Finding and installing Firefox extensions

SURF'S UP

If you look around the Internet, you'll find a number of useful add-ons for Mozilla Firefox. **BY ANDREAS KNEIB**

The Mozilla Firefox browser is designed to easily accommodate extensions, and the Firefox community has responded with a rich assortment of add-on modules. If you're interested in higher performance, or even if you just want to check the weather, you'll find a Firefox add-on to meet your needs. We took a look at some of the

Figure 1: The Firefox Extension Manager shows you the extensions currently installed in your browser..

most useful modules for the new Firefox 1.5.

Getting Started

If your Linux distribution doesn't have the latest version of Firefox, you can download it from the Firefox homepage at [1]. Once you have installed the latest version, you can open the Firefox Extension Manager (Figure 1) by selecting *Tools | Extensions*. The Extension Manager is a central tool for plug-in management.

If your Firefox 1.0 version already has a number of extensions installed before you upgrade to Firefox 1.5, the browser should now show you if the modules are compatible with the new version. If not, you can click the *Update* button at the bottom of the Extension Manager window. The program now checks the project website to see if a newer version of

the module is available. Then just re-launch the web browser to enable the tools.

If Firefox fails to locate working extensions, the old extensions will stay disabled until an update becomes available or until you remove the extensions manually. If you still encounter problems, such as the program crashing because the browser has stumbled over an incompatible or broken module, you can try starting the program in safe mode using the following parameters in the command line: *firefox -safe-mode*.

In safe mode, all extensions and **themes** [4] are disabled, and you can run the Extension Manager to remove the offending module.

New Material

If you have been running Firefox without any add-ons, you might like to visit the

Firefox add-on website at [2] to see what you have been missing (Figure 2). You can go to the website without leaving the Extension Manager by clicking on the *Get more extensions* link. The list contains the ten most popular add-ons, as well as links to other extensions and resources.

The categories are shown on the left, from blogging extensions via download tools, to tools that protect your privacy. In addition to this website, there are various alternative projects that offer extensions for the Firefox browser, such as the Extension Mirror [3].

Ad Blocker

Let's start with a plug-in that you need to make some websites usable: Adblock. The module blocks elements such as advertising graphics and intrusive banners. The Ad Blocker is normally one of the ten most popular add-ons.

The installation is really simple. Just go to the Adblock website [5] and click the *Install Now* link. This link opens the software install dialog (Figure 3).

Press *Install* to launch into the process. After restarting the browser, you should find that Adblock is ready for takeoff. If this procedure fails for some reason, select *Edit | Preferences | Content* to see which websites have been approved for software installation. But remember to restrict this to trustworthy sites to avoid opening up a security hole.

Another method of integrating the ad blocker is to download the extension file and then just drag & drop the file icon to install. To do so, just right click the *Install Now* link, and select *Save link as…* to save the extension with the *xpi* file extension on your hard disk. The next step is to use the Konqueror file manager to drag the file to the main Firefox window to launch into the software installation.

Working with Adblock is simple; an *Adblock* message appears in the bar at the bottom of the browser window. When you click the message, the tool shows you a list of elements on the website you are currently viewing and offers to hide some of these elements. You can right click an element on a page to pop-up a menu that lets you disable an image, or an Iframe element, for example.

You can go to *Tools | Adblock | Preferences* to manage and edit the filter rules

Figure 2: The Firefox Add-ons page provides links to the most popular Firefox extensions.

for the tool. Adblock understands wildcards such as the asterisk "*", and this is a good thing, especially if you are billed for airtime, as it helps display the page more quickly, and this can save you a lot of money.

The Quick Brown Fox

To farther improve the browsing speed, you might like to install the Fasterfox extension. Just like Adblock, you will find Fasterfox in the list of tools under *Most Popular Firefox Extensions*, or on the project homepage at [6]. The plug-in gives you a number of techniques for improving web page loading speeds.

After completing the install, you can use the preferences manager to complete the configuration. Start by clicking on the Fasterfox plug-in in the overview. Then click on *Preferences* to go to the options.

Non-technical users can just check the *Turbo* box to bring the browser up to speed. But if you enjoy experimenting, you can click *Modify* to display a selection of tabs for individual customization.

One of Fasterfox's major strengths is its ability to preload web pages; this ability is known as *Enhanced Prefetching*. This means that, while opening a site, the browser also loads the sites that this site links to in the background. When you click one of the links, the browser serves up the document without any delay.

You can configure prefetching via the *General* tab. This option is disabled by

default, as it often uses up much of an Internet connection's bandwidth. The text box below the option allows you to exclude certain links from prefetching.

Enhanced prefetching is different from the browser's integrated prefetching feature. The web server has to support standard prefetching for the browser to leverage it. In contrast to this, enhanced prefetching downloads linked websites autonomously, even if the server does not support prefetching.

At the bottom of the tab is a checkbox that asks if you wish to display a timer at the foot of the Firefox window. The timer tells you how much time the browser will need to load the page. Right clicking the timer takes you to a dialog with various options.

