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## Outfoxing the Web

**In five months, Firefox has whipped past Netscape Navigator, Safari and Opera, writes GRANT BUCKLER**

**BY GRANT BUCKLER**

MONDAY, APRIL 18, 2005  
UPDATED AT 9:17 AM EST  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Alan K'necht tried Firefox more than a year ago, before it was officially released, and fell in love with the open-source Web browser. So have all the people he's recommended it to who have tried it, adds the president of Toronto-based Web development and technology strategy company K'nechtology Inc.

Firefox is the latest addition to a growing selection of Web browsers, and while Microsoft Corp.'s Internet Explorer remains the runaway leader with almost 90 per cent of the market, Firefox has made impressive gains. Net Applications, Inc., an Aliso Viejo, Calif., company that makes Web monitoring software and surveys browser market share monthly, reported in March that Firefox's share grew to 6.71 per cent of the browser market in February from 5.59 per cent in January, while Internet Explorer's dropped to 88.59 per cent from 90.31.

More impressively, Firefox came from zero in five months. The software was officially introduced Nov. 9, says Chris Hofmann, director of engineering at the Mozilla Foundation, a Mountain View, Calif.,-based open-source group that oversees Firefox's development.

Since its introduction, Firefox has pushed past the once-dominant Netscape Navigator, Apple Computer Inc.'s Safari browser for the Macintosh and Opera Software ASA's Opera, whose market shares Net Applications puts at 1.80, 1.73 and 0.46 per cent respectively.

"Firefox came out of the gate with a bang," says Dan Shapero, chief executive officer of Net Applications.

While Firefox is only five months old, its pedigree dates to the Web's beginnings. The first browser was Mosaic, developed at the University of Illinois by Marc Andreessen and a group of students. Mr. Andreessen founded Netscape Inc. to turn Mosaic into a commercial product called Navigator.

The software code underlying Mosaic and Navigator is called Mozilla -- also the name of a cartoon lizard that was Netscape's mascot in its early days. In 1998, Netscape turned this code over to the open-source community.

"This was the first big commercial company to attempt to use open source as a development model for its products," Mr. Hofmann notes. The Mozilla "engine" is still the basis for Navigator as well as Firefox.

Although the code had been made open source, America Online Inc. -- which acquired Netscape in 1998 -- continued to oversee its development until 2003, when it handed over that responsibility and \$2-million (U.S.) in seed capital to the newly created Mozilla Foundation.

There was an open-source Mozilla browser before last fall -- a suite of browser, e-mail client and other components -- but it was mainly a test bed for Netscape development, Mr. Hofmann says. Last year, the Mozilla Foundation decided to replace the old suite with a stand-alone browser -- Firefox -- and an e-mail client called Thunderbird, which debuted in December.

Open-source software enthusiasts helped drive Firefox's initial success, Mr. Shapero says. "I know there's a whole group of people that jumped on it for that reason." But he says the software also has some security advantages over Internet Explorer and some attractive features that the market leader lacks.

Firefox's most talked-about feature is tabbed browsing, which allows users to set up frequently used pages as tabs that are loaded when the browser starts up and can be switched with a single mouse-click. The Google toolbar is built in, as is a tool for blocking pop-ups advertising. Mr. K'necht says Firefox also loads faster than Internet Explorer.

Then there's security. Mr. Hofmann maintains Firefox is less vulnerable to certain attacks than Internet Explorer is because it does not support ActiveX, Microsoft's technology for sharing information among applications.

ActiveX allows programs to be downloaded to a computer without the user's knowledge, he says, providing opportunities to writers of viruses and spyware. "Firefox doesn't have any of that technology, and so we think that that provides users with an extra level of protection."

Possibly. But it also means websites that rely on ActiveX will not work properly with Firefox.

Pete Lindstrom, research director at Spire Security LLC in Malvern, Penn., says this presents a problem, especially for large organizations that might otherwise consider using the new browser. The problem is not just with outside websites, he notes, but with internal applications that work through the browsers on employees' computers. "The browser is a universal client," he says. "You have to test every application that's running within it."

Mr. Hofmann counters that ActiveX won't work on Linux or Apple Computer Inc.'s Macintosh systems, nor does it support mobile devices. And he adds that Microsoft has frequently advised customers to turn off ActiveX in their browsers as a short-term defence until new security vulnerabilities could be addressed. If those warnings are heeded, he says, the same websites and applications that won't work with Firefox wouldn't work with Internet Explorer a good deal of the time either.

Mr. Hofmann also argues that because Firefox is open source, many developers are working to make it secure, adding that "the developers that we've attracted really have a passion for security and privacy."

Much the same argument has been made in the Linux versus Windows debate, and Microsoft's counter-argument is that it has a dedicated team working on the issue.

Figures from security software firm Symantec Corp. also raise some questions about Firefox's security advantage. In its latest Internet Security Threat Report, Symantec said 21 vulnerabilities were documented in Firefox and its predecessor, the Mozilla suite, in the second half of 2004 compared with only 13 in Internet Explorer.

However, Dean Turner, executive editor of the report for Symantec Canada, notes that a higher percentage of the Internet Explorer vulnerabilities were classified as high severity, and that the Microsoft browser still has more documented vulnerabilities over all.

Regardless of how secure the software actually is, Firefox's smaller market share is actually a security advantage. With 90 per cent of the market, Internet Explorer is the favoured target for viruses and spyware.

Mr. Lindstrom calls this "security through obscurity."

And he adds: "If everybody takes the advice to switch to Firefox, then it becomes a more attractive target and will suffer the same consequences as IE does currently."

## Thunderbird is go

The companion product to Mozilla Firefox is the Thunderbird e-mail client. Like Firefox, it's available free from the Mozilla Foundation website. Some key features:

**Built-in spam control.** Thunderbird "learns" what you consider spam -- initially, you mark messages as spam, and the software extrapolates from your choices to identify other likely spam. It can direct spam to a junk e-mail folder, delete it or just flag it.

**Security.** Thunderbird never opens attached files automatically, and it won't let messages do anything without the user's say-so. That means better protection against viruses, says Scott MacGregor, Thunderbird's lead developer.

The next release, due this summer, will add protection against phishing scams, or attempts to fool people into giving away sensitive personal information. Thunderbird 1.1 will scan incoming mail for hints of phishing, such as Web links that appear to point to one address but actually direct you to another.

**Tools for organizing mail.** Thunderbird has search tools to help users find messages, and searches can be saved as virtual mail folders. That means one message can effectively be in more than one folder, Mr. MacGregor explains. Thunderbird can also group messages in various ways, such as showing all today's messages in one window.

**News feeds.** Thunderbird works with Really Simple Syndication (RSS), a protocol for distributing news items and other materials. Users can receive such items in their e-mail boxes.

Mr. MacGregor says nearly six million copies of Thunderbird have been downloaded since it debuted in December.

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