

## April-May'06 Digest.

by Allan Naguit. April-May 2006.



Welcome to a "double-issue" of the ezine. It's true, the April issue didn't come out. Time was tight. Schedules slipped. My fault entirely. To make up for it, I've packed April into the May issue. So, to our new subscribers in April: no, we didn't forget about you, and welcome! And to everyone else, my apologies for missing the April issue!

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### (1) NEWS - A 'new' type of virus: Ransomware

There's a type of computer infection which you may not have heard about: **Ransomware**

**Several variations have been found, but what they have in common is a demand for money or something bad happens** (or continues to happen) to your computer and/or its files.

**An infected company computer was said to have had its files (including documents, photographs and spreadsheets) encrypted** and held to ransom. Instructions were left for how to contact the ransomer, who then demanded \$200 for the digital key to unencrypt the files.

**Another variation had the ransomware freeze a computer and threaten to delete files every 30 minutes.** It also gave instructions on how to send \$10.99 via Western Union to free the computer. Luckily, in this case, it was a bluff; no files were actually deleted. Sophos, an anti-virus company, discovered the password on the infected computer and released it to the public.

At least in the latter case, the experts aren't sure how the virus is spreading, but the suspicion is that it "may be embedded in a Web page and spread through a so-called drive-by install, a method that doesn't require users to actively click on and download an attachment."

**My advice? As usual, practice safer computing** (stay

away from dodgy websites, keep anti-malware protection up-to-date, use a safe browser, be wary of clicking on links).

**If you get infected, don't pay up.** Contact your local computer professional (I.T. Handyman). Or, if you want to try and fix the problem yourself, the same company (Sophos) who cracked the password for one of these trojan/ransomware has a helpful page here:

<http://www.sophos.com/support/disinfection/trojan.html>

References / for more info:

<http://www.viruslist.com/en/weblog?weblogid=185454886>

[http://www.int.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=115&art\\_id=qw1116918720581B225](http://www.int.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=115&art_id=qw1116918720581B225)

[http://www.infoworld.com/article/06/04/27/77828\\_HNtrojanransom\\_1.html](http://www.infoworld.com/article/06/04/27/77828_HNtrojanransom_1.html)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ransomware>

### (2) MAIN - Firefox, the safer web browser

Browsing the internet with your old browser can be likened to driving around with a beat-up old car. You know, the one that's maybe got a bit of rust, rattles, whose engine sometimes doesn't start or just conks out, whose doors don't close so well and the seat belts are too loose. It gets you from A to B, sure, but wouldn't it be nice to drive something newer, safer, and yes, has bells and whistles galore?

Enter the hottest web browser of the moment: Firefox.

## Firefox® 1.5

You're probably using Internet Explorer. Why should you use something else?

**Here's a fact: US-CERT (the U.S. government's Computer Emergency Readiness Team) made the recommendation to "Use a different web browser"** (i.e., other than Internet Explorer) back in July 2004.

Ref: <http://www.kb.cert.org/vuls/id/713878>

**Now, I don't want to get into a debate about which is better, Firefox or Internet Explorer, and why.**

There have been discussions, debates and rants about this all over the net. For example, the following link points to an article (Sept '05) in ZDNet, an online technology site: <http://blogs.zdnet.com/Ou/?p=103>. The writer argued that "Firefox ... has more vulnerabilities per month than Internet Explorer". What's interesting is the raging debate that followed as readers wrote in with differing points of view. Have a read and make up your own mind.

**What I will tell you is that I'm a Firefox user.** I switched from Internet Explorer to Firefox many, many

months ago and I've never looked back. I like the look and feel of Firefox, the speed of publication of updates and reaction to discovered exploits, and the "open source" philosophy. Although I don't have my own hard, empirical evidence that my PC is safer when browsing using Firefox, it sure seems like it. Why? When I'm online, unlike when I was I an Internet Explorer user, I'm hardly ever bothered by annoying pop-ups. The anti-malware applications (which I update and run regularly on my PC) almost never report anything bad. I don't get much spam, and I haven't had to reinstall Windows in months.

Yes, a new version of Internet Explorer (version 7) is in the works. The beta version is out, if you're brave enough to try it and help test it. It's supposed to address a lot of the security concerns with the current model. But in the meantime, do yourself a favour and try Firefox. Firefox is packed with features you'll really appreciate. Besides, you can have both browsers on your computer. Anyway, it's free. (And if you're already using an older version of Firefox, go ahead and update to the latest version!)

One other browser that deserves a mention is the **Opera** browser. I used to use it as well and found it very good, but I never liked the ads banner it used to display (which was the price of using the browser for free). However, in September 2005, the people behind Opera started providing their browser -without the ads banner- for free. Go ahead and check it out. <http://www.opera.com>.

## What makes Firefox good?

Firefox comes with these great features (and many others): *tabbed-browsing*, *pop-up blocking*, *better security*, and plenty of (free) *add-ons*.

## Tabbed browsing

This is a standard feature of Firefox. If you haven't tried tabbed browsing before, it basically allows you to open several web pages at once without running a new browser session for each. Each extra page is represented by a tab in Firefox. Clicking on a tab will focus you on that specific page. This is really handy if you're doing research, or simply like having various pages open at the same time (for example, web email, sports page, news, and maybe something to do with what you're actually supposed to be working on right now).



