

Like most Mac users, I greeted news of Microsoft's Internet Explorer World Wide Web browser with some disdain.

"Just Microsoft's attempt to derail Netscape," I thought.

Comfortable with the knowledge that Microsoft had completely missed the starting gate when the Net revolution began, I assured myself that Netscape was so far ahead technologically that it would be difficult (if not impossible) to catch up. And even if Microsoft did manage to throw together a web browser, the Mac version would surely demonstrate the same stellar performance as Word 6.0.

After shunning it for weeks, I could do so no longer. Words of praise from colleagues, readers and friends became intolerable. I had to verify their claims. I reluctantly downloaded the Internet Explorer beta and installed it.

Upon launching Internet Explorer for the first time, the application intelligently recognized that I had been using another browser; politely it asked if I'd like to use the same settings.

"Sure! That makes it easy," I thought. Less than 30 seconds later, I was viewing the MacSense Online web site through the eyes of Microsoft. And the sight I saw was uncomfortably good.

Internet Explorer is a fairly polished web browser. It has a clean interface, and feels less complex and less weighty than Netscape 2.0. It supports most HTML 3.0 features, and can use all Netscape 2.0 plug-ins, eliminating many of the inherent benefits of using Netscape 2.0 (It does not yet support frames or JavaScript, although this is promised.). Cleverly, the browser will also download the complete layout of a web page before attempting to grab the graphics; that way, Net surfers can quickly link to subordinate web pages without waiting for the page's graphics to download.

Be it hardware or software, a clone is a clone. Clearly, Internet Explorer is a clone of Netscape.

And, in the grandest tradition of Microsoft, the company will refine its software clone until it becomes a market force to be reckoned with.

Microsoft has a simple strategy: Anything Netscape does, Microsoft will do better; anything Netscape sells, Microsoft will give away.

Netscape has been targeted. How long the company can survive under such fire is unclear. Its stuffed and mounted head may all too soon be added to Gates's trophy collection of vanquished competitors.

In the past month, Microsoft has made a strategic deal with America Online that promises to usurp Netscape's foothold on the browser market. Beginning this summer, Internet Explorer—not Netscape—will be the web browser built into AOL's client software. In the blink of an eye, AOL's 5 million subscribers will become Internet Explorer users (As part of the aforementioned deal, AOL software will also be placed side by side the Microsoft Network in future offerings of Windows 95.).

Oddly enough, AOL and Netscape announced a deal just days before the Microsoft/AOL announcement: Netscape is to be the default browser for AOL's net dial-up Internet service, GNN. But in this case, Netscape is not requisite. Subscribers to GNN will be able to choose which browser they like. Sounds like somebody got the short end of the stick.

Netscape has made other friends. CompuServe will soon bundle Netscape Navigator with its client software. But CompuServe's reach is hardly that of America Online, and, once again, Netscape won't be specifically required.

With two competing products of equal merit, we cannot make a usage decision based upon functionality or feature set. Our choice of browser becomes a political decision. I'm a sucker for the struggling underdog. That's why I own a Macintosh. And that's why I will continue to support Netscape, despite the compelling quality of Internet Explorer.

While Microsoft has just entered the browser market—a market largely dominated by Netscape—it alone remains the Big Brother of the information age.

MacSenseED@aol.com

