

Internet Explorer and Firefox Staying Alive

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14/03/08



As of March, AOL, which owns Netscape Navigator, stopped providing support for its Web browser, which during the 1990s was the most popular, raking in a 90% market share, in stark contrast to the 0.6% it has dropped to since, this being a result of its falling prey to Microsoft's Internet Explorer (MSIE).

How could MSIE have toppled the once mighty Netscape? The answer is simple: Microsoft capitalized on its own whopping 96% market share for desktop operating systems. In the '90s, after the first two versions of MSIE failed, Microsoft decided to automatically plug it into the Windows desktop, thus facilitating its use, to the detriment of its competitor. In fact, Microsoft also tried to make it impossible for the rival browser to be preinstalled on the desktop, although when AOL accused the company of this the courts sided with the latter. Unfortunately, at that point it was already too late to save the moribund Netscape, which was holding onto just 8% of the market. Nonetheless, in 1998 the Netscape code was made available under an Open Source license, the launch of the Mozilla project and the Foundation of the same name developed Firefox, a Web browser that now controls 16% of the market and continues to grow.

Why is Firefox continuing to gain ground on MSIE? Basically, because it is more innovative and offers users better features and services. It was the first browser to offer tabbed browsing and the blocking of popups, two functions that make for a better user experience. Furthermore, Firefox pays close attention to the little details. For instance, when a Firefox user opens a link in a new tab, it automatically gets opened at the end of the tab bar, whereas with MSIE it is placed next to the tab where the link was clicked on. This is a difference that a user can appreciate when multiple tabs are open: if there are three active tabs and a link is clicked on from the first tab, to be opened in a new tab, Firefox opens it in the fourth position, whereas MSIE puts it second, displacing the other tabs in the process. Another difference can be seen when printing a table that runs across multiple pages in print preview. Firefox displays and prints the rows *thead* and *tfoot* on each page of the print preview, while MSIE 7 shows only the *thead* rows at the top of the table and the *tfoot* rows at the end.

These may seem like minor differences, but these kinds of details contribute to a better experience for the user. In any case, they help a small time player like Firefox operating in adverse conditions continue to scrape away some of the market share held by the industry giant and in the process forces the latter to pick up the pace with its innovation.

Thanks to this, the announcement of the beta version of MSIE 8 being made available to developers and testers is good news for all Web users.

This new version comes with improved security while adding functions for integration with websites, applications and social networks, such as: Activities, a function akin to the “Compártelo” plugin, which works with the Internet's top services; WebSlices, content subscriptions that can easily be displayed in the sidebar; the Favorites Bar, which allows for grouping not only the user's favorite sites, but also website subscriptions; and Automatic Crash Recovery, a security system for recovering data that might have been lost in the event of an MSIE crash. Additionally, a new anti-phishing filter allows system administrators to decide which websites are secure and which ones are not.

Microsoft sources emphasize the interoperability of the new browser as well as its support of standards such as CSS, a decision that makes developers' jobs easier since it means websites conceived for Internet Explorer 8 will be viewed correctly with other Web browsers. While at first glance it may not appear to be adding radical new features, or even that its most direct competitor will come up with a quick answer, what is most important is that Microsoft is also promoting compatibility among Web browsers. This will undoubtedly benefit everyone: competitors, developers and Internet users.