to its browser, in the same way that it has substantially incorporated its browser into its operating system. IE 4.*x*'s Active Channels are inseparable from the browser itself: you subscribe to a channel as part of your Favorites. You can even browse the channels when IE 4.*x* is offline.

Push	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
HTML on the desktop	Yes	Yes
Screensaver mode	Yes	Yes
Subscriptions	Yes	Yes
Content providers	ABC News, CNET	PointCast, BackWeb
Desktop applets	No	Yes
Content specification	HTML, JavaScript	CDF
Offline mode	Yes	Yes

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Performance

WINNER Internet Explorer 4.x

Speed freaks, be warned: these bloated browsers are slower to launch than their previous incarnations, but that's just the nature of the beast. However, both run Java applets more quickly, which may or may not be so important as more and more Web sites remove them. But if your intranet applications rely on applets, you'll benefit from the performance bump.

We tested using Pendragon Software's CaffeineMark 3.0, a popular Java benchmark, to test the speed of both Netscape and Microsoft. Internet Explorer 4.*x* handily beat Communicator 4.*x* on the test, by just over 20 percent. With the releases of Communicator 4.04 and 4.05, Netscape has improved the speed at which applets load, but the company still hasn't completely closed the Java performance gap.

We also tried a simple large-image test. CNET has a test page with links to GIFs of various sizes. You click a link and time how long it takes for the browser to load the page. To test these browsers, we choose the largest test image, a 1.77MB GIF of Richard Hart's smiling face. We tested early in the morning, when essentially we were the only people on CNET's internal network, to avoid introducing too much variable delay from network traffic. Again, Internet Explorer beat Communicator each time we ran the test.

Our final speed test was to see how fast both browsers load and render HTML pages. We grabbed a representative sample of pages off the Web and created copies on an internal test server. We then instrumented the pages with a JavaScript timer to see how long it took to load each page. The number in the table below represents the total load time for a set of 8 pages, averaged over three runs. As with the large-image test, we ran under near-ideal conditions on our network, so your mileage will vary. But in our testing, Internet Explorer was consistently faster.

Performance	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Speed		
CaffeineMark 3.0 *	637	773
Large GIF download	22 seconds	16.5 seconds
Load HTML	35.4 seconds	26.8 seconds

* Larger value is better

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Extensibility

WINNER Tie

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Then Java applets arrived on the scene. Like plug-ins, Java can add new features to plain browsers. But unlike plug-ins, which you have to download and install, Java applets install themselves on demand. Microsoft saw the value of this approach and married it to OLE technology to produce ActiveX Controls. As with Java, ActiveX Controls download and install themselves automatically. However, they provide the performance of a plug-in. The downside: where Java applets work on any Java-ready platform, ActiveX Controls run on Windows 95 and Windows NT 4.0 only, and their added functionality may come at a cost to security.

That's where the situation has stood since the 3.*x* browsers arrived, and not a whole lot has changed with the 4.*x* versions. Communicator 4.*x* supports a new way to download applets and some changes to the JavaScript scripting language, while IE 4.*x* gets an updated version of JavaScript and a new way to package HTML pages called scriptlets. Other than that, extensibility for the two browsers remains essentially on par.

Extensibility	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Java		
JIT	Yes	Yes
Installable applets	JAR	CAB
Scripting		
JavaScript	JavaScript 1.2	ECMAScript
VBScript	No	Yes
Other	No	ActiveX scripting
Plug-ins/ActiveX		
Dynamically installed	Plug-ins	ActiveX Controls
Active document	Yes	Yes
Multimedia		
AVI	Yes	Yes
MPEG	No	Yes
QuickTime	Yes	Yes
VRML	2.0	2.0
Streaming media	RealPlayer	RealPlayer, NetShow
Other	AIFF, WAV	AIFF, WAV

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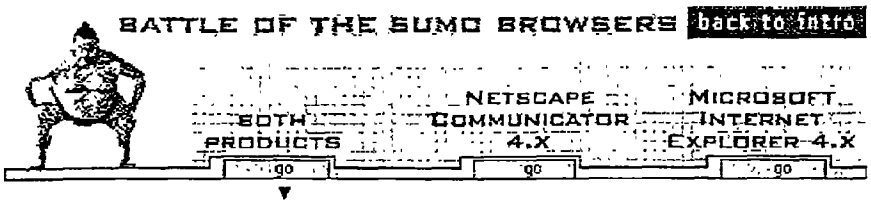

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Platform support

WINNER Communicator 4.x

Netscape continues to be the clear leader in terms of supporting a variety of operating systems. The company has shipped versions of Communicator on more than 16 different platforms, from Windows 3.1 to Linux to Power Mac. And Netscape has made a point of keeping the feature sets nearly identical across the board. Additionally, with Netscape's recent decision to give away its source code to the public, we may soon see Communicator popping up on everything from set-top boxes to the Amiga.

