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It's Not Over till the Fat Lady Sings
The New Opera 7.01 for Windows
-- "the fastest, smallest, most full-featured
desktop browser on the planet" --

by Gary Wolff

Well folks, this is one of those rare cases where, indeed, less is more.

The Norwegian company Opera Software ASA has just edged competition up a notch by releasing on January 28 its latest innovative tool for web surfing and I must say, I'm pretty impressed. Opera is now the third most popular browser on the web, and growing fast: around one million new users are downloading and installing Opera each month.

The Java-less installation program which I downloaded takes up less than 3.5 megabytes of memory. In addition to not taking up much memory or space on your computer, one of Opera's main appeals, I think, is its speed. Because it's small, and because it's written to keep things simple, most web pages load very quickly. For example, while an information-packed newspaper web site might take minutes to load in Microsoft Corp.'s Internet Explorer (IE), Opera zaps it onto your screen in what seems like only seconds (independent browser performance tests conducted by GreyMagic can be viewed at: http://www.greymagic.com/dagon/results.html).
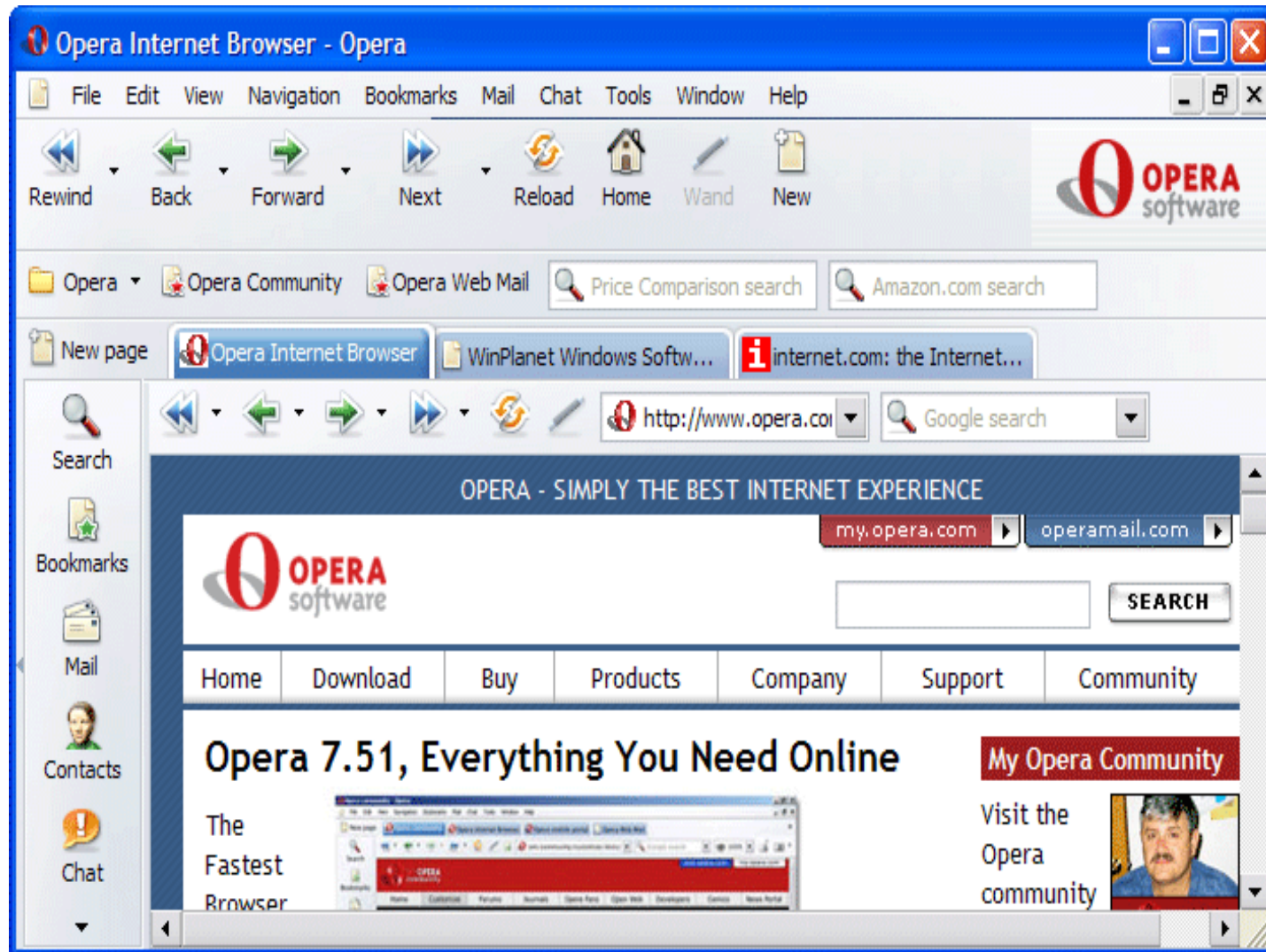
COOL NEW STUFF

