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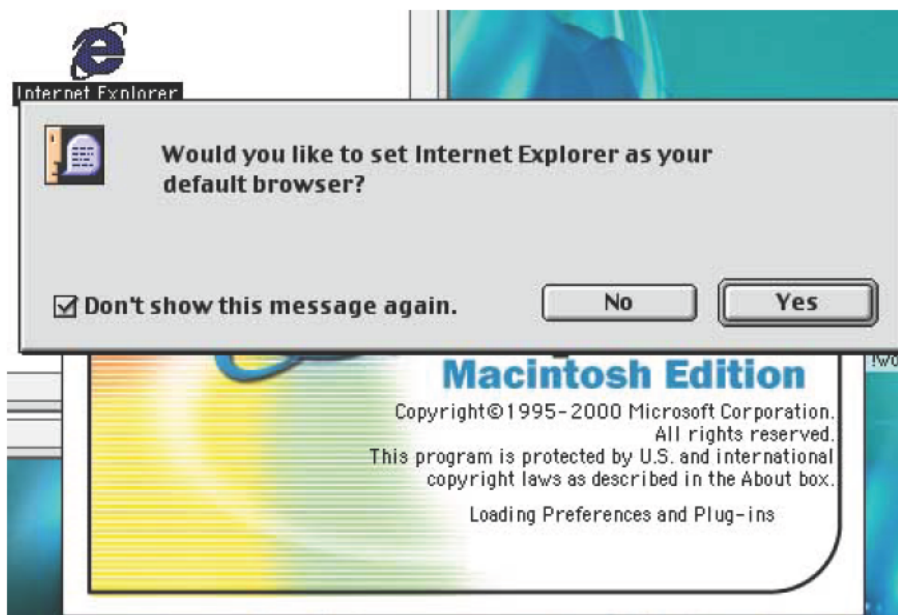Member Services    TCS Forums    Webmail    Join!

# Microsoft Internet Explorer 5: Quick Look

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When Microsoft sent some representatives to Washington Apple Pi in January, they showed off a late beta version of Internet Explorer 5 for the Macintosh. The result was unexpected: even the die-hard Netscape fans admitted that, at least during the demo, IE 5 looked real, real slick. Visually, at least, quite striking.



Microsoft Internet Explorer 5 asks you if you want to make it your default browser. If you say "No," it doesn't argue with you. The checkbox allows you to turn off this question; otherwise, you'll be asked each time you launch it.

