Net needs

Purge those plug-ins, **exorcise** those extensions and get back to basics urges Nigel Whitfield.

Do you suffer from browser bloat? Perhaps you've downloaded the latest version of Internet Explorer and now you're eagerly awaiting the security updates? Or, you may have gone through a number of small increments each time Netscape came out with a new web browser? And, with modern browsers, having visited a few fancy sites you'll find your hard disk is clogged up with plug-ins, Active X controls, and plenty of other things.

In my case, one of the ways in which that scenario has manifested itself is an accumulation of bizarre extensions and plug-ins on my Mac. The net result of this is browsers which are painfully slow to start, and rather more crashes than are good for one with such a gentle temperament as myself. And frankly, if Netscape's Quality Feedback Agent doesn't stop popping up for no reason at all, I shall type something very rude into the description box. If it weren't for the fact that Internet Explorer runs even more slowly on the occasions when it deigns to start properly, I might already have made the switch.

It seems I'm not the only person experiencing this. Much of the junk that accumulates on a modern computer seems to be a result of people's frequent use of the net — being told they need to download more stuff just to make better use of the things they already want to use. So, it's probably time to think about what you *really* need.

Frankly, most of the web sites that I see would look just as good in a version 3 web browser, such as the copy of Netscape Navigator that's sitting on one of my Unix systems. Most of the plug-ins I've ever downloaded are just different ways of doing the same thing — and often an attempt to disguise with flashy

WHERE TO GET INTERNET ESSENTIALS

www.eudora.com

www.icab.de

www.ozemail.com.au/~pli/netfinder

www.turnpike.com

www.mirc.co.uk

www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Homepage/telnet.html

www.mirc.co.uk

multimedia the fact that a site has little useful information to offer.

Yes, you might want the latest version of Internet Explorer so that you can access your Hotmail account via Outlook Express, or use the fancy stationery options that are now included. But what do you really need to use the internet? After a little thought, here's a rundown of internet essentials.

☞ *If you have other ideas, I would be happy to hear them — in particular, what programs do you reckon are the best for doing a certain job, and why?*

What do you really need to use the net? Here's a list of internet essentials.

■ Explorer vs Navigator
When it comes to web browsing, for most people it's still just a choice between Internet Explorer or Netscape's Navigator. Or, more likely, a case of taking what you're given and using that. But if you have made the choice, what made you do it? And would you consider a paid-for browser, like the new one from iCab? It may lack some of the advanced features of the latest versions from the

big boys — but when did you last see a site that really needed DHTML? And why should, say, a professional association's web site, consisting largely of detailed texts to download, need Flash animations anyway?

Email is another tool that many people choose by default; taking the mail program that comes with their browser, or with their office package. Personally, I've yet to see a mail program that's as flexible as the Mail Users Shell, which I use on my Unix computers. When it comes to PC or Mac, however, I stick with Eudora — not least because it does the job, doesn't crash, and to move to anything else would be nothing short of a nightmare. But would you prefer Turnpike? Or Outlook? Or perhaps Claris Emailer?

Beyond the realms of email and the web, what do you really need? A good FTP program is useful for those who want to maintain web sites efficiently: Fetch on the Macintosh is my usual choice, although Net Finder may be
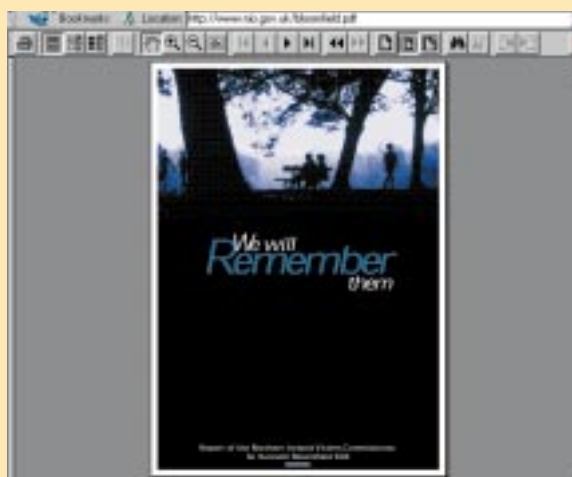
ESSENTIAL PLUG-INS

Plug-ins do add to the clutter on your web site, but they can also prove useful by extending the facilities of the browser. If you are just starting out on the web, there are some that you really ought to have, to make sure your system can display the bulk of the pages you visit.