When Fasterfox hits the accelerator with a bunch of optimized settings, it sends Firefox shooting through the World Wide Web at high speed. Assum-
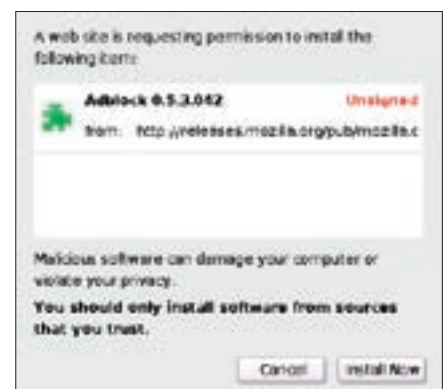

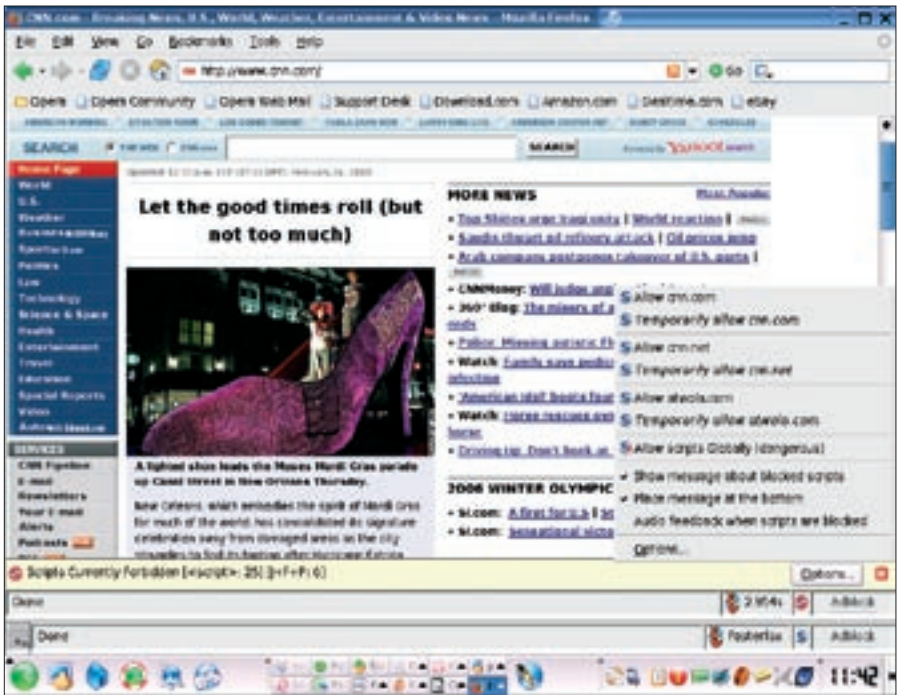Figure 3: You can use this dialog box to add Adblock.

Figure 4: The Noscript add-on identifies Javascript code and presents the user with a menu of options.

ing you are not billed by volume, you will definitely enjoy the experience of enhanced prefetching.

Weather Fox

The name Forecastfox may sound slightly similar to Fasterfox, but the function this extension gives you is completely different. Forecastfox is the weather forecaster for your browser. Again, this is one of the ten most popular extensions on the Firefox website, and the extension even has its own homepage [7].

The tool displays a regularly updated weather forecast at the bottom of the Firefox window. Of course, Forecastfox has no way of knowing where you live, so you will want to configure your location in the Extension Manager. In the *General* section, press *Find location* to do so.

Type the name of your hometown in the mask that now appears. The program searches in the weather station database for towns with the same name as your hometown and gives you a list of options. After you select your location from the list, the extension will keep you updated on your local weather.

Another of the options concerns the units of measurement for your local weather station. Depending on your personal taste, you can opt for imperial or

metric measurements. The other sections of the many concern optional settings, such as the display appearance, tool tips, or links.

Besides a weather preview for the next few days, your virtual weather forecaster gives you a satellite picture with your home town at the center. To display the satellite image, drag the mouse to the green radar icon at the bottom of the screen. Clicking on the icon opens the *http://wwwa.accuweather.com* website in the browser and gives you a full-screen display of the satellite image.

Admittedly, Forecastfox won't do much to improve the weather, but at least you'll know if it's worth leaving your desk. At the same time, the tool removes the need to launch a third-party weather forecasting application such as Wmweather.

Tricks

The last add-on we will be looking at is a surfing tool titled Noscript [8], which lets you enable or disable Javascript and Java to suit your own preferences. There are various ways to access the options for this popular extension. You can either take the route via the Extension Manager, just like with Fasterfox, or you can use the Noscript bar in the browser window, or the icon at the foot of the program window.

There are three tabs with settings: *General*, *Appearance*, and *Advanced*. Use the *General* tab to enter web pages where you will permit Javascripts to run. *Appearance* lets you specify where you want the Noscript icon to reside, or the alert tone that warns you when the plug-in fights off a script. The other fields are for changing the display.

The extended parameters let you specify how to handle copy & paste, Macromedia Flash, Java, or other plug-ins. Now, whenever you run across a page on the World Wide Web that attempts to launch Javascript, a bar with an *Options* button appears (Figure 4).

The button takes you to a menu where you can allow scripts on this website to run either permanently or in the current browser session.

This menu gives users the freedom to choose whether to allow scripts on a case by case basis without having to click through the browser's Javascript settings every time. This feature is not just a matter of convenience; it also has security implications. If you change your Javascript settings multiple times during an Internet session, you are bound to lose track of the settings at some stage; it is good to know whether Javascript is enabled or not.

Conclusions

Browsers like Firefox fit a user like a tailor-made suit. With its wide choice of extensions, you can customize Firefox to suit your individual needs. ■

INFO

[1] Firefox download:
http://www.mozilla.com/firefox/

[2] Official Firefox extensions:
https://addons.mozilla.org/extensions/?application=firefox

[3] Extensions mirror:
http://www.extensionsmirror.nl

[4] Official Firefox themes:
https://addons.mozilla.org/themes/?application=firefox

[5] Adblock:
https://addons.mozilla.org/extensions/moreinfo.php?id=10&application=firefox

[6] Fasterfox: *http://fasterfox.mozdev.org*

[7] Forecastfox:
http://forecastfox.mozdev.org

[8] NoScript: *http://noscript.net*