

Chapter 1

Why You Should Fire Your Old Browser

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering what a browser is
 - ▶ Finding out why you should switch to Firefox
 - ▶ Looking at a little bit of history
-

There's just one Internet, but there isn't one Internet experience. How safely, easily, and quickly you browse the Web is a function of the browser you're using. Firefox is the only one designed to meet the demands of a wired world, so if you're not using it, you're stuck in rush hour traffic — while 100 million others whiz by you in the carpool lane. But before I tell you why to change lanes, I tell you what a browser is.

What Is a Browser, Anyway?

Many people confuse a *Web browser* with a *search engine*, such as Google. It's a reasonable mistake because most daily browsing begins with a search. However, whereas a search engine finds Web sites, a browser displays them. Think of the browser as your window to the Web. It doesn't have specific knowledge about the scenery (like a search engine), but you need to look through it to see what's out there.

In addition to displaying Web sites, the browser provides tools to help you navigate among them. I talk about basic commands like Back and Forward in Chapter 2, but most browsers also include features like Bookmarks, which help you keep track of your favorite pages. Successful browsers hide the complex underpinnings of the Web and make surfing safe, pleasurable, and easy. Check out Figure 1-1.

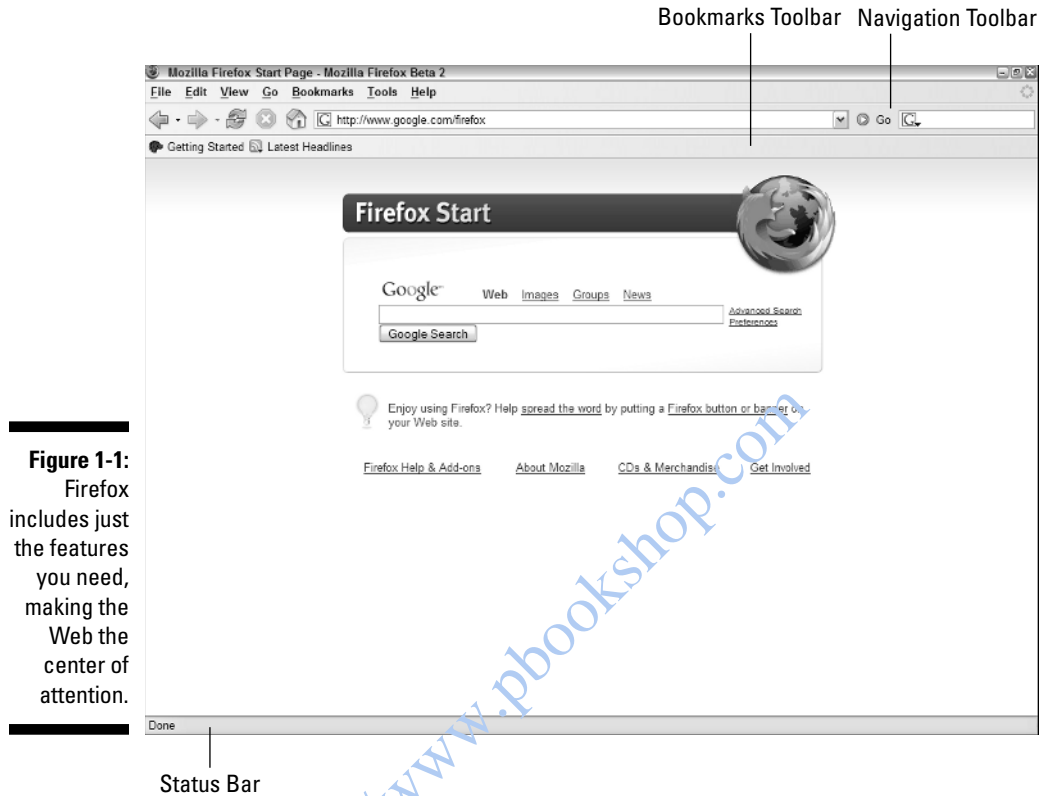


Figure 1-1:
Firefox includes just the features you need, making the Web the center of attention.

Why Use Firefox?

On the day the other developers and I started work on Firefox, before we had any users, and back when a *firefox* was just a red panda (it's true!), we wrote down our goals in a one-page "vision" document. It began:

"Why Create Firefox? We want to have fun and build an excellent, user-friendly browser without all the constraints (features, compatibility, marketing, month long discussions, etc.) that afflict the current browser development."