So, before you begin surfing in earnest, here's our recommended list of the plug-ins that really do deserve space on your hard disk. All these work on both PC and Macintosh systems. There are others that might be useful but if you don't at least have these, you'll really be missing out on the web.
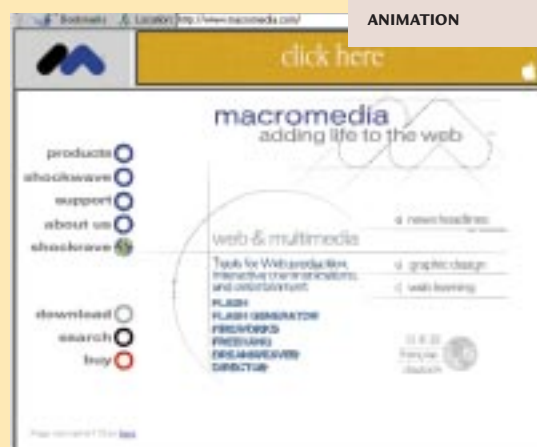
☛ **Adobe Acrobat**
www.adobe.com/ prodindex /acrobat/readstep.html
— this enables you to read PDF files, which are widely used for items such as manuals, technical support information and plenty of other things. It enables you to see pages exactly like the printed version.

▲ ACROBAT IS ESSENTIAL FOR MANY ONLINE DOCUMENTS

☛ **Apple Quicktime**
www.apple.com/ quicktime
— Virtual Reality, MP3 audio, movies and plenty of other features. QuickTime is one of the best multimedia plug-ins around. Everyone should have it.

☛ **Macromedia Shockwave**
www.macromedia.com/ software/downloads

— for animations and other fancy features on a web site, this is the best solution and is widely used. Essential.

☛ **Real Player**
www.real.com
— for live video and audio from sites such as CNN and the BBC, you will need this. It is also used by radio stations, which means you will be able to listen to them live, online.

▼ SHOCKWAVE BRINGS PAGES ALIVE WITH ANIMATION

preferred by some. And in Windows? The command line ftp that's included, if well hidden, will do the job with a lot less fuss than many of the graphical programs I have seen for Windows.

If you want to chat, invest in a copy of mIRC for Windows, or Ircle for the Mac and have the bizarre sensation of your computer talking to you as you chat. Quite how bizarre, of course, depends on which channels you frequent!

Web masters would do well to acquire a Telnet program, too, as would anyone who wants to access Unix systems via the internet.

Telnet can be a useful tool for any debugging you might want to do when things don't work well. You can use it to check out web and mail servers, and many other things. On the Mac, the obvious choice is NCSA Telnet.

On a Windows system, there's a Telnet program built in and you'll find it by choosing 'Run' and typing telnet. It's not great, but good enough for basic use. If you want an alternative Telnet program for Windows, once again NCSA may be your best bet.

That, as they say, is more or less it, with programs for chat, ftp and Telnet, most people will be able to do most of what they want on the internet. And you don't need the most bloated, latest downloads to do it all, either. So, if you're having problems with crashing browsers, tricky uploads and other net nightmares, don't assume you'll cure them all with the latest update, or with the update to fix the bugs in the update!

Instead, sit back, and think what you really want to do. Throw away everything else. Chuck out those unwanted plug-ins

you downloaded once to look at a site which you have never revisited. Turn off the features you really don't need and you'll probably be surprised at how little difference it makes to most of what you do on the net.

Now, if only I could find a copy of Netscape Navigator 3 for the Macintosh, I think I'd be a lot happier and I'd certainly be surfing much faster.

■ **Next month's column** will be a bumper set of questions and answers. In the meantime, please do get in touch with your recommendations for top net software.

PCW CONTACTS

Nigel Whitfield welcomes your feedback on the Internet column. He can be contacted by post via the PCW editorial office (address p10) or email internet@pcw.co.uk