Impressing an early Saturday morning crowd on a cold January day is an accomplishment. People tend to be very skeptical at this time of day, wondering to themselves, "Should I have stayed in bed? Where can I get a cup of hot cocoa? Why didn't I attend the January MacWorld, in sunny San Francisco?" But the semi-frozen General Meeting audience was genuinely impressed.
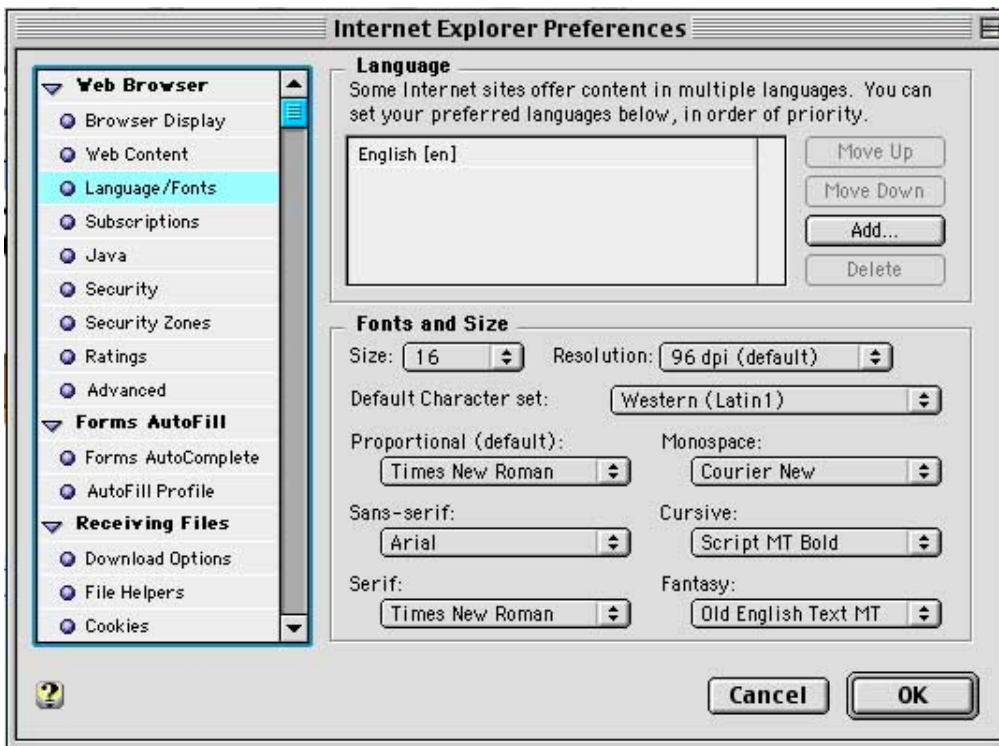
There were some nagging doubts, however. It *was*, after all, a demo. Childhood chores are a demo; a career is the real thing. In January, the Microsofties did not actually use Internet Explorer to connect to the Internet (there was no network line or phone line on stage), so essentially the Microsoft representatives demonstrated a beta version of the software running on simulated data. The "real" version was slated to ship in February, they said.



Macintosh users are famous for being fond of esthetics, so giving the user the option of selecting the browser's color trim is a nice touch. Even if you wouldn't dream of using anything but blueberry, the thought of setting your supervisor's browser to strawberry or lime is all but irresistible.

So, on the last Monday in March, 2000, Microsoft Internet Explorer 5 appeared on Microsoft's Web site, a month late. So late, in fact, that Washington Apple Pi Labs had almost no time to write this article before shipping it off for publication. So late, to tell the truth, that almost as much time was spent writing this article as trying out IE 5. "We don't have time to review it, so let's just say we looked at it."

And it is, indeed, a looker. Installing it on an unguarded blueberry iBook, we launched Internet Explorer and noticed that the icons, highlights and other visual elements were all blueberry. Curious, we then installed it on an unguarded iMac, with an original Bondi Blue case. When IE 5 launched, everything was trimmed in Bondi Blue. Neat! So we crept up on a blue-and-white Power Mac G3, and installed it on that machine. When IE 5 launched, it was decked out in blueberry, once again. Finally, we installed it on a grape iMac that someone had foolishly asked us to examine: it came up in -- blueberry.

As it ships, Internet Explorer 5 displays Web pages using a non-standard (for Macintosh, at least) screen resolution, non-standard fonts, and in unusually large points sizes. Fortunately, you can reset everything to more comfortable, reasonable defaults.

Having used up a huge portion of our available time installing the program on unsuspecting computers, we've come to the conclusion that, on a Bondi Blue iMac, at least, IE 5 will be trimmed in Bondi Blue at launch. On everything else we tried (blue and white G3, blueberry iBook, exciting beige Power Mac 8600, etc.), IE 5 took on blueberry colors at launch. We wanted to experiment a bit more but (a) people were beginning to give us very strange looks and (b) there were probably other, more interesting things to note besides color.

Color, as it turns out, is configurable. If you don't want a blueberry IE 5 browser on your blueberry iBook, you can use the View menu to select from a range of colors: blueberry, bondi, grape, graphite, lime, PowerBook black, PowerBook bronze, strawberry or tangerine. This strikes us as a very Mac-like feature: while some Windows users worry about colors on their machines, Mac people are often obsessed with such details. The only possible problem with nine color choices: some people will want 900.

