



Netscape Web Browser: 1994 – 2008, R.I.P.

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In December, when AOL announced that it would cease supporting the Nestcape web browser and no longer provide updates for that program, I really wanted to breathe a sigh of relief because browser compatibility is an ever-present thorn in web designers' sides. Why? Because every browser has its own interpretation (sometimes a complete translation) of your web page.

Take, for example, this page, which recently gave me a certain degree of apoplexy.

Here's how it looked in Internet Explorer:



And here's how Netscape read the very same page:



With some reconfiguration of the coding, we, of course, made the page look almost the same in all browsers.

This is not an atypical result. The worst case is when a site that looks fine in IE displays only a blank page in Netscape. Generally, of all the web browsers, IE is the most intuitive (or forgiving), usually displaying a page as the designer intended.

Until some standardization comes to bear on web browser engines, this is simply a phenomenon web designers are going to have to live with.

Alas, there is really no respite in site, because, wherever you read "Netscape" in this article, you can substitute "Firefox", as it uses the same engine as Netscape. And although Netscape has experienced a rapid decline in users, Firefox seems to be on the rise.

Should you be worried if you're a Netscape user?

There's nothing to worry about. The browser won't disappear and won't become unusable. But AOL will no longer issue security patches or upgrades for Netscape - which means that in time you may become vulnerable to nasty technology, like viruses and spyware, from which your browser will not be protected. This is a good time to start looking at alternative browsers.

What's the difference and does it matter which web browser you use?

No, it's entirely a matter of preference – usually a preference for the look of the browser itself – toolbars, add-ons, etc. – rather than how the browser displays web pages. In a world of perfectly constructed web pages, everything will look the same to you.

Here's a quick overview of some basic elements of the most popular browsers, based on the most current version of each., indicating that they're really all much the same,

Browser	Bookmark Management	Auto-complete forms	Search Engine Toolbar	Tabbed Browsing	Pop-up Blocking	Page Zooming
I.E.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
I.E. for Mac	✓	✓	x	x	x	x
Firefox	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
Netscape	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
Opera	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Safari	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

If you're a Microsoft user, you almost certainly have Internet Explorer (remember the anti-trust mess Microsoft got into over bundling IE with Windows?) All of the other browsers are freely available from the Internet, so you can try out as many as you want - or at least as many as your hard-drive space will permit.