Opera also has more, and better, features than its heavyweight competitor, Internet Explorer. For example, take the "Forward" button on your usual browser. In other browsers it will only take you back to a page you've already visited, and then left. Right? Opera, however, instead tries to figure out from the page you're visiting where you'll go next, so that by clicking on the forward button you'll go there automatically. The forward button will change into a double-arrow "Fast Forward" button on pages where this is possible.

It works like this: Let's say you're using the Google search engine to look for the word "Lloret" on the Tokyo PC web site. After you type in site:www.tokyopc.org Lloret, the first page of matches appears, but to reach the following pages of over 100 matches, you'd have to keep scrolling down to the bottom of every Google page to find the "Next" link. Not with Opera: You simply click on the fast forward button which will take you to the

next page of matches, and then to the next, and so on. Simple, elegant, and useful. It works equally as well when perusing multi-page online news articles.

If you find moving the mouse to the "forward" button to be a hassle, try this: Just press the "x" key and you'll automatically go to the next page of Google's Lloret matches. Or press the "z" key and you'll go back to the last page. Indeed, there are many, many other keyboard shortcuts, including using the "Shift" and arrow keys. If you already have some familiarity with general Windows keyboard shortcuts, then supposedly it is possible by using "mouse gestures" (with very detailed documentation to assist you) to even use Opera without a mouse. Doing so will
allow you to freely move around the screen, accessing links, and making the whole web-surfing experience a lot easier in a complete keyboard-only navigation. Smart stuff.

WHAT ELSE IS NEW?

Hotlist -- Bookmarks, history, e-mail, and contacts are now combined into just one panel and can be managed via the Hotlist, allowing the user to switch back and forth simply by clicking on the respective button for the panel they desire (see screenshot). And unlike Microsoft's Internet Explorer, where all the panels are displayed on the left side of the screen, Opera allows you to choose where on the screen you want them---top, bottom, left, or right, making it all pretty flexible. It can also list all the files you've downloaded (called "transfers"), as well as all the links in the page you're currently viewing. So, say you're viewing your home page at Yahoo, complete with links to news from your hometown, current valuation of your portfolio, your favorite cartoons, etc. All those links can now be listed separately in the left-hand panel, meaning you don't have to wander around the page to get what you're looking for.

Versatile windows management and MDI -- One of the things that makes Opera stand out from other Web browsers is that you can have several Web pages open at the same time within Opera. This is called a Multiple Document Interface (MDI). There are several benefits to this, like speed, easy access, low memory usage, and a less cluttered task bar. This means that when you open a new page in Opera, it will open "within" Opera, and it will be shown on the page bar (see screenshot). To change between the web pages you currently have open, simply click on the tabs on the Page Bar, or you can have new pages open up in an entirely new application window, the same as you can do with other browsers.

Plus, you can save different window combinations as "sessions," and go back and forth between window sessions. Opera can also remember all your windows and web pages between surfing sessions. So when you first start up Opera again the next time, you can continue surfing exactly where you left off from before. Or by using its new "Session Manager," from the start-up dialog box you can choose between multiple previously saved sessions.

Page download progress bar -- When a web page is loading, a temporary progress bar appears at the bottom of the window showing you various download progress parameters, including percent complete, number of images being loaded, total size (kb) of the page, download speed, and elapsed time.