If you look at a Web page in Internet Explorer 5, first in the over-large sizes that it uses as defaults (top), and later in Macintosh-standard sizes (bottom), you'll quickly see that Microsoft's initial settings show far less of a page, requiring the user to scroll around more.
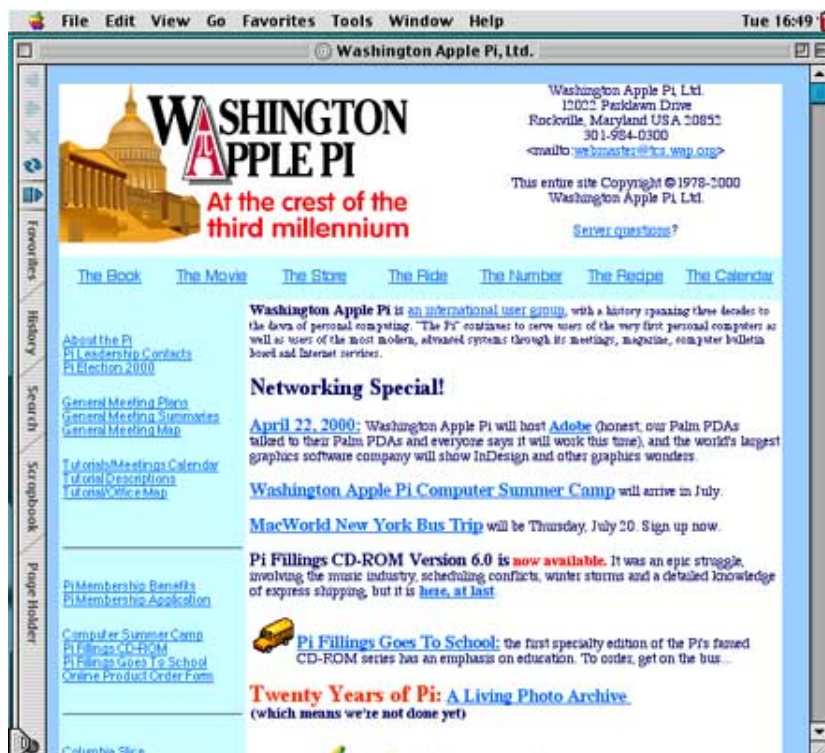
Once you get beyond the striking colors, the next thing you notice is: the size. Everything in the IE browser window looks like it was magnified. As it turns out, it *has* been magnified: IE 5 ships with settings that essentially give you a 96 dpi (dots per inch) view of the Web, making everything about a third larger than the usual Macintosh 72 dpi standard.

If this isn't unsettling enough, Microsoft compounds the problem by selecting non-standard fonts and larger than average font sizes for displaying everything. Since Macs first started browsing the Web, the "standard" display font size has been 12 points, with Times used for proportional text and Courier for monospaced text. Microsoft changes these to the more Windows-like Times New Roman and Courier New fonts, and bumps the point size up to 16 points. It also adds Arial as the default sans-serif font, Script MT Bold as the default cursive font (default cursive font?), and Old English Text MT as the default fantasy font (fantasy font?).

These changes can be a bit disconcerting. When you visit your usual Web pages, you'll notice that IE 5 displays only about two-thirds of what you are used to seeing; you now need to scroll (up and down as well as sideways) to see all the material. Visually, everything looks uncomfortably large, reminding you of kindergarten books.

Fortunately, you can control the look, dropping everything back to "normal" after going to the Edit menu, selecting Preferences, and then fiddling with the Language/Font section. This will be critical for those with "small" monitors (less than 800 x 600 pixels), as the new IE 5 defaults chew up way, way too much screen space. Of course, if you have poor eyes and you want the larger print, you can leave everything alone.



By clicking a single button on the favorites bar, most of the default toolbars and other screen clutter disappear. Set up like

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