Galina Barskaya, Fotolia

Exploring Opera 9

A TASTE OF OPERA

Stable, fast, and complete: Opera 9 gives you everything you need for the Internet in a compact package. **BY MIRKO ALBRECHT**

Twelve years have passed since Norway's Opera Software ASA offered its first web browser to users, and every release since then has introduced revolutionary new features.

Opera started life as a 1.3 MB competitor to the major players of the time, such as Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator, but Opera has always offered many unique features. In fact, products by other vendors still lack many of Opera's special features, such as fast tiling of tabs and convenient arrow key-based scrolling.

Although Opera is closed source, the browser runs on various operating systems, and Linux users have enjoyed the program for many years now.

First Time Out

Downloading and installing Opera 9 is very easy. If the repositories for your favorite distribution don't include the program, you can download it from the Opera homepage [1]. The site has packages for all major distributions, and you can use your distribution's package manager to install. If your distribution is not on the download list, the static RPM package should help.

When you first launch Opera, a window with the terms of use pops up and prompts you to confirm – this is an unusual sight for users more familiar with Open Source. When the browser starts, you'll see that Opera provides search boxes for megasites such as Google, Amazon, and Ebay.

One good thing we noticed was that KDE integration seems improved. The browser uses the default system colors, and even transparent menus if you have set them up in the KDE Control Center. Opera's use of the menu fonts is slightly quirky, although menus are readable, in contrast to version 8. You can select (*Tools | Preferences | Advanced | Fonts*) to set the fonts up to match your KDE environment if necessary.

Customizing

Selecting *Tools | Preferences | Search* takes you to a dialog where you can set
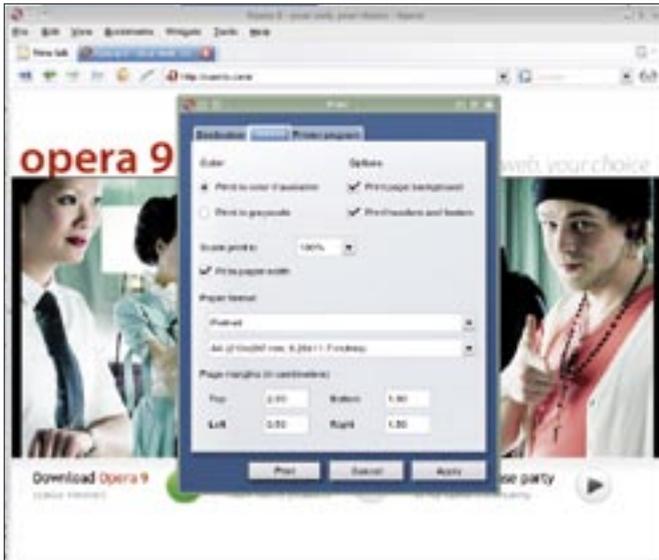
Figure 1: Opera 9 offers sereral print options.
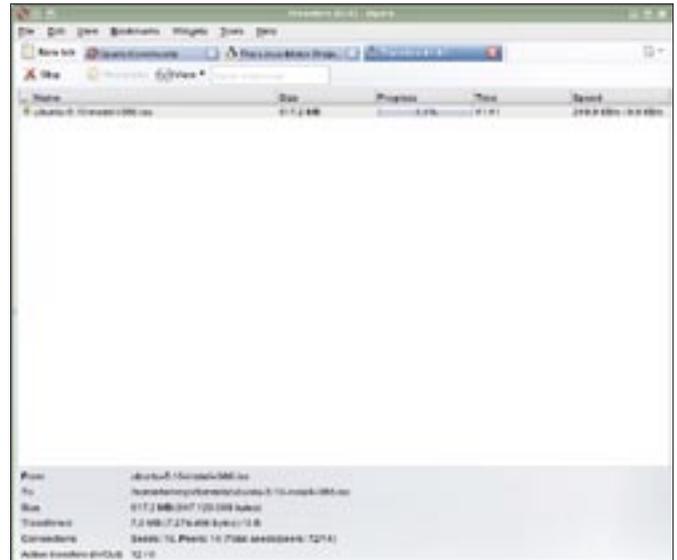
Figure 2: Download files with Opera's integrated BitTorrent support.

up some browsing preferences. For example, readers in the UK might prefer to open *http://www.google.co.uk* rather than the default of *http://www.google.com* when they press *g*. As an alternative, you can surf to a page, and then right click a search box to pop up a menu where you can set up a search shortcut. If you create a *wp* entry for Wikipedia.com, for example, you can then type *wp searchkey* in the address box, and Opera will take you to the entry in the free encyclopedia. I can hardly imagine a faster or easier way to fetch search results.

New Features

Opera inserts a tiny icon into the KDE system tray. You can click the icon to hide Opera but keep critical program features available in the dropdown menu. If you quit Opera in the traditional way, the quick start function disappears too.

