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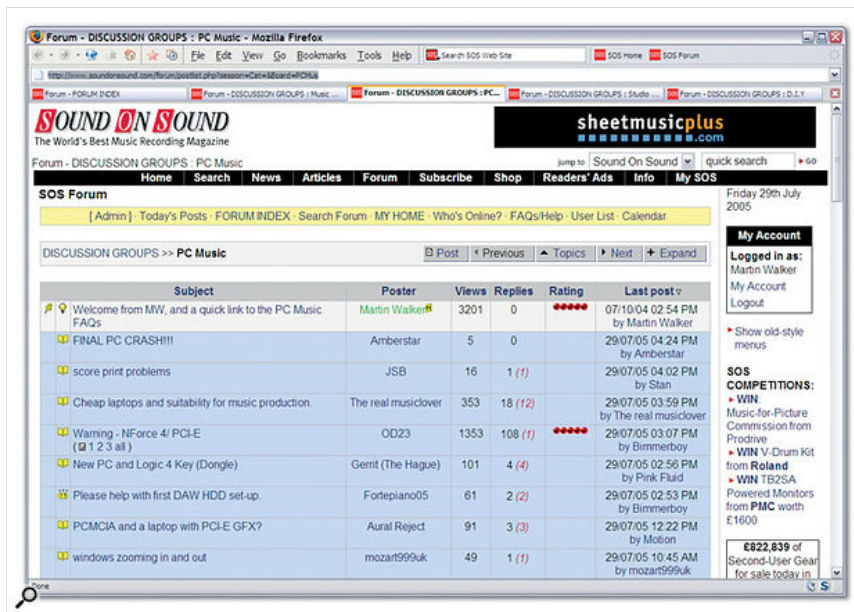
Mozilla Firefox Vs Microsoft Internet Explorer

PC Notes

- Computer / Software

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Frustrated by Internet Explorer, fed up with its security scares, or looking for a more streamlined and safer browsing experience? Why not try the freeware Firefox browser from Mozilla. (Notice the multiple tabbed windows, and the dedicated SOS Search function built into the menu bar).

More news of what's cooking in the world of Windows — but first, why it might be time to ditch *Internet Explorer* in favour of *Mozilla's Firefox*...

Microsoft's *Internet Explorer* application has generated more than its fair share of security scares over the years and is still endlessly targeted by hackers trying to access and corrupt our PCs. Given that it's now almost mandatory for PC musicians to have Internet access for application registration and downloading updates, this month I was finally tempted by all the good publicity (and the small 4.6MB download size) to try the alternative, freeware Mozilla *Firefox* Internet browser. If, like many musicians, you're still using *Internet Explorer*, on the grounds that it's bundled with Windows and you don't see any point in downloading a replacement for what you already have, read on...

Firefox (www.mozilla.org/products/firefox) runs under Windows 98 through to Windows XP (as well as on Mac OS X and several versions of Linux), and compared with Microsoft's *IE* (*Internet Explorer*) I find it faster, safer, and easier to use. In fact, I wish I'd swapped over a long time ago, since it's revolutionised my web browsing experience in various ways.

The most obvious is Firefox's tabbed browsing; as well as the usual 'Open Link In New Window' option, you can instead 'Open Link In New Tab', which lets you open as many tabbed pages as you like within one *Firefox* window. This is not only more convenient in many cases, but also uses less system resources than opening the same number of individual windows. It's great for

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SOS forum browsing, because I can open new windows for the PC Music, Music Recording Technology and Studio Design & Acoustics conferences, and then open dozens of tabs in each window to keep each batch neatly together while I read through them. You can even specify a group of tabs as your home page.

There's also a customisable Search bar built into the menu bar. Type a word or phrase into this and it links to your favourite search engine — quicker than launching the Google page first, for instance. In addition, an intelligent Find function starts looking through the current web page as soon as you begin typing in the desired word, and so may well have found the first instance before you even finish typing it.

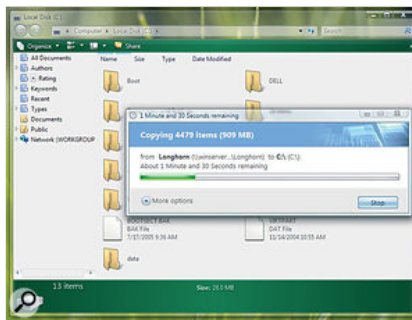
To make the transition from *IE* easier, you can import your existing bookmark collection during *Firefox* installation, while most of its default settings are sensible ones for the new user, so you won't have to spend ages configuring it. The Password Manager also lets you save login information for specific sites, to save ever having to type it in again.

