

Re-evaluating Browser Support  
Discussion Item  
Submitted by Doug, 04/14/97

A few months ago, we were in a debate over which browsers to support for StreamNet web development. This debate sparked when it was discovered that NCSA Mosaic was unable to support a certain HTML feature (nested tables) being used by the web site.

The general consensus was that we should support the yet “unofficial” HTML 3.2 standard (which is now official) with one exception: pages would be tested to ensure compatibility with Netscape Navigator, Microsoft Internet Explorer, and NCSA Mosaic.

Mosaic was a problem at the time since it did not completely support HTML 3.2 and required a minor rework of the web site programming. Since then, NCSA has released a more HTML 3.2 compatible browser: version 3.0 of the product. I have not run this version through “The Jaunt” yet, but a cursory review of a few sites shows that it renders complex pages considerably different than the two primary browsers: Navigator and Internet Explorer. Also, Mosaic does not seem to support Java or JavaScript.

Because it’s desirable to enhance our web interface both with better graphics and perhaps with more interactive controls, Mosaic’s less consistent rendering of pages and its lack of support for Java and JavaScript still makes it a major piece holding us back from a more advanced interface design.

One other piece that is holding us back is our current intent to continue support for Windows 3.1 browsers. The two major browsers are available for Windows 3.1 (however it’s doubtful that IE 4.0 will be made available for this platform). This means that the use of a tool like Java, is not an option for us (IE does provide Java support for Windows 3.1, but I understand that Java the applets run very slow). JavaScript and full HTML 3.2 could still be used however with the major browsers.

I would like the StreamNet project to consider dropping support for both the NCSA Mosaic browser and Windows 3.1 compatibility. I believe a good case can still be made for dropping Mosaic support, but can understand if we need to remain Windows 3.1 compatible (after all, one of our major PSMFC steering committee members is still using Windows 3.1).

The purpose of bringing this discussion up at this time is that I am in the process of determining which development tools to use for the next development phase of the StreamNet web site—using the Windows NT/MS SQL Server platform.

I am not strongly advocating the withdrawal of support for these products—but if I knew that I didn’t have to support them, it could have a significant effect on my selection of tools. That is why I would like us to at least consider it. The most compelling reason for withdrawing support is to aid us in building a more user friendly interface to our web site.

Steering Committee Decision  
04/16/97

Browser support: The Steering Committee decided that due the predominant use of the Netscape and Microsoft browsers (93% combined hits at PSMFC) and the fact that Internet Explorer is free to anyone using Windows, support for Mosaic would no longer be a requirement for web site development.

Operating system support: The Steering Committee decided that due to the fact Windows 3.1 is still prevalently used by agencies, support should continue for it. This means that 16-bit browsers must be supported in web development.