Meanwhile, Microsoft has shown some interest in moving IE 4.*x* across platforms. Versions of IE 4.*x* for the Mac, Windows 3.1, and Solaris are either shipping or in public beta, with additional UNIX support for AIX, HP-UX, and IRIX promised. Unfortunately, many of IE 4.*x*'s features are Windows 95/NT-specific (such as the Active Desktop) and won't translate well--if at all--to other platforms.

Microsoft is closing the gap, but it's unlikely that Redmond will ever catch Netscape in the cross-platform competition.

Platform support	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Windows 3.1	Yes	Yes
Windows 95	Yes	Yes
Windows NT 3.5x	Yes	No
Windows NT 4.0	Yes	Yes
Windows CE	No	Yes
Macintosh (PowerPC)	Yes	Yes
Macintosh (68000)	Yes	No
Solaris	Yes	No
IRIX	Yes	No
HP/UX	Yes	No
Other Unix	Yes	No
OS/2	Yes	No
Linux	Yes	No

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Performance

WINNER Internet Explorer 4.x

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Speed		
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Large GIF download	22 seconds	16.5 seconds
Load HTML	35.4 seconds	26.8 seconds

* (Larger value is better)

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COMPARISON CHART

Starting with "CNET recommends," you can read our in-depth comparison between these two browser suites. We've also gathered here, on one page, the major features of both. Scan the list to see which one fits your needs. You can also try our Decision Maker to help decide which one to download and install as your default browser.

Browsers	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
User interface		
Context menus	Yes	Yes
Tool tips	Yes	Yes
Configurable toolbars	Some	Yes
IntelliMouse support	Yes	Yes
Offline browsing		
Browsable cache	No	Yes
Subscriptions	Yes	Yes
Notification	Yes	Yes
HTML support		
HTML 3.2	Yes	Yes
HTML editor	Composer	FrontPage Express on Windows 95 only
Cascading style sheets	Yes	Yes
Dynamic HTML	Yes	Yes
Full-screen mode	Yes	Yes
Layers	Layer tag style sheets	Style sheets

Mail and news	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Mail		
IMAP	Yes	Yes
LDAP	Yes	Yes
Offline reading	Yes	Yes
Offline reply	Yes	Yes
Inbox Direct support	Yes	Yes
Filters	Yes	Yes
Multiple in-boxes	Yes	Yes
Create HTML mail	Yes	Yes
Nested folders	Yes	Yes
News		
Multiple news servers	Yes	Yes
Offline reading	Yes	Yes
Offline reply	Yes	Yes
Automatic threading	Yes	Yes
Filters	Yes	Yes
Message security		
Digital signatures	Yes	Yes
Encryption	Requires certificate	Requires certificate

Conferencing	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
H.323 conferencing	Audio	Audio & video, Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Shared whiteboard	Yes	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Application sharing	No	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Text chat	Yes	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Multipoint support	No	No

Authoring	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Wysiwyg HTML editor	Yes	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
HTML in email	Yes	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Tables	Yes	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Frames	No	No
Objects	No	ActiveX, Java
Image editing	No	No
Style sheets	No	No

Push	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
HTML on the desktop	Yes	Yes
Screensaver mode	Yes	Yes
Subscriptions	Yes	Yes
Desktop applets	No	Yes
Content specification	RDF	CDF
Offline mode	Yes	Yes

Performance	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Speed (Win 95)		
CaffeineMark 3.0 *	637	773
Large GIF download	22 seconds	16.5 seconds
Load HTML	35.4 seconds	26.8 seconds

* (Larger value is better)

Desktop integration	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Remote desktop	No	Within an NT domain (Windows 95/NT 4.0 only)
OLE, ActiveX	OLE (Windows 95/NT 4.0 only)	OLE, ActiveX (Windows 95/NT 4.0 only)
Integration w/ Windows	No	Active Desktop, Web view (Windows 95/NT 4.0 only)

Security	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Applet signing	Yes	Yes (Authenticode)
ActiveX signing	No	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Cookie manager	No	No
Script signing	Yes	No
Personal certificates	Yes	Yes
Ratings systems	No	RSACi, PICS
SSL	128-bit	128-bit

Extensibility	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Java		
JIT	Yes	Yes
Installable applets	JAR	CAB
Scripting		
JavaScript	JavaScript 1.2	ECMAScript
VBScript	No	Windows 95/NT 4.0 only
Other	No	ActiveX scripting
Plug-ins/ActiveX		
Dynamically installed	Plug-ins	ActiveX controls (Windows 95/NT 4.0 only)
Active document	Yes	Yes
Multimedia		
AVI	Yes	Yes
MPEG	No	Yes
QuickTime	Yes	Yes
VRML	2.0	2.0
Streaming media	RealPlayer	RealPlayer, NetShow
Other	AIFF, WAV	AIFF, WAV