The document went on to outline the requirements Firefox had to meet, as I discuss in the following sections.

Giving birth to a Firefox (or, how I spent my high school years)

For a browser so focused on delivering simplicity, Firefox boasts an absurdly complicated past that dates back to the beginning of the mainstream Web itself. The story begins with a little company called Netscape, which made the first consumer-oriented, visual Web browser. Netscape almost single-handedly sparked the online revolution, and from 1995 through 1997, it dominated the browser industry. As the millennium drew to a close, however, Netscape faced increasingly fierce competition from Microsoft, which undercut Netscape by making its browser free. With billions in the bank, Microsoft could afford to throw thousands of engineers at its fledgling — Internet Explorer — and lose money for years.

Two milestones radically — but, in hindsight, futilely — changed Netscape's direction around this time. First, the online service juggernaut America Online (AOL) purchased Netscape for \$4.2 billion. Second, Netscape tried to level the playing field against Microsoft by making the historic decision to release its browser code through a development model called *open source*. Most software companies jealously guard their source code because any competitor who obtains it can easily copy the product. However, desperate times called for desperate measures. Netscape was banking on a global community of volunteer developers to emerge and help build its next-generation browser. Volunteers, in turn, would get a chance to influence and develop an Internet browser still used by millions. Leveraging free talent was Netscape's only shot against the world's richest software company.

Although it ultimately failed to keep the company afloat in the browser wars, Netscape's

decision to open source the code led to a vibrant community of volunteers known as Mozilla that persevered long after Netscape bowed out. Self-governing, passionate about the Web, and funded largely on donations, the Mozilla community quickly garnered respect in the development community. The great thing about open source is that anyone can join, regardless of experience, age or other constraints typically imposed on candidates in the professional world. I joined the community during high school at age 14, and soon afterward, my efforts landed me a series of internships at (rapidly sinking) Netscape.

Working in the Mozilla community and later interning at Netscape were wonderful experiences, and I probably couldn't have asked for a better job. However, there was an itch that couldn't be scratched in either role: the obsessive desire to create a simple, lightweight browser that didn't encumber non-technical people with meaningless jargon and endless options. It was difficult to achieve this in Mozilla because the volunteer developers were more interested in creating a browser that catered to themselves (with all of the associated power-user features). It was also difficult to achieve this at Netscape because the company — now hanging on by a thread — resorted to monetizing its flagship browser at the cost of a simple user experience. Meanwhile, having won the browser wars, Microsoft all but abandoned the browser market entirely. Intrigued by such a wide-open opportunity, I found a small group of others within Mozilla and Netscape who shared my itch, and in 2002, we scratched it. Firefox was born.

Firefox solves your Internet headaches

It's little wonder that computers are so difficult to use: The developers who make them have a much higher tolerance for pain. Something that's "hard" for an average user is easy for them, and when the user is screaming "I swear I'll throw this computer out the window!" the developer is just getting warmed up.

We've found two problems with the way most software is developed:

- ✓ **Some developers intentionally design products for themselves.** This results in products that are made by geeks and intended for fellow geeks. The average user then has no idea how to use the product.
- ✓ **Some developers just can't help designing products for themselves.** They intend to make a product for the user, but they can't help tweaking it into a confusing behemoth of a program.

We solved the first problem by declaring our intent in the Firefox manifesto: "The interface will not be geeky nor will it have a hacker-focus. The idea is to design the best Web browser for most people." Solving the second, however, requires an understanding of how non-developers look at and use software, and that isn't easy to come by.

Enter my mother. I started working on Firefox toward the end of high school, after many years of jogging down the hall to help her with computer problems. That hall bridged the generation gap and opened my eyes to how "normal" people use and understand computers.

Every Firefox developer has a story like that. Some observe their friends and family struggling; others sit down with strangers in book stores and coffee shops. We want to understand what's wrong with your Web experience and how we can fix it. In the following sections, I discuss the main complaints we've gathered.

"I can't stand all the clutter."

Buttons. Menus. Windows. Poppers. Technology is supposed to help people, so why does it always stand in your way? We want Firefox to be practically invisible, so if we've done our job properly, you shouldn't notice it. Popup ads and other nuisances are blocked silently and automatically, and only the features you need are included.