New Features in Opera 9

- Widgets – small Ajax-based helpers
- User-friendly content blocker
- Individual per page security policies
- Integrated BitTorrent client
- Add a search box for any search machine
- Display websites as thumbnails for easier navigation
- URI *opera:config* for granular tuning
- Highlighting for search results
- Improved trash can function
- Improved KDE integration

Besides the simple approach to creating a new quick search field, Opera Software once again introduced a whole bunch of new features with version 9. (See the box titled "New Features in Opera 9.")

BitTorrent integration, which was promised for version 8.5, finally made its way into the browser suite (Figure 2). If you type *b searchkey* in the address box, Opera will search the filesharing network and add the downloads to a transfer list, removing the need for a third-party tool.

The content blocker is another useful addition. To use the blocker, just right-click a website, select *Block content*, and select the banners you no longer want to see in future. You can select *Tools | Preferences | Advanced | Content | Blocked content* to manage entries for ads you have blocked.

This works perfectly on news pages, giving the user an uncluttered view of the true content. Note that the content blocker can change the layout if the page is overloaded with ads; in many cases, Opera inserts large color fills. However, the blocker can't remove ads integrated as normal frame text.

You can also set up security polices on a page by page basis. Right-click the Internet page (don't click an image), to pop up the context menu for that page. Clicking the *Edit site preferences* then takes you to a plethora of settings that control the browser's behavior with respect to cookies, pop-ups, plugins, Javascript, and other security-specific fea-

tures. You can even set the browser identification individually for each website.

Fun and Games

The most obvious new feature is the addition of widgets, which you may be familiar with from Karamba or GDesklets (Figure 3). These mini-programs are based on Ajax [2] and are easily installed via *Widgets | Add widgets*. For each widget, you can specify whether the program will reside in the background or hide other windows.

The variety of choice is amazing, from Opera-skinned clocks, through panels and todo lists, to full-fledged HTML editors. The quality varies from excellent and useful to useless and totally dispensable. On a positive note, Opera users can experiment safely to find out what they really need – widgets are just as easily removed as installed – although I have my doubts as to whether these more or less useful browser add-ins will establish themselves. After all, there seems to be a trend for operating systems to integrate their own gadget systems.

Fine Tuning

Besides these more obvious introductions, Opera 9 includes improvements to a whole bunch of details. For example, the web page search function, [Ctrl] + [F], uses two-color highlighting, painting the current match yellow and the other matches green. However, if Opera is using the KDE theme, the matches are displayed in your choice of KDE highlighting color.

There is no need to wade through the *opera6.ini* system file in a text editor. You can enter *opera:config* to open a neat page that supports easy preference editing. If you are not entirely sure what to set, you should steer clear of this function, or check out the Opera forums at [3] and [4] to discover your options.

Opera 9 offers a preview of websites in the background when you hover the mouse over the tab with the site (Figure 4). This helps you quickly locate the site you need without having to actually click and take a look inside.

If you accidentally close one or more tabs, you can rescue them from the trash can and reinstate the view. The vendors also claim to have improved the program's printing capabilities and plugin handling. Popular plugins worked first time out in our lab, but some users have reported printing problems on the forums ([3], [4]).

All Inclusive

Opera is a complete Internet suite that includes email, IRC chat, RSS feed, and newsreader modules beside the browser. One thing we appreciated was the fact that menu entries are not shown for those parts of the suite you have not previously used, although they are installed when you launch a component for the first time.

Modules are displayed as new tabs, which can be controlled like side panels.

The slightly unorthodox approach to sorting email by user name, or other criteria, may be confusing if you are more familiar with a folder-based organizational structure, but it does make sense if you think about it, as it removes the need to define innumerable filter rules.

Improvements to modules are restricted to the details in Opera 9. For example, there have been some improvements to IMAP integration; and the program has a smiley menu for those of you who enjoy playing around in email messages.

The Newsfeed module will now read Atom 1.0 feeds, and DCC flies are linked in chat windows. You can check out the Changelog [5] for a complete list of enhancements.

Conclusions

Version 9 sees Opera with a pleasingly complete feature scope on a small footprint – it's amazing how much the programmers have managed to bundle into the 5 MByte package. While Opera's competitors continue to bloat their offerings, Opera has stayed lean and fast. A comprehensive program package like this could do with a better address book, however, and support for importing addresses and emails from popular third-party formats would be a welcome addition.

The Opera browser is extremely stable and unproblematic; users can access preferences easily via context menus. The developers have continued to iron out legacy rendering problems, although the browser might still trip up over the occasional tricky site.

After a short learning curve, newcomers should have no problem surfing the web with Opera, or with applying Opera's high-end search features to real life problems. Advanced users will appreciate Opera's granularity, which provides enormous opportunity for customization. ∎

Figure 4: Opera 9 offers a preview of websites in the background when you hover the mouse over the tab.

Figure 3: Opera widgets can run outside of the browser.

INFO

[1] Opera homepage: *http://www.opera.com*

[2] Ajax: *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Ajax_%28programming%29*

[3] Opera forums: *http://my.opera.com/ community/forums/index.dml*

[4] Opera community: *http://my.opera.com/community/*

[5] Changelog: *http://www.opera.com/ docs/changelogs/linux/900/*