Illustration 1: Tabbed browsing in Firefox (showing 5 tabs open)

In fact, in writing this issue, at one point I had no less

than thirteen tabs open, each set to a different web page relevant to this issue's content. Now, this issue took me several days to write. To keep my research material handy, I created a bookmark folder called "April May '06 ezine" and bookmarked all those pages into that folder. At the beginning of a workday, I'd use Firefox's "Open in Tabs" feature to open all thirteen or so web pages in the "April May '06 ezine" folder and carry on where I left off.



## Pop-up Blocking

Firefox has a built-in pop-up blocker designed to block unwanted pop-up and pop-under ads. On the whole, this works very well, although I've found that this feature doesn't catch them all – I sometimes (but not very often) see unexpected pop-ups on my screen. Luckily, the latest version of Firefox is supposed to have "improved pop-up blocking". Looks like it's a never ending game of chess between the Firefox developers and those sneaky advertisers, one trying to stay a step ahead of the other.

## Firefox has "better security"

Part of my job is "to keep my finger on the pulse of the internet" (well, I try), so I found out early about a security bulletin in April regarding a vulnerability that affected Firefox. I was scouring the net, trying to find out more about it when my Firefox browser popped up a message saying that it had just upgraded itself to version 1.5.0.2, and would I like to restart now or later? After I restarted, I went back to what I was reading. Eventually, I read that the fix was to upgrade Firefox to version 1.5.0.2. Already done! This highlights one of the biggest advantages of Firefox: the speed at which fixes and patches are published by the developers. Whenever a security issue is raised, it's not long before a fix is published. (**UPDATE:** Since I wrote the above, my version of Firefox has been updated to version 1.5.0.3, in reaction to a vulnerability discovered May 02, 2006.)

## Bells and Whistles (Add-ons)

Now we come to the fun bit. Ever walk through the car section of your local shopping mall and look at the after-market add-ons you can use to jazz up your car? Well, Firefox has its own store, with over a thousand items on the shelves. It's the Firefox Add-ons webpage (<https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/extensions>).



A Firefox Add-on, also known as an extension, is something that extends what Firefox can do for you. For example, you can choose to have Firefox display your local weather forecast (Forecastfox), control your media player from within Firefox (FoxyTunes), and help block annoying ads (Adblock). And they're free.

## So Many Extensions

With over a thousand extensions, you might feel like a kid at a candy store with enough money to buy everything. There are so many extensions, it's almost overwhelming, especially when you can taste all the candy. And just like this kid, eating all the candy won't be so good for you. The trick is to use only the extensions that you actually want. Some have found that installing too many extensions can slow down your Firefox browsing experience. Luckily, it's as easy to remove as to add Firefox extensions.

## Extensions: a snap to install (and uninstall).

Here, I'll show you a typical **installation**. I went to the Firefox Add-ons page and selected an Extension to install (in this case, something called Adblock, an extension that, well, blocks web ads).

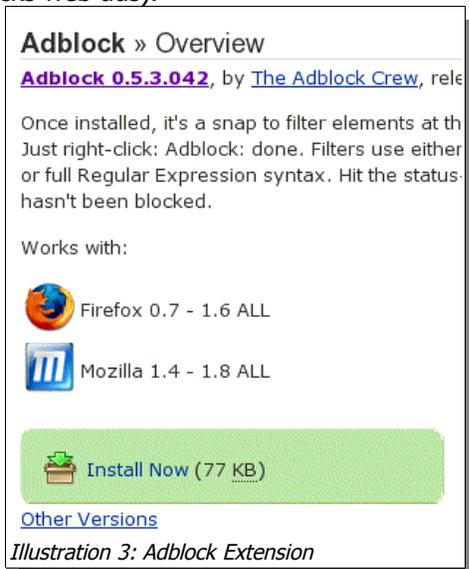


Illustration 3: Adblock Extension

When I clicked on the "Install Now", I was presented with the following:

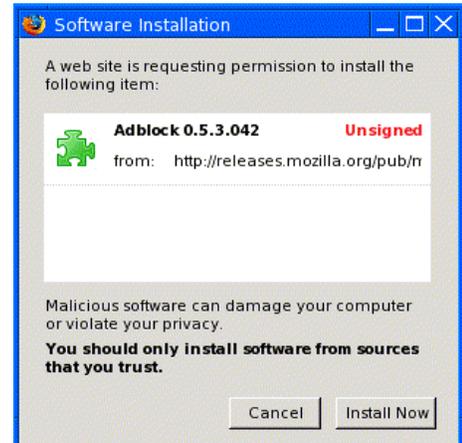


Illustration 4: Installing the Adblock extension

By clicking on the **Install Now**, the extension is installed into Firefox. Extensions usually comes into effect after restarting Firefox (just the browser, not the entire computer).

