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Tools turn browser into galaxy

BY KRISTI HEIM
Mercury News

Nobody would expect to explore the world's biggest library page by page, yet some would say that's exactly what it's like trying to get around on the Internet.

While the Web has become increasingly sophisticated, the tools available for using it haven't kept pace. Now that's starting to change.

Navigating the ever-expanding Web ''is not as intuitive or visual as it ought to be,'' said Billy Pidgeon, an analyst at Jupiter Communications in New York.

Offering an alternative to the click-and-wait frustration of downloading pages, a growing mini-industry is coming up with ways to organize the Web into more manageable and visually attractive pieces. The new software tools, which are generally downloadable for free, make use of symbols such as dots, snippets and even a miniature solar system.

Some of these new tools sit on a desktop as icons and eliminate the need for turning on a browser and typing in Web addresses or finding bookmarks. Where the browser acts like one big window onto the Net, these objects act like small portholes onto sites people want to visit regularly.

Rather than clicking through numerous pages of a Web site, users can combine parts from different pages into one icon, which can be sent to others through e-mail. They're designed to let people

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do several things on the Web simultaneously, such as keep track of auctions or stock prices, read the news and search for information.

Even when they're open, the icons leave plenty of room on the screen for working on other desktop applications.

For consumers, the new software tools may help in weeding through the information jungle.

Businesses can license the technology to package and distribute their online content.

But the real test is whether these new Web navigation tools can achieve critical mass at a time when many dot-com companies are going under. Their long-term success may hinge on forging alliances with larger content and commerce companies, Pidgeon said.

George and John Kembel, twin brothers and graduates of the same Stanford University product design program, founded Sunnyvale start-up DoDots Inc. to give Web sites better packaging.

In their analogy, surfing the Web is like trolling the supermarket aisles for lettuce, croutons and dressing. They aim to combine everything into a single bag of mixed salad.

The dot icons they offer are like those bags, serving up bite-size applications written with the widely used HTML code. Companies use the dots to package their content and services, and then send them out to users as miniature versions of their Web pages.

''Album dots'', for example, look like little album covers and can play music and store song lyrics.

DoDots has agreements with about 30 companies, including Merriam Webster, advice service Epinions.com, technology news site ZDNet and online shopper mySimon. For now, consumers are limited to using dots from these companies.

DoDots makes money through licensing, distribution and click-through fees as well as a percentage of sales by DoDots' partners.

Snippets.com, a start-up in Pleasanton, has a similar service that offers a ''drawer'' of small boxes that flicker with online content at the bottom of the computer screen. Each ''snippet'' is a slice of a Web site from one of the 40 partners that pay to be in the

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drawer. The boxes light up with a green exclamation mark whenever the information on the site changes, letting users know about new stock prices, for example. Users can customize the settings to view highlights or greater detail.

For Snippets partners, the drawers represent a potentially powerful marketing pipeline, said Dennis Moulton, vice president of business development and marketing. They can learn the contents of each user's drawer, allowing them to send targetec ads to viewers, he said.

Snippets' partners include CNN, ESPN and Yahoo Weather.

Snippets had 50,000 users in May and aims to increase that tenfold by the end of this month.

Another company attempting to change the face of the Web is San Francisco-based UBUBU Inc. Its Universe product features images of planets, sculptures and other art objects that sit on the desktop like bookmarks. The objects represent not only Web sites, but e-mail, applications and computer files.

UBUBU's partners deliver content to Web users through UBUBU's icons. One of the 75 partners is the TV show ''Absolutely Fabulous,'' which beckons its online audience with icons of lipstick, champagne bottles and high-heeled shoes. Other partners include BBC America, the World Wrestling Federation, Amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com and actor Patrick Stewart.

UBUBU Chief Executive Brian Backus, a former producer for Disney Interactive, said the tool was born out of his ''frustration at having to stare at an ugly computer screen all day.''

''We're all living off a system of Windows designed for professionals and engineers transmitting facts and numbers,'' he said. ''It's bad at representing other parts of human experience.''

Aimed at the youth market, UBUBU lets people transform what's on their computer into a ''personal cyber solar system'' with planets that lead to cities, buildings and even rooms.

In September, UBUBU plans to promote a Web-based ''public universe'' by offering a tool set for anyone to construct their own planet and disseminate it on the Internet. Backus envisions a Web in which a search for ''gourmet food'' might bring up a Wolfgang Puck planet, or a search for ''politics'' might lead to Ralph Nader's planet.

''We believe for the Web to ever become a true worldwide mass

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medium, it needs to speak as most people do,'' Backus said. ''Pictures are a global language.'' The challenge for companies offering software tools beyond the browser is that people may not want to spend time to learn a completely different system, notes Pidgeon.

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