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Firefox 'extensions' boost browser's power

BY JULIO OJEDA-ZAPATA
Pioneer Press

All by itself, the Mozilla Foundation's Firefox Web browser makes Microsoft's Internet Explorer look laughably primitive. But for some power users, that isn't good enough.

They've tricked out their copies of Firefox with all manner of "extensions" — little software plug-ins that augment the browser's capabilities in a range of fun and useful ways.

Such extensions are typically created by individuals and offered for free on such sites as the Extension Room (extensionroom.mozdev.org) and Mozilla Update (addons.update.mozilla.org). A handful, such as recent Yahoo and Amazon.com offerings, come from big companies that are getting hip to the increasingly popular Firefox (available at www.getfirefox.com).

Firefox enthusiasts we surveyed typically rely on fewer than half a dozen extensions each, but one power user has plugged nearly three dozen modules into his copy of Firefox. "Hope my small list proves useful," he said in an e-mail when describing them (we're not sure if he was kidding about the "small" part).

Another Firefox user, Adria Richards of Minneapolis, switched from Internet Explorer because she wanted to easily keep her bookmarks in sync on multiple computers — an extension automates this process.

"The modular design that Firefox introduced is great," said Richards, 27, a computer-network administrator who now uses more than a half-dozen extensions. "With IE, that's all you get. The extensions create different flavors of the same (Firefox) browser, basically."

You don't have to be a geek like Richards (who goes by the online moniker "geeky girl") to dabble with extensions. They're a snap to install and typically easy to use. More than 200 extensions are available, so you're likely to find at least one or two indispensable gems.

But beware: Some extensions are works in progress that may cause Firefox, or other extensions, to malfunction. Instead of installing a dozen or more at once, try them one at a time so you can quickly get rid of the extensions that seem to cause trouble.

Most extensions are cross-platform — that is, they work with Windows, Macintosh and Linux versions of Firefox.

Ready to get started? First, find an extension's download page and click the "install" link. Firefox may block the download, so you will need to "allow" it (the relevant button will appear near the top-right corner of your window).

At that point, you'll usually be able to download the extension and integrate it with Firefox in one step

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In some cases, you must first download it to your desktop and then use the "open file" command to pull it into the browser.

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For starters, try installing the xMirror extension, which makes it easier to find other extensions. It will add a drop-down menu to your extension-manager window so you are able to select among several extension-directory sites, not just the Mozilla Update link Firefox provides in its generic form.

Now it's time to go crazy. Here's a sampling of new or popular extensions:

Yahoo toolbar. Yahoo has released a Firefox version of its search toolbar (toolbar.yahoo.com/firefox). It's supposedly Windows-only, but it seemed to work fine for us with Macintosh and Linux versions of Firefox. Amazon's A9 search engine also is out in toolbar form (toolbar.a9.com).

FlickrFox. The Flickr online-photo service is red-hot, so it's no surprise someone has come up with a Flickr-related Firefox extension. This one displays pictures in the browser's sidebar. You can peruse photos from the entire Flickr online pool or just your favorites, those belonging to pals and so on.

Tabbrowser preferences. One of Firefox's key advantages over Internet Explorer is tabbed browsing, which lets you access two or more open Web pages via a tidy row of clickable tabs. That's not enough for some Firefox freaks, so tab-related extensions like this one add a range of refinements.

Linky. Want to open some or all of the links you find on a Web page? Linky lets you assign each link to its own tab or a standalone browser window. It also opens all the images on a page, clustering them in a single tab or window. This is more power than we need, frankly, but it's a ton of fun to use.

ScrapBook. The defunct Mac OS X version of Internet Explorer had a terrific scrapbooking feature that let you save and organize electronic snapshots of Web pages, including the temporary ones that can't be bookmarked. The ScrapBook extension duplicates this, with powerful variations.

AdBlock. Local Mozilla Foundation operative Rob Davis swears by AdBlock, a highly customizable extension that blocks a variety of Web-page ads. Those haven't irked us enough to make us want to use AdBlock, but people who hate the ads can import a host of filters to nix common ad sources.

ForecastFox. If keeping tabs on the weather is important to you — in Minnesota, that means everybody — you can insert at-a-glance climate information into your browser window (along the bottom edge, for instance, or closer to the top). You then get current weather conditions and forecasts.

FoxyTunes. For those who listen to music on their computers while working in Firefox, this one is a no-brainer. It adds music-player controls to the bottom edge of your browser window, and it lets you select which player — iTunes, Windows Media Player or the like — the controls will manipulate.

ResizeSearchBox. This seemingly trivial extension is a must-have for those who find Firefox's integrated search-engine window a bit too cramped for comfort. ResizeSearchBox replicates a slider control in Apple Computer's Safari browser that lets you use your mouse to resize the search window.

Bookmarks synchronizer. If you use multiple machines, this vital extension keeps your bookmarks in sync. You need online FTP or HTTP space for bookmark data. Apple's .Mac service fits the bill, as it does for Safari syncing. Unlike Safari, this extension works with Windows and Linux PCs.




We've only scratched the surface here. Extensions are but one way the versatile Firefox can be customized. You can download extensions for Mozilla's Thunderbird e-mail program, too.

See our list of Web links to articles and resources so you can bone up on the programs' hidden capabilities. Find it on TwinCities.com's Personal Technology page (link below) or our Your Tech Weblog at www.yourtechweblog.com.

Will Microsoft rise to the challenge? You may find out as early as this summer. After repeatedly saying it wouldn't significantly update Internet Explorer until the release of its next Windows version, due no earlier than 2006, the company recently reversed itself and said it would fast-track a fresh IE version — due in test form in a few months.

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