Microsoft News

Beta testers have just got their hands on the latest version of Microsoft's next operating system, formerly known as Longhorn but recently renamed Vista. Given that the dictionary definition of this word is 'a distant view along an avenue', perhaps this is a veiled reference to the fact that Vista is still at least another year away from launch.

Great stress has been placed on Vista being more secure and stable, and it's also hoped that it will herald the arrival of mainstream 64-bit computing. However, the most obvious changes are still the graphic ones, with glass-like display effects, illuminated 'gel' buttons and controls, and 3D windows, collectively termed 'Aero Glass'. Running these effects will require a desktop PC with a 3D graphics accelerator offering AGP 8x or PCI Express 8x support, but may also be possible on high-end laptops by 2006. Frankly, Longhorn may look good, but Microsoft have been talking about it for so long that I suspect many industry experts are beginning to stifle a few yawns each time yet another announcement is made. Let's hope it's worth the wait.

Intriguingly, Microsoft are also selling lots of copies of their new Windows XP Starter Edition software, a stripped-down version being offered in Thailand as an alternative to Linux at about a sixth of the price of Windows XP Home. Details aren't clear on just what has been removed, but if it's ever available worldwide it might be of interest to musicians who simply aren't interested in bells and whistles.



A glimpse of Microsoft's Vista operating system, complete with transparency effects and gel buttons. Vista should be released in about a year's time.

Increased Security

Convenience and elegance are certainly important in a browser, but for many people the biggest attraction of *Firefox* is its increased security over *IE*. I suspect that this is partly because hackers currently concentrate on exploiting weaknesses with *Internet Explorer*, because it's the most popular browser, but many people also find setting up the most suitable *IE* security and privacy settings very confusing.

In the case of *Firefox*, most of the default settings are already the most sensible choices — pop-up ads are automatically blocked, unless you enable them for specific web sites; you can specify Cookie behaviour far more easily; and there's even an Image Manager so that you can decide which web sites can download images as part of their pages — handy for speeding things up if you have a slow connection.

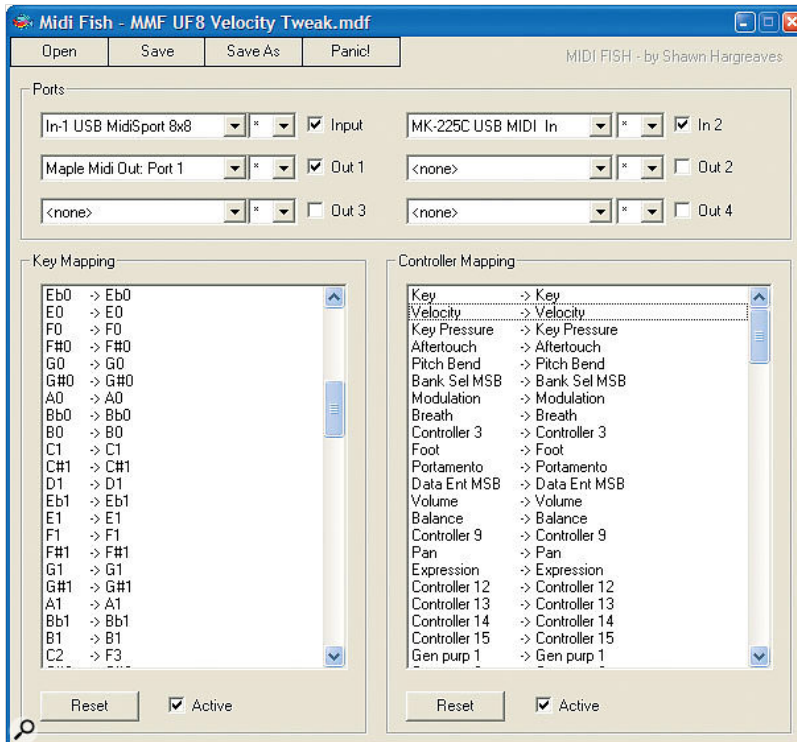
Even better for most people, *Firefox* doesn't support the Windows-only ActiveX controls, that are automatically downloaded and executed by *Internet Explorer* when you open some web pages. ActiveX controls are similar to Java applets, but have full access to the Windows operating system, which makes them potentially far more dangerous. While a few web sites do

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use ActiveX to embed special functions such as drop-down text boxes, command buttons and audio and video players in their pages, malicious web sites can also use them to transfer trojans and viruses to your PC. It's even theoretically possible for such controls to power down your PC, or upload all your documents to the Internet, in the absence of a decent Firewall utility — and you may simply not know what's happening behind the scenes until it's too late. Personally, I've only so far come across one web page that absolutely required ActiveX, and that was Microsoft's own web page devoted to the subject, but if you ever come across any others, *IE* will still be ready and waiting as an alternative browser.