One of those features is called *tabbed browsing*, and it will change the way you surf the Web. Tabbed browsing is the kind of thing that's hard to explain

A Firefox by any other name

In an industry built on Windows, it's hardly surprising that the question I'm asked most often concerns Firefox's unusually eye-catching name. In fact, Firefox has gone by three names throughout its short lifetime.

When we started work on the Firefox project in 2002, we called it Phoenix after the mythical bird that is reborn from its own ashes. This was a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that the product was being reborn out of the ashes of Netscape, the very first Web browser. Because Firefox is based on much of the same underlying code as Netscape, this was an apt metaphor. It was also a playful jab at a company that, we felt, had stopped adequately serving its customers, and desperately needed to be reborn.

Unfortunately, we were a very small — and very broke — team in those days, and we didn't have the money or the wherewithal to do any sort of legal inquiry into the name. As Phoenix grew more popular, we were contacted by a company who claimed ownership of the trademark. To avoid legal problems, we changed the name to Firebird, a synonym for Phoenix that evokes the same imagery. Of course, we still didn't have any money, and we just wanted to get back to work on the browser. So we didn't bother inquiring about this name, either.

We soon learned that a database project was already using the name Firebird, and the encroachment was even worse this time, because the project was open source and community-developed — just like Firefox. Oops.

Because Firebird had grown fairly popular by this point, we wanted to keep the Fire moniker for continued name recognition, and spent about three months just bouncing ideas off each other:

- ✓ Fireblast?
- ✓ Fireworks?
- ✓ Firefox?
- ✓ Firesoup?

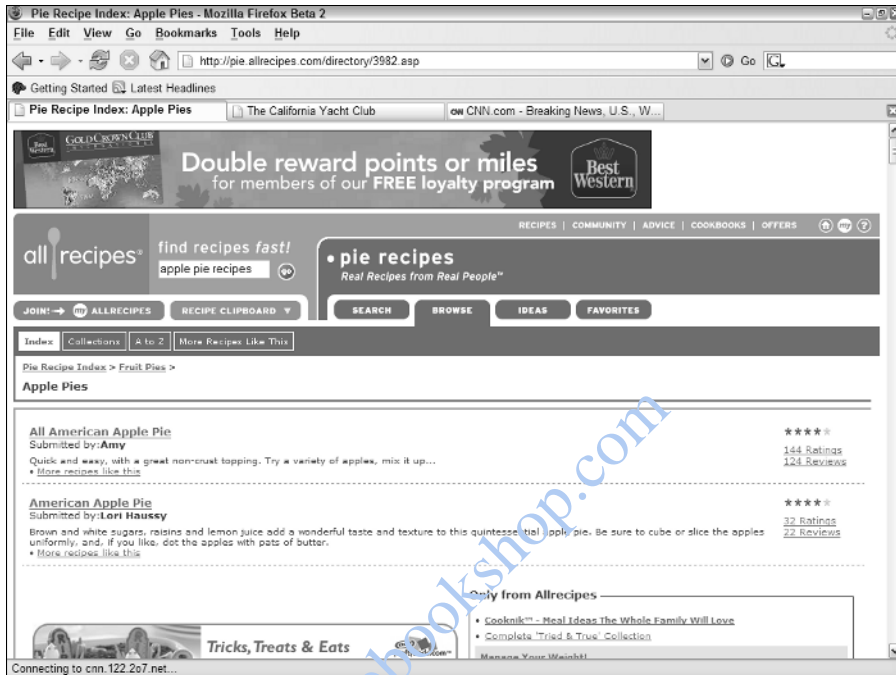
Bingo! Firesoup it was. No, just kidding. We did, of course, pick Firefox, and this time we made sure we had rights to the name. Contrary to popular belief, a Firefox is actually not a fox — it's a Chinese red panda, as shown in the figure.



Of course, our community wasn't going to let us off the hook so easily — especially after we poked fun at Netscape with our first two names. Soon after this final name change, a volunteer created an extension called Firesomething that randomly assigns a new name to Firefox each time you start — like Firecat or, yes, even Fireblake. What goes around comes around.

but easy to fall in love with. (Figure 1-2 shows you tabs, and Chapter 7 tells you more about them.) When you work with tabs, you enjoy multiple Web pages in the same window, just a click away from each other! No more littered taskbar!

Figure 1-2:
Firefox pioneers a new, clutter-free method of surfing called tabbed browsing. It's a favorite among users.



"I can never find what I'm looking for."

