Firefox: features and functions

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This paper is about some of the functions of the Firefox browser. It will describe just some of the features when browsing; how to manage bookmarks; the use of the search bar; the more popular add-ons; and some of the settings where they impinge on the other features described.

How to get it

The version I will be using is 3.6.6 as distributed by Ubuntu 10.04.

To obtain the latest version of Firefox for your system go to the Mozilla site: http://www.mozilla.com/firefox/ which will re-route you to your local download site.

Browsing and basics

We all know about clicking on a link, but here are a few other pointers for newcomers.

If you just let the mouse stay over a link, the value of the link is displayed along the bottom of the window so you can see where it will lead when clicked.

Using the right button to click on a link gives some options to allow you to save the value of the link as well as view the new page in a new tab or window. These options override the options given in the link itself. For example, it is possible for a webpage to ask that a link is opened in a new window by default, and that will then be the behaviour when a left click is used. The right click menu gives the option of opening in a new window whatever the webpage requested.

To scroll down a page, either use the scroll wheel on the mouse, or Page Down key, or the space bar if the focus is on the browser page.

To increase or decrease the size of the text being shown, use Ctl/+, or Ctl/- respectively.

If you think the bookmark bar and other bits of infrastructure occupy too much of the screen, then Function key F11 will toggle between the normal view and a full screen version of the displayed page.

If you find that it is taking a long time to load a page and suspect it is faulty in some way, then the icon of a red circle with a cross will stop the loading where it was and allow recovery to a more satisfactory place.

Settings

These can be found under Edit → Preferences.

Under the General tab, you can specify how to handle downloads and where to put them; or say that you want always to be asked where to put them. This is also the place to define your initial page when Firefox starts.

There are a number of options on how to handle new tabs under the Tabs tab; in particular, whether to switch to the new tab when it is started (my personal preference), and whether to start requests for a new window in a new tab instead (which Firefox sets by default).

The Privacy tab gives options on what to do with history, cookies, and other spoor from your browsing when Firefox is closed. The drop down list includes removing all history, and the custom setting allows you to set things up for private use. This is where you would set up the options to protect users from having their data misused in an internet kiosk.

Keeping your security data safe

Firefox has the ability to save usernames and passwords for sites that require a login. These can be protected by a single global password set under the Security tab.

While browsing, after logging in to such a site, a bar appears at the top of the browser window with buttons to allow you to save the values you entered in order to log in. Only sites that are written to allow this will enable the option to be given, but in practice almost all of them that need a login now provide the correct formats.

Bookmarks

When a page is displayed, it is just a matter of going to Bookmarks → Bookmark This Page (or use Ctl/D) and then selecting the menu item under which it is to be placed. Alternatively, you can get there via a right click while the cursor is in the page, but not on a link. If the folder where you want it is not in the dropdown list, then the little button to the right will bring up a full dialog where you can select any folder, or create new folders for your bookmarks. You can also specify any tags you wish to associate with the bookmark at that point, too.

Why use tags? The way you use a feature is of course a personal preference. But as a possibly contrived example, suppose you wish to know which bookmarked pages are associated with sites for which you have an account with login and password. Then you could specify these bookmarked pages with a tag, say 'login' and find them all under Bookmarks → Recent tags, or see the list of all tags under Bookmarks → Organise Bookmarks. Or if you had all your news sites bookmarked under a "News" folder, you could add a tag 'weather' for those which also give you the weather.

Backing-up and transferring bookmarks

To make a backup of your bookmarks, go to Bookmarks → Organise Bookmarks and hit the Import and Backup → Backup menu item. This will take you to a file selection dialog where you can chose the place where you want to save it. The name of the file, by default, includes the date which will prevent overwriting older versions of a backup if you do this regularly. The backup also will contain the tag values for each bookmark.

The easiest way of transferring bookmarks from one place to another is to back-up to a portable device and then on the target machine, select Import and Backup → Restore which will allow you to navigate to the backup and reset all the bookmarks. Note that Restore will replace *all* the existing bookmarks in the target installation; it does *not* merge them.

If you save them using the Import and Backup → Export HTML, then you will create a file that you can look at in Firefox to select the bookmarks you want to include. In the past, I've had trouble importing from such a file as the levels of menu indirection seem to shift. However, the newer versions may be better.

Searching

At the top right of the Firefox window, a search field is present by default with a number of possible search engines already included ready for use. Clicking on the icon immediately to the left of the search field will show the ones you have installed, and selecting the Manage Search Engines from the menu will enable you to get more that Mozilla has been informed of. Some websites that include a search facility also provide a way of inserting their search into the list as well.

Popular Add-ons

One of the great things about Firefox is the vast number of add-ons that you can get for it. There is something for almost anything you can think you may want to do. Here I'll mention just a few of the more popular ones you can find at Tools → Add-ons. Those which are installed are listed under the Extensions icon. From here you can disable any you do not want to be active temporarily, or even remove them. This is also the place to change the settings for some of them. Some add-ons will insert extra items under the Tools menu and/or add icons in a toolbar or status bar to enable their features to be accessed.

To find more, use Get Add-ons icon and then the Browse All Add-ons link and do a search.

Add-on: NoScript

Even with the most secure browsers, you can still be caught out by malicious scripting on some sites. This add-on will not allow any scripts from a site to run unless you expressly permit it. To start with, it can seem annoying, but as you set more and more of your regular sites to allow scripting to occur, then the problems die away.

Add-on: Adblock Plus

Adverts can be very annoying, especially those which flash at you and distract from the site. Most extra advertising is done via specialised sites which feed the advertisements via automatic linking from the site you are browsing. This add-on will allow you to subscribe to lists of advertising sites that you do not want to be seen. The add-on will then disallow those sites from sending you the advertisements. In addition it will allow you to put more sites you do not wish to see onto your personal ban list.

Add-on: CookieSafe

For the very cautious, cookies should be kept under control. These are little files that are saved by your browser to remember things about the site you are looking at. It is the method whereby a site can remember what your login status is, for instance. However, it is difficult to make any reasonably complex dialog in a site without using cookies, so banning them completely is rarely a viable option for anyone. But this add-on will allow you to select the sites that you will permit to keep cookies on your local machine.

Add-on: Certificate Patrol

Certificates are the means that a secure site can be verified to be who they say they are. There are a number of trusted global suppliers of certificates, and any site that uses a secure (https) connection should show a validated certificate to the browser. In practice, when such a site is accessed, the

status of a valid certificate is indicated in the url location bar by green text. This add-on will tell you about new certificates that you acquire from secure sites, as well as inform you when a site changes its validating agent in case you think you might be duped into accepting a malicious impostor.

Add-on: ImageZoom

Sometimes you may wish to see a larger version of an image, and this add-on will allow you to expand an image up to 400% of the original size. However, it cannot improve the resolution of the image, so if it only a few pixels, all that will happen will be that the pixels will. Become larger blocks of pixels and probably not improve visibility.

Further information

For information on the types of links: http://www.echoecho.com/htmllinks03.htm