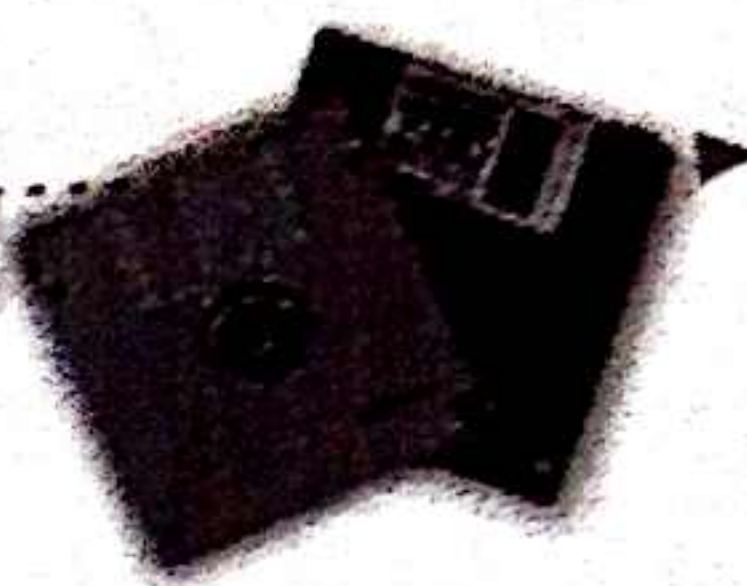




# Freeware Friday



## Tune Out, Turn On, Plug In!

by Scott Holstad

By now, you've probably heard about plug-ins. (If not, plug-ins are mini-programs that enable bigger programs -- in this case Netscape Navigator -- to do cool, neat-o things.) You may even have a few. If you have Netscape Navigator 3.0(TM), then you have a couple that came preloaded with your browser. Since you're undoubtedly an avid "Daily bLink" reader, you probably recall the Shockwave piece we wrote back in August. Perhaps you even have RealAudio and a couple of other plug-in essentials. But did you know that new plug-ins are coming out at the rate of 277 a day!?! Okay, so I'm exaggerating just a bit. But you can't deny that plug-ins are being created at an extraordinary rate.

One of the biggest reasons for plug-in popularity is video. Developers are apparently willing to do anything to spice up their Web pages (and get 'em noticed), so mini-movies are popping up all over the place. One plug-in which allows you to enjoy watching MPEG videos is the InterVU MPEG Player. Available in both PC and Mac versions, it provides streaming MPEG downloads played right on your Web page, a preview of the first video frame before downloading, and a full-speed cached playback option. After you've snagged InterVU, not only will you be prepared when you run across a Web page with an in-line MPEG, but you can actually seek MPEGs out! You can watch the Simpsons, Beavis and Butthead, or even Debbie Harry.

Video isn't the only thing hitting the Web though. Animation is increasingly popular. FutureWave Software is shipping a plug-in for PCs and Macs called FutureSplash which enables users to display vector-based animation. As such animation is smaller in format (and faster) than GIFs or JPEGs, downloading is faster and playback typically begins immediately. After you grab this plug-in, you might want to enjoy FutureSplash's demos.

Another animation plug-in is Totally Hip's Sizzler. This plug-in takes standard PICS files or Mac QuickTime movies (as well as AVIs), and converts them into sprite files which play on Web pages using a streaming technology similar to InterVU's. You can find some truly cool examples of Sizzler-based animation, but while the technology is "hip," Sizzler needs to be "totally" improved -- the image takes time to develop, so you hurt your eyes trying to figure out what that mass of pixels is supposed to be as the animation downloads -- some of the images actually spin while developing!

Many developers are producing productivity plug-ins. You can find software for PowerPoint presentations, Excel applications, Adobe Acrobat PDFs, and even a plug-in for Windows-based Netscape users to utilize Microsoft's ActiveX Controls. A couple of productivity plug-ins I like are Now Software's AboutTime and AboutPeople. They let you access funky browsable calendars and address books, and, while I'm not convinced that they're universally useful, they are kinda neat.

While there are plenty of cool plug-ins to spice up your browser, there are some that make you wonder what the hell their developers were thinking. For some of these plug-ins, there have got to be ... oh, TEN people in the universe who would find them useful! One of these beauties is EarthTime, which lets you know what time

it is across the time zones. It even "shows you seasonal changes in daylight and darkness." Woowoo!!!  
Party Time! Actually, more like SnoozeTime. I mean, do I really need to know what time it is in Zambia?  
Okay, I'm being a little flip here, but I'm trying to make a point. Plug-ins exist to enhance and extend your  
browser. How does this product do that? Why has it been made available as a plug-in? Do you really want to  
download this sort of thing only to clutter up Netscape when you can find this type of info on the Web without  
needing additional software? Hhhmmmmmm.

But wait, you can also get a TCL/TK plug-in (TCL/TK is a Unix scripting language that ... wait, I'm not gonna  
go into this. The vast majority of you couldn't care less and the 1% that do already know what it is.), online  
forms, and one baby called Chemscape Chime, which "lets scientists display chemically significant 2D and  
3D structures within an HTML page or table" (brought to you, courtesy of "the leading supplier of chemical  
information-management solutions to the pharmaceutical, agrochemical, and chemical industries).  
Oooooohhhhhhh.

Well, maybe I shouldn't be too hard on the niche plug-ins. They obviously have their uses, and perhaps they  
can help us enjoy the Web all the more. Look, maybe you're already sick of plug-ins and think they border on  
the comical, but some of 'em are pretty cool, and some are increasingly necessary. If you want to enjoy the  
benefit of a fully loaded browser, check out Netscape plug-ins and surf the Net in style.



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