

review by Erik J. Barzeski

.0 Stars — 1 Star Poor, 5 Stars Excellent

**Title:** Internet Explorer/Outlook Express

**Version:** 4.5

**Developer:** Microsoft

**Price:** Free

**Contact Info:** <http://www.microsoft.com/mac/>

**Genre:** Web Browser/Email

**System Requirements:** PowerPC, Mac OS 7.5.5 or later, 8 MB RAM, 10 MB hard disk space

## witching From a Pair of Favorites

I'll be honest with you. Until three weeks ago, I had a powerful tandem working. Netscape's Navigator 4.08 handled my http and ftp needs, and Claris EMailer 2.0v3 handled my email needs. I was happy and productive. Then EMailer became fond of messing with my "Bowels of the Memory Manager." In other words, it began crashing. To make matters worse, Microsoft introduced Internet Explorer (IE) and Outlook Express (OE) 4.5. Being the curious sort, I downloaded and tried them out. I can now report that they are my default browser and email client. But I digress... read this review before you make them yours.

op Around the Internet

With Internet Explorer 4.5, Microsoft has, at least temporarily, abandoned the typical "browser war" feature set: overloaded (and often useless) features. Instead, Microsoft seems to have focused on tweaking and improving on the features already found in their 4.0x browser. Usability and speed are primary concerns, it would seem, and the efforts come through well. The Forms AutoFill, Printing features, and enhanced Explorer Bar are welcome additions which that "other" browser currently can't compete with.

### Forms AutoFill

I fill out a lot of forms on the Web. Subscription forms, order forms, and software registration forms. It gets boring: name, email address, telephone number, etc. There are some fine text macro utilities around, such as TypeIt4Me, but even then you've got to move to each form field and type a few letters.

Internet Explorer 4.5 solves this problem. With the correct information stored in your preferences, a simple keypress (command-=) fills in almost all Web-based forms with the correct information. If a form contains an item which is not contained in your AutoFill Profile, IE's Forms AutoComplete lets you set up other commonly-used items. Type a few letters and the rest of the information is filled in — never before has spending money on the Internet been easier!

### Printing

o be honest, I've never liked printing web pages. Why? Well, I knew that it wouldn't print right! Graphics would get split across two pages, text would wrap oddly, and fourteen extra pages would, for whatever reason, spew out of the printer after the actual content was done.

IE intelligently parses web pages before deciding where to place page breaks — it tries not to break up tables or graphics, for example. When light type (white on a black background) is found, IE reverses the color for printing. That's very useful. And with IE 4.5's Shrink Pages to Fit and Print Preview features, printing is easy easy easy! And it works!

### Quick! Hold That Page!

sometimes grow tired of the old routine: click on a link, look around, hit the back button. Click on the next link, get a 404, hit the back button again. Keep doing this, oh, forever. We've all gone through this ritualistic clicking of

links, and we've all hated it.

IE 4.5 solves this problem with its Page Holder feature. With a few clicks, an entire Web page can be shoved into the Explorer Bar (the area on the left-hand side of the browser window — say goodbye to the "Channels" tab). With an additional click, a list of links similar to the one seen at right can be displayed. Click on each in turn and save yourself the hassle!

## Exploring the Other Goodies

Internet Explorer doesn't rest on the laurels of three fine advances. No no no! It pushes the browser envelope in several other areas as well.

### Drag and Drop Installation, Self-Repair

Yes, just like Office '98, IE and OE can self-repair themselves. Users of Office will be happy to note that no "extra" junk is installed into the system folder, and in fact the entire IE folder (with my current set of 10 plugins) totals less than 10 MB. Besides, everyone loves applications that can be installed without quitting all other applications or, heaven forbid, a restart.

### More Drag and Drop

It's no lie that Mac users appreciate two things: nifty icons and drag and drop. IE 4.5 integrates both in an interesting and easy-to-use fashion. Drag any image from a website to your desktop and it is immediately saved, with a preview icon, to your hard disk. Snazzy — now it'll be even easier to steal images. For those anal folks out there (myself included): no, you don't get to rename the file and you won't find an option to turn the preview icons off.

### Find Sherlock Here

I don't often use Sherlock to search the Internet, though I know a great many others rely on it many times a day. Those users will be happy to know that Sherlock has a place in the IE navigation space (above the content area). With options to "Find Similar Pages," "Summarize Page to Clipboard," and "Open Apple Sherlock," this feature should save some people a little bit of time. Me? I'll just launch Sherlock from my Apple Menu as I always do...

### Quick Like a Bunny

Though I hesitate to say "IE is faster than Navigator," because on some systems the opposite is often true, I will say that it does seem faster. IE has, so far as I know, always excelled at page rendering speed when the back button is pressed — pages reappear almost immediately. Sorry, but Navigator can't say that.

## ot All Is Well

Though Internet Explorer 4.5 has made great advances, it still has problems. Let's stick to format and go over them individually, shall we?

### Java Gonna Eat That?

Gosh knows what Microsoft will ever do with Java. Not all Java works properly, and I'm kinda getting sick of seeing error dialogs appear when I know the code is correct. Pages that load correctly in Navigator freak out IE. Go figure. Maybe Sun will sue them... <grin>

### Auto-Complete This!

Though many would list this as a feature, I for one detest the way in which IE 4.5 currently deals with auto-completion. For example, one site which I visit frequently has a URL which looks like <http://members.url.com/source-code/c++/index.html> . However, to get to this page I first must log in at <http://members.url.com/> . IE "helps me out" by auto-completing the entire URL every time I begin typing it. Each time I must click at the end of the ".com/" and delete the extra text. URL auto-completion is great, sometimes, but I'm pretty close to disabling it.

### Download Window

Though IE 4.5's