**To uninstall**, go to Tools, Extensions, highlight the extension you want to remove then click Uninstall.

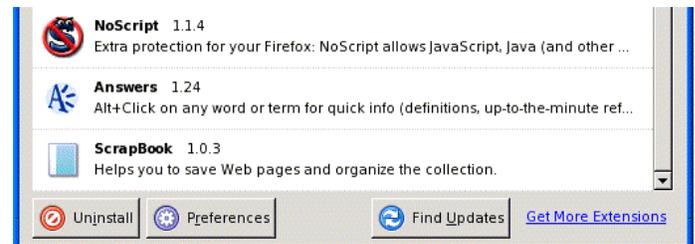


Illustration 5: Extension Manager - Uninstall button on the lower left

## Firefox Add-on Categories

To get you started, you can try browsing the "Recommended", "Most Popular" and the "Highest Rated" lists. Or, you can browse by category. The categories include: *Blogging, Bookmarks, Contacts, Developer Tools, Download Tools, Editing and Forms, Entertainment, Humor, Image Browsing, Kiosk Browsing, Languages, Message Reading, Miscellaneous, Navigation, News Reading, Privacy and Security, Search Tools, Tabbed Browsing, Web Annoyances, Website Integration, XUL Applications.*

That's a big list.

I just reviewed the items displayed according to the "Recommended" list. There does seem to be a bias towards the internet-savvy user (after all, early adopters of Firefox tended to be of the the pioneering, bleeding-edge type... until recently that is). If you're more of a no-nonsense / "business person" type, you can try my own

recommendations (I find these useful for everyday use):

### Allan's Recommended Firefox Extensions

**Adblock** – to block annoying web ads

**Answers** - Hold down Alt (or Option on a Mac) and click on any word to get a quick definition, an up-to-the-minute reference and more from Answers.com.

**Auto Copy** – Whatever you highlight on a page in Firefox automatically gets copied to the clipboard. This makes it easy to paste text into documents, or, say, into Google.

**Paste and Go** – Works very well with Auto Copy. Once you highlight, say, a phrase on a web page you want to Google, right-click in the search box and choose the option "Paste and Search" to Google it straight-away.

**Tab Mix Plus** – this turbo-charges Firefox's tabbing features. The thing I like the most is "Session Manager". I have it set so Firefox remembers the web pages on all tabs I have open, when I turn it off. The next time I run Firefox, I can restore my previous session or start afresh.

**IE View** – Lets you load pages in Internet Explorer with a single right-click, or mark certain sites to *always* load in IE. This add-on is for those websites which were written to work expressly with IE, like Windows Update and some banks'. Note: The first time I tried Firefox to do online banking, I got a strongly-worded warning on my screen about how my browser was "not supported". I went ahead anyway figuring there'd be no harm if I didn't move any money. An *account enquiry* worked, so I tried an actual payment, which also worked. I've been using Firefox to do my online banking ever since, trouble-free. But if you really HAVE to use Internet Explorer, then the IE View add-on is for you.

I'll finish off this Firefox section with some of my **nice-to-have extensions**:

**Forecastfox** – Display your local weather forecast.

**FoxyTunes** - Control your music player within Firefox.

**Resize Search Box** – To increase the default size of the search box in Firefox (which I find a bit small).

**Translate** – Translate web pages and/or selected text to different languages.

**WellRounded** – This is a cosmetic extension. It rounds the edges of the location bar, search bar, find bar, and other toolbars in Firefox. I just like the look.

### (3) IT TIPS – How to save on your fuel bill

**edmunds.com**, an "automotive information website", has an article where they test driving tips to see which ones really save fuel, and by how much. The tests are:

Test #1: Aggressive Driving vs. Moderate Driving

Test #2: Lower Speeds Saves Gas

Test #3: Use Cruise Control

Test #4: A/C on, Windows Up vs. A/C on, Windows Down

Test #5: Check Your Tire Pressure

Test #6: Avoid Excessive Idling

It seems self-evident that not taking off too fast at lights will save on fuel, but apparently doing so (and driving moderately) can shave as much as **one-third** off your fuel bill! Read the rest of this interesting article here:

<http://www.edmunds.com/ownership/driving/articles/106842/article.html>

Ok, from now on, I'm driving like I'm Driving Miss Daisy.

### Motormouth.com.au

For our Aussie readers, check online for the cheapest petrol in your area before getting in your car to fill up. Visit <http://www.motormouth.com.au>. The website states that they report fuel prices for Brisbane, the Gold and Sunshine Coasts, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. Also: "From Monday to Saturday fuel prices are updated at approximately 8.15 am each morning and at 3pm each afternoon. On Sundays fuel prices are updated from 9am."

### (4) FUN - The Corporate B.S. Generator

#### The Corporate B.S. Generator

<http://www.atrinxnet.com/bs-generator.html>

Want to sound like an ambitious business professional? A high-level executive of a mega-corporation? The "Corporate B.S. Generator" can help! This website will give you a catch phrase with each click!

Here are three samples (three clicks!):

- "efficiently target competitive methodologies"
- "credibly initiate seamless mindshare"
- "appropriately negotiate flexible functionalities"

Just roll of the tongue, don't they?

- Till next time!

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For more tips on "how to unblock your computer's pipes", visit our website at [www.funai.com.au](http://www.funai.com.au).