Built-in search utility -- Use Opera's search utility to search the web for just about anything�c..news, books, images, domain names, videos, MP3/audio, etc. Just type your words in the convenient search field(s) at the top of Opera's window, where you can specify which major search engine or search category you prefer. The "Super Search" field searches Google and AllTheWeb simultaneously, displaying each set of results in a separate window. And there's even a "Find in Page" search field, eliminating the need to open up a separate search window when you press Ctrl+F.

Extended and improved drag-and-drop support -- Rearrange or move toolbar items using drag-and-drop customization or move bookmarks, tabs, and window session URLs as shortcuts onto the desktop. Basically, you can put any button or search field on any toolbar, simply by dragging and dropping it onto the toolbar where you wish to have it. For example: you can drag the Print button onto the Contacts toolbar, even though it might not logically belong there.

Small-Screen Rendering -- This technology intelligently reformats web sites to fit inside the screen width, thereby eliminating the need for horizontal scrolling. This feature is one way web page developers can, at the press of a button, see what their full-screen web page will look like on the small screen of a PDA or cell phone -- a nice touch that speaks volumes about the way browsing is heading.

Zooming -- Opera can zoom pages in and out, and this is a powerful way to get the overview of a complex web page, while also being able to magnify certain parts of the page. This is great for old codgers like me with failing eyesight. Simply click on the zoom drop-down menu at the top of Opera's window, or, each time you press the zero key, it zooms in 10% (or out 10% when pressing the "9" key).

Bookmark management -- If, like me, in IE you have a very LONG list of folders in Favorites, you sometimes have to scroll up or down off the screen to find the address you're looking for. In Opera's Bookmarks, they simply added a third column (Duh!), eliminating the need for any vertical scrolling. Unfortunately, with my WinXP machine I didn't see any right-click ability to manage bookmark properties as you can do with IE's Favorites -- nor the tiny little window that pops up with the URL when you pause your pointer over the folder item. But in each bookmark folder you have the options of clicking on "Add page here..", which saves the address of the page you are presently viewing into that folder, and of clicking on "Open all folder items", which opens every web address you have saved in that folder into its own browser window. Interestingly, I did have right-click ability with my Win98 machine, but the bookmarks were not viewable from the Bookmarks drop-down menu. I could only access them from the HotList panel. Go figure.

The M2 News and Email Client -- The M2 news and email client is an email database, news reader, and mailing list organizer, all in one. I'm not particularly interested in using Opera for email, but supposedly it is less vulnerable than Outlook/Outlook Express to virus attacks by disabling the scripts that activate the virus or worm. Unlike competing browsers that allow received e-mail to run operating system scripts or to run JavaScript which create security risks, Opera allows neither. Plus, Opera goes one step further. By default, Opera turns off web access for images, style sheets, and other external files. While neither images nor style sheets pose security risks, spammers can use them as a method for counting or, in the worst case, identifying prospective e-mail victims.

What I was interested in, however, was subscribing to news.tokyopc.org, which I managed to get set up in only a matter of minutes by following the easy-to-follow news reader instructions.

The Wand password manager -- Opera now offers one-click log-in to password-protected sites. Log-in fields with available passwords are marked with a slick golden rim, and access is provided by simply clicking the Wand icon or pressing the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+Enter.

Pop-up windows -- Can be programmed to open up only in the background or refused altogether. YES !!

Skinning -- Changing the look of a browser has never been easier with Opera's new one-click skin install. Just pick and click once on any of the 65 different skins submitted by independent authors that are available online. As a further enhancement, changes in the coloring can also be made by selecting a color scheme from the View menu.