And who can blame you? There are over 12 billion pages on the Web. The Search Box in the upper-right corner gives you direct access to a handful of top search engines from wherever you are (see Figure 1-3) and allows you to add engines to that list (see Chapter 4). When you find a relevant page, use the Find Bar to drill down even further (see Figure 1-4). Chapter 4 outlines how Firefox helps you find what you're looking for.

Figure 1-3:
Search for anything from anywhere by using the Search Box in the corner of Firefox.

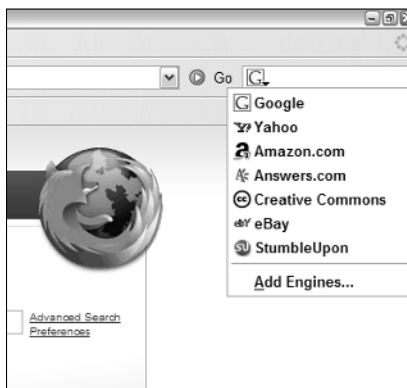
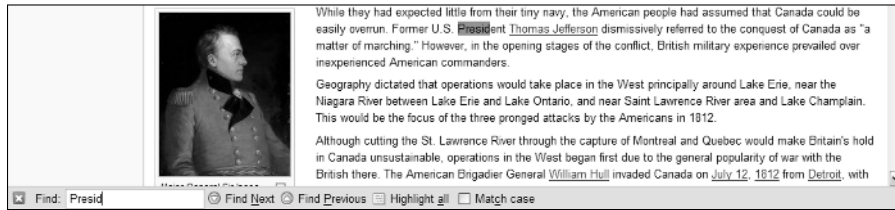


Figure 1-4:
Firefox's
revolutionary
Find Bar
automatically
finds text on
a page as
you type.

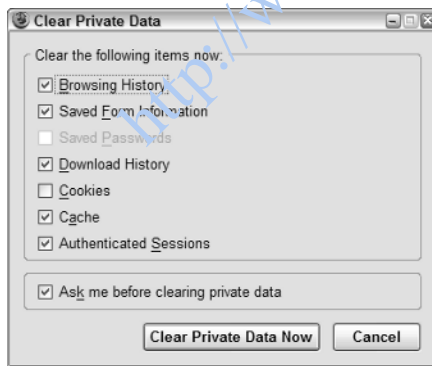


"The Internet is a scary place."

Every day, the media warns you about rampant identity theft, yet the world's most-used browser — Internet Explorer — has the worst security track record of any product. Firefox was built with your security in mind and forbids the technologies that make Internet Explorer so exploitable. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers across the globe test for problems before Firefox reaches your computer.

Firefox also gives you complete control over the information it stores while you're surfing, such as browsing history and saved passwords. You can choose how long Firefox remembers this information, and you can clear it all at once with a simple keystroke: Ctrl+Shift+Delete in Windows (see Figure 1-5; see Chapter 14).

Figure 1-5:
Firefox's
Clear
Private Data
feature lets
you clear
all your
browsing
records with
a keystroke.



"The Internet is slow."

Over the past five years, a plague called *spyware* has infected computers worldwide. Spyware is a kind of software that creeps onto your machine and watches what you're doing so it can display supposedly relevant advertisements. It isn't

just a distraction; it's an invasion of your privacy, and it slows your computer to a crawl. Research indicates that much of the spyware on computers today comes through Internet Explorer. Firefox helps you avoid these annoying pests. When you cut down the spyware on your computer, your Internet connection speeds up.

"Computers are stubborn."

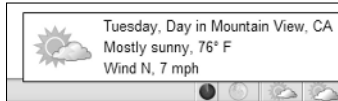
Sometimes it seems like you have to obey software and not the other way round. Firefox knows who's boss: *You are*. Build your dream browser through glamorous themes (see Figure 1-6; check out Chapter 17 for more info) and powerful extensions that reshape, redesign, and enrich Firefox (see Figure 1-7 and Chapters 20 and 22). You can also customize your toolbars to your heart's content, as I explain in Chapter 18.

Themes change the appearance of toolbars, buttons, and windows.



Figure 1-6:
Who said
software
had to
be ugly?
Choose from
hundreds
of Firefox
themes.

