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Microsoft recently released Internet Explorer 7 (IE 7), the latest version of the world's most popular (or at least most used) web browser. Currently, about 80 percent of Internet users worldwide use a version of IE, down from more than 90 percent in the late 1990s. The other major browsers are Firefox and Opera. With all of the security patches and upgrades we receive from Microsoft, this might not seem like much of a big deal. But really it is because, despite constantly growing online security threats such as bogus websites that harvest confidential information, spyware, adware, spamware, phishing and browser hijacks, just to name a few, Microsoft has not updated IE since 2001. Sure, there have been a few security patches to address shortcomings of the browser, but no real features have been added since that time.

While Microsoft was resting on its laurels, new competitors entered the market. And its oldest foe, from whom they took the market in the 1990s, disappeared. Netscape, once the definitive leader among web browsers, had faded into barely a blip on the radar when AOL bought the company, which essentially guaranteed its demise. However, the Opera and Firefox browsers have taken advantage of the market, incorporating new technologies and features that were not offered in IE and offering improved security. After losing about 10 percent of its market share and after about three years of development, Microsoft has finally debuted the non-beta version of IE 7, which is available only for computers running Windows XP (Home or Professional).

New Features

For those web surfers, whether business-oriented or recreational, who haven't wanted the "hassle" of switching browsers (because they think it

will be too much work), the good news is that IE 7 now has essentially caught

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page accessible via tabs that can also be previewed on a thumbnail page. Many people love tabbed browsing because it reduces the need for having several windows cluttering up their screens. As somewhat of a power user who frequently has 10 or more IE windows open, I prefer non-tabbed browsing, instead moving between pages using the taskbar at the bottom of the screen.

Another major addition is the anti-phishing feature. Phishing, of course, is when the bad guys out there try to get users to enter personal financial information onto a website that looks like a legitimate website. The bad guys have gotten good at this, sending out millions of e-mails telling people their bank account or eBay access will be suspended if the user doesn't reactivate it. They set up a fake website that resembles the bank or other organization's website and sometimes obscure the web address bar, which would show that the user is actually on an unknown website. The new anti-phishing tool always shows the real web address and checks that address against a database of known phishing addresses, alerting the user of problems.

IE 7 is also the first of the major browsers to have built-in support for RSS feeds, automatically cataloguing the available feeds from each page visited. Now, I'm sure some of you are saying IE 6 had this, or Firefox and Opera do that. It's true that they support RSS, but IE 7 includes a basic RSS reader, while the others support third-party readers as add-ons to the browser.

Other features include a built-in search function that can use any search site the user desires, but like many of the interface changes, this search bar cannot be removed from the screen. The new version also includes a zoom function that allows portions of the screen to be magnified, as well as better security frameworks, increased user control of ActiveX, enhancements to support web

standards,

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toolbar, one of the biggest blunders that Microsoft made is the placement of the Refresh button to the right of the address bar, away from the other navigation buttons. If I could just add this button to the toolbar it would be fine, but I can't.

On another positive note, those users frustrated with printing blank or partial pages will be pleased with improvements to the print function, which now automatically

shrinks pages to fit the screen (although it can shrink text a bit too much if you're not careful). IE's new Favorites Center (formerly the Favorites sidebar) has been changed, as well, and now provides tabs for RSS feeds.

When to Upgrade

If I hadn't intended on writing this column about IE 7, I would have waited a few more months to upgrade, mostly to give the time to get the bugs out. However, this system has been in the works for about three years, and in beta testing for more than a year, so most bugs are gone. The only real problems I have are with not being able to set my interface back to the way I had it before, especially the Refresh button, but also the other toolbars. The benefits of the system are significant, however. From helpful tools like the RSS notification and reader functions, to essential security enhancements including anti-phishing and ActiveX, users will have an overall better and safer web browsing experience with IE 7. So if you're running XP Home or Pro, go ahead and consider upgrading sometime before tax season hits.

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