LANGUAGE OPTIONS

I had no trouble viewing pages in Japanese, Korean or Chinese with my WinXP machine, but did have some trouble viewing some Chinese and most Korean pages with my Win98 machine. Highlighted text can be right-click translated from English in and out of six languages including Japanese. And I had no trouble translating in

or out of Japanese using their default machine translator at infoseek.co.jp. My Nihongo skills are not up-to-speed enough to evaluate the accuracy of the E>J translations, but the J>E ones were definitely good for a few chuckles. For the time being, Opera 7.01 is only available in English, but Version 6.05 language modules for Japanese, Korean, and Chinese (and 31 other languages) can be downloaded onto an already-installed version of Opera for Windows. These text files will change the language of your user interface, but not the help files. A newsgroup regarding Opera translations is available at news.opera.no/opera.translate and one Opera user has put up a Japanese information page about Opera called Moonstone's Laboratory at www.moonstone.jp.

SECURITY

I'm certainly no security expert, but Opera has been hailed (maybe just by themselves --) as the most secure (http://my.opera.com/openweb/security) browser on the market. After Opera 7's initial release in late January, five security vulnerabilities were identified, after which Opera once again lived up to its excellent response record and released version 7.01, only 5 days after initial notification. The new version fixed all of the reported issues.

I, for one, am an obsessive cookie blocker, and it appears that this browser seems to have all the usual built-in safeguards for allowing or refusing them, in spite of some sites' persistent efforts in attempting to cram them down your throat anyways. The gateway sites like Hotmail and Lycos, as well as all their 3rd parties, seem to be the worst. And if a page tries to use illegal cookies, for example, to trace your browsing within a national domain, the cookie will automatically be refused by Opera.

Opera supports 128-bit Secure Socket Layer (SSL) versions 2 and 3, and Transport Layer Security (TLS).

DOWNSIDES

Some web sites won't allow you in unless you're using Internet Explorer. So during my usual surfing, I found myself keeping a standby IE window handy for those sites that threw up a roadblock against Opera. Another: the browser costs US$39, compared to IE, which is free. The good news: A free version is available (http://www.opera.com/download/index.dml?opsys=Windows&lng=en&platform=Windows) and fully functional, so long as you're willing to put up with an unobtrusive window spouting ads at you. My advice? Try it out for a month and, once you're hooked, shell out the cash for the unsponsored version. Plus, your first 14 days are ad-free.

I discovered only a few minor bugs that you always get with new releases, like some help screens not opening properly or sometimes encountering internal server errors when asking for online help, but I'm sure they'll have all these ironed out after a while. I will admit I wanted to pull my hair out (of what's left) a few times fighting with cookies and passwords, but it reckon that's just par for the course in getting up-to-speed with any new browser. And you should expect the usual setup hassles in configuring your media player, importing bookmarks, contact addresses, etc.

When you download Opera, there's no option of specifying which version of Windows you are using�c.one size fits all�cso I guess it's reasonable to assume, as I have already discovered, operating results will vary

depending on your OS.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

So what kind of future lies ahead for Opera? We're all dreaming if we think it can take on Microsoft. But surely it can somehow fill the void for users who are looking for a little something different than that offered by the big bad monopoly. Already, some of the more innovative features in Opera are being copied by competing browsers.

But Opera is playing it smart. Aware that the mobile phone is already encroaching on the territory currently occupied by PDAs and laptops, Opera is hoping its browser is a tempting choice to an industry wary of giving too much elbow room to Microsoft. For example, Nokia Corp.'s Communicator cell phone has Opera as its browser, while a Korean version of Opera comes preloaded on the Sharp Zaurus PDA.

For me personally, it is extremely encouraging and gratifying to see such an innovative piece of software sprout up outside the far-reaching and intimidating domain of the Microsoft empire. In my opinion, that alone deserves all the support we can give it. Eat your heart out, Mr. Gates�c�c

p.s. For any of you existing Opera users who have experienced problems accessing sites when using Opera, or have received a message saying that you are using an unsupported browser, or suspect that a site may be trying to block Opera, you can report the problem by first viewing instructions at: http://my.opera.com/openweb.

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Credits: Mr. Jeremy Wagstaff, who writes the weekly "Loose Wire" column for The Wall Street Journal Online (wsj.com) and the Far Eastern Economic Review (feer.com), deserves full credit for turning me on to this fantastic piece of free software.

Algorithmica Japonica

January , 2003

The Newsletter of the [Tokyo PC Users Group](#)

Submissions : [Editor](#)

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