IE8 Adds Features, Improves Security

MICROSOFT RELEASED INTERNET Explorer 8 beta 2 last week, putting it on track to be released at year’s end. IE8 will be the second major overhaul of the Web browser since the 2001 release of IE6. In the intervening years, the Web has changed dramatically, and Mozilla’s Firefox has become a stiff competitor, forcing Microsoft to go on the offensive.

Microsoft has added a range of new features to IE8. It’s faster and adds significant standards support for easier Web development plus a plethora of security, usability, and manageability features aimed at keeping users and IT shops happy.

and Microsoft on top of the browser market, where it is still well ahead of Firefox. Microsoft has 73% of the browser market compared with Firefox’s 19%, estimates Net Applications, a Web apps and analytics vendor.

Internet Explorer was long beset for poor security, but IE8 appears to be part of Microsoft’s commitment to improve that. Newly added are a malware filter, cross-site scripting protection, better phishing protection, more control over the use of ActiveX plug-ins, and improved crash recovery with the ability to re-load a browser session even if it’s accidentally shut down. Firefox only reloads a session if the browser crashes. A new feature called InPrivate Browsing allows anonymous surfing, and another called InPrivate Blocking prevents third-party sites from tracking user behavior.

Other new features make the Web more usable. Web Slice lets users subscribe to snippets of information on a Web site—like an RSS feed. A feature called Accelerators (called Activities in beta 1) lets users do things like map, translate, and define highlighted text on a page without having to copy and paste the text in another site. The address bar suggests URLs as they’re being typed by matching words with user favorites and RSS feeds as well as with history, though it falls short of matching the similar capability of Firefox’s new “Awesome Bar.”

But IE8 adds features Mozilla doesn’t have, such as the ability to group recently opened tabs together and a search box enhanced by automatic suggestions and miniature site previews, including images.

IE8 caters more to IT pros than does Firefox, which has few business capabilities. And support for standards will make developers happy but could be a problem for businesses with older Web sites that don’t comply and won’t load in IE8’s default mode. Those sites can be set to load in a compatibility mode to avoid that problem. IE8 also includes more than 100 new group policy settings, including the ability to turn off InPrivate Browsing.

While Microsoft preps the latest test version of IE8, Mozilla isn’t sitting still. Last week, it unveiled Ubiquity, which is similar to IE’s Accelerators feature. Mozilla is also working on the next version of its browser after releasing Firefox 3.0 earlier this year.

—J. NICHOLAS HOOVER

GOOGLE THINKS IT WOULD be valuable to have any Web site you visit—whether on your phone or PC—know where you are. This way, you could receive information that is relevant only to your location. A new API from Google will let Web site developers do this, even without the use of GPS.

The benefit and utility of having Web sites automatically aware of your location are clear. This is especially true if surfing from a mobile phone. It would help cut down on the time you’d otherwise have to spend keying in location data. Now you may not have to.

The new Gears Geolocation API can find your phone using cell towers that are close by or via your phone’s GPS. If you’re using a PC, it will use your computer’s IP address. How will this make things better? Google cites as an example the European travel site Lastminute.com, which has location-enabled a mobile restaurant finder to find places near you.

Right now, Gears only works on Windows Mobile devices using Internet Explorer, and IE or Firefox on the desktop.

Google says the software won’t record location information, merely use it to provide better and more relevant search results. Web sites must ask if it’s OK to use location information, and Google cautions that people should only agree if they trust the site.

Yahoo also has a new location-data platform, Fire Eagle, which lets people direct their mobile phones to share location information with third-party services. People also can manually input location data in the Yahoo system.

Now it’s up to Web site developers to take the API or the Yahoo service and use it to empower location awareness.

—ERIC ZEMAN