Because *Firefox* is an Open Source application, there are also thousands of coders looking for security flaws and fixing them quickly. There's apparently even a \$500 bounty offered to anyone who successfully spots a bug, which augurs well for any future security issues.

MIDI Fish



There's nothing fishy about this handy utility apart from its name. MIDI Fish can perform advanced controller and key translations on your MIDI data, could be indispensable to anyone using multiple drum synths, and is entirely free.

This month, *SOS* reader Shawn Hargreaves passed on details of his freeware *MIDI Fish* utility, which offers several very useful features that I've not seen before. Shawn wrote it primarily for his own use under Windows ME, but I've tested it under Windows XP and it works fine. You can use it to change any one MIDI controller type into another, perhaps to let your modulation wheel generate aftertouch or alter your filter cutoff frequency, with the added ability to scale or invert the input and output values using sliders, so that you could, for example, turn an incoming velocity range of 0-100 into an output range of 0-127, or play your keyboard 'upside down'. A really handy feature is the pair of bargraphs showing input and output values in real time, which is a great help for seeing exactly how your data is being changed during setup.

MIDI Fish also provides key-mapping functions that anyone with a drum synth will appreciate. Each individual note you play can be persuaded to output any other note value, so you could create a set of drum maps that allows you to always play the same type of sound (kick, snare, hi-hat and so on) from the same set of keys on your keyboard. Those with two keyboards connected to *MIDI Fish* input ports one and two can set this up very easily: press a note on the first keyboard, then press the desired output-translation note on the second keyboard.

It's also possible to use the key-mapping functions to route specific notes to up to four different MIDI output ports, so you could connect up to four different drum synths and play different sounds from each of them, depending on which keys you hit, or on the velocity of your hit (with optional crossfading between the sounds), or on the current value of any controller. This is a versatile utility for the MIDI performer, with features that would be very difficult to duplicate elsewhere, and is very cleverly written. You can download *MIDI Fish* from www.talula.demon.co.uk/midifish/index.html.

Customising

Firefox provides the usual customisable toolbars, plus loads of downloadable Skins and Themes for changing its graphic appearance. In addition, anyone who misses certain features from *IE* can download lots of Extensions (tiny plug-ins, many of which are 100KB or smaller), each of which adds extra functions. I've already installed the 58KB *Noscript*, which provides yet more security by letting you specify which web sites are allowed to execute Javascript (a subset of the Java programming language). While this generally results in far fewer problems than ActiveX controls and is more widely used (often to launch links to appear in pop-up windows, to cause text or graphics to change when you move the mouse over them, or to provide drop-down menus), I prefer to be cautious. With *Noscript* installed, a bar appears across the top when you load a non-authorised page, if it required Javascript, and lets you know just how many scripts were blocked. I've been amazed at how many some sites use (my record so far is 71 on one page!), but you can allow or temporarily allow any site to run them quite easily, if you need to, with a couple of mouse clicks. If you try *Noscript* yourself, though, you'll probably want to disable its rather annoying Audio Feedback feature.

I've also added a very relevant option to the customisable search bar. *SOS* Forum user Supermasita has created a *Firefox* search plug-in that performs a quick search for topics on the *SOS* web site. You can [install this from here](#).

Firefox already includes a good Download Manager that oversees the downloading of multiple files, and it has a handy pause function, if you want to temporarily suspend downloading to speed up the loading of web pages. However, I also downloaded the 153KB *Flashgot* extension that allows *Firefox* to use most of the external (third-party) download managers, so I could use the excellent *Leechget* (www.leechget.net), which is free for private use and lets you queue up to eight simultaneous downloads and accelerate them by splitting each file into several segments and downloading them simultaneously on different 'channels'.

You can even download an extension that lets you 'View Page In *Internet Explorer*' instead, if you come across any *IE*-only pages. However, so far I've only ever had to do this once. If you do run into any compatibility problems, Mozilla's web site has an excellent knowledge base, but far more important to me is the fact that *Firefox* has provided a faster and more elegant browsing experience and hasn't yet crashed on me once, which is more than I can say for *IE*! At least 23 million people have already downloaded *Firefox*, and I recommend it to any musician who wants more streamlined and safer Internet browsing.

Ironically, on the very day I was due to send this column to *SOS*, news also arrived that the first beta version of Microsoft's new *Internet Explorer 7* had been made available to developers. It will run on Windows XP SP2 and (surprise, surprise!), the most obvious features are better security, a search box on the menu bar and tabbed browsing. Does that sound familiar? I bet it won't be a 4.6MB download though!