Platform support	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Windows 3.1	Yes	Yes
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Windows NT 3.5x	Yes	Yes
Windows NT 4.0	Yes	Yes
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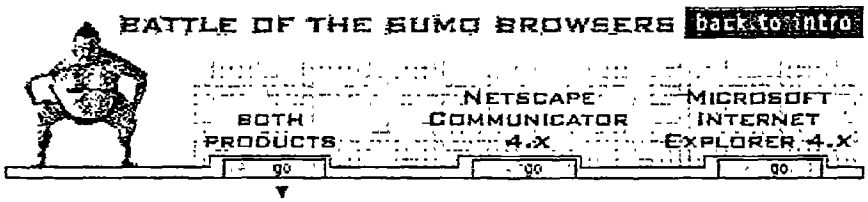
Macintosh (PowerPC)	Yes	Yes
Macintosh (680x0)	Yes	Yes
Solaris (Sun)	Yes	Yes
Solaris (Intel)	Yes	No
IRIX	Yes	No
HP/UX	Yes	No
AIX	Yes	No
Linux	Yes	No
OS/2	Yes	No
Other Unix	Yes	No
Source code available	Yes	No



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Conferencing

WINNER Internet Explorer 4.x

Audio- and especially videoconferencing over the unpredictable bandwidth of the Internet remains a black art. TCP/IP underlies communications on the Internet, and it was never designed to support the kinds of demands placed on it by multimedia content.

We'll see changes in the coming years as Internet hardware improves to support new TCP/IP extensions that will provide the assured bandwidth required by voice and video. In the meantime, we think the latest versions of Netscape Conference and Microsoft NetMeeting make for almost tolerable communications with today's network infrastructure. But Internet conferencing is not quite ready to replace the handset and POTS (plain old telephone system).

However, if you have plenty of bandwidth, Internet telephony can save time--and money. You can communicate with others while sharing a whiteboard or sending files back and forth. In the case of NetMeeting, you can also videoconference and share applications.

For the moment, the conferencing components of IE and Communicator are interesting add-ons, but they aren't really core components like the browsers or the email clients.

Conferencing	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
H.323 conferencing	Audio	Audio & video
Shared whiteboard	Yes	Yes
Application sharing	No	Yes
Text chat	Yes	Yes
Multipoint support	No	No

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Extensibility

WINNER Tie

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Scripting		
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VBScript	No	Yes
Other	No	ActiveX scripting
Plug-ins/ActiveX		
Dynamically installed	Plug-ins	ActiveX Controls
Active document	Yes	Yes
Multimedia		
AVI	Yes	Yes
MPEG	No	Yes
QuickTime	Yes	Yes
VRML	2.0	2.0
Streaming media	RealPlayer	RealPlayer, NetShow
Other	AIFF, WAV	AIFF, WAV

Go to "Extensibility: Netscape Communicator 4.05"

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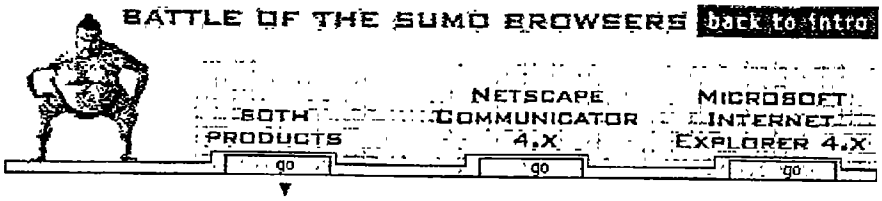

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Platform support

WINNER Communicator 4.x

Netscape continues to be the clear leader in terms of supporting a variety of operating systems. The company has shipped versions of Communicator on more than 16 different platforms, from Windows 3.1 to Linux to Power Mac. And Netscape has made a point of keeping the feature sets nearly identical across the board. Additionally, with Netscape's recent decision to give away its source code to the public, we may soon see Communicator popping up on everything from set-top boxes to the Amiga.

Meanwhile, Microsoft has shown some interest in moving IE 4.*x* across platforms. Versions of IE 4.*x* for the Mac, Windows 3.1, and Solaris are either shipping or in public beta, with additional UNIX support for AIX, HP-UX, and IRIX promised. Unfortunately, many of IE 4.*x*'s features are Windows 95/NT-specific (such as the Active Desktop) and won't translate well--if at all--to other platforms.

Microsoft is closing the gap, but it's unlikely that Redmond will ever catch Netscape in the cross-platform competition.

Platform support	Communicator 4.x	Internet Explorer 4.x
Windows 3.1	Yes	Yes
Windows 95	Yes	Yes
Windows NT 3.5x	Yes	No
Windows NT 4.0	Yes	Yes
Windows CE	No	Yes
Macintosh (PowerPC)	Yes	Yes
Macintosh (680x0)	Yes	No
Solaris	Yes	No
IRIX	Yes	No
HP UX	Yes	No
Other Unix	Yes	No
OS/2	Yes	No
Linux	Yes	No

Go to "Platform support: Netscape Communicator 4.05"