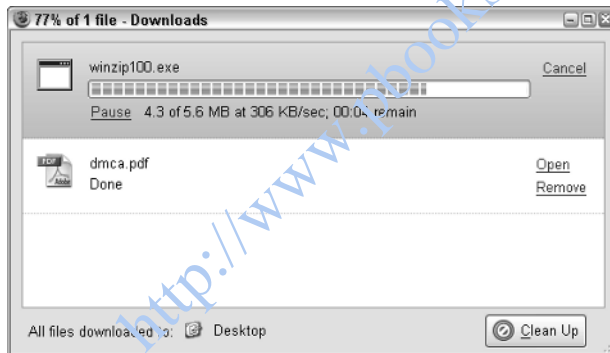
Figure 1-7:
Extensions
add new
features,
such as
weather
information,
to Firefox.



"I can't find the files I downloaded."

It's amazing that you can retrieve files from all over the world, but if you can't find them on our own computers after you download them, you have a problem. Firefox integrates a Download Manager that offers one-click access to your downloaded files (see Figure 1-8; see Chapter 11).

Figure 1-8:
The
Download
Manager
makes
it easy to
keep an eye
on your
downloads
and open
them when
they finish.

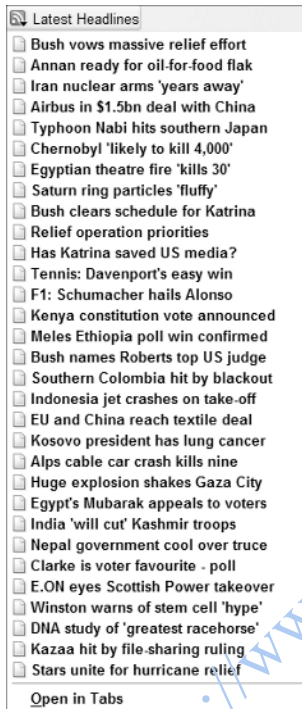


"Staying up-to-date is stressful."

As wonderful as the Internet is, it can be overwhelming. Some people track so many sources of information that it's impossible to keep up. Firefox brings the news to you through a feature called Live Bookmarks — bookmarks that can update themselves. Whether you want to stay on top of the headlines, the weather, or your sister's blog, Firefox keeps you connected automatically.

Figure 1-9, for example, shows the latest batch of headlines from BBC News. Firefox creates and updates this list automatically. (See Chapter 5 for more about bookmarks and live bookmarks.)

Figure 1-9:
Firefox can update your bookmarks automatically, so stay where you are: The info comes to you.



Firefox is developed by people who care

The greeting card writers are calling me now, but I don't know how else to say it: Firefox developers *care*. You've heard this sales pitch from companies before, but there are two differences here: We aren't selling anything, and we aren't a traditional company.

Firefox is a free product that is guided by a non-profit organization. Unlike most other software projects, Firefox is developed by a global network of volunteers through a development model called *open source*. This model ensures that the project remains open and guided by its principles, not by the ambitions of any one individual or corporation. There are no riches to be had and no stocks to be sold; Firefox developers are here because they want to create a better browser.

If you aren't using Firefox, you're probably using Microsoft Internet Explorer. And like most other people I've talked to, you probably aren't thrilled with the experience. Maybe it's the incessant popup ads or the weekly security updates. Maybe your computer moves more slowly than your teenage son on Monday morning. Maybe you can't pinpoint the problem; the browser just *feels* inadequate.

Firefox solves these problems, but I don't waste pages in this book giving you a feature-by-feature comparison. Feature charts are for marketing departments (yawn), which we Firefox developers don't have to worry about (woo!). Instead, I talk about motivations. I look at what drives the people behind these products.

Internet Explorer is developed by a company that exists, first and foremost, to make money for its shareholders. This is not an attack; it's just the reality of a public company. Using Internet Explorer wasn't always so painful. But after it became mainstream over four years ago, Microsoft stopped developing it. After all, why upgrade a free product? Since then, sleazy salespeople have come up with a horde of new tricks to bother you online, but Microsoft has had no financial reason to combat them. Internet Explorer has thus become outdated and inadequate.

Firefox began as a hobby, not a corporate expenditure. I started it with Dave Hyatt, a co-worker of mine at Netscape, another browser company, when Netscape stopped seeing users and started seeing dollar signs. We aren't driven by revenues or competition. Our users are our only shareholders, and they are the ones we need to satisfy.

You have nothing to lose

It takes just a couple minutes to start using a browser that could save you hundreds of hours and dozens of gray hairs. Your bookmarks, saved passwords, browsing history, and other information are transferred automatically from your old browser to Firefox. And it's free. Why not?

<http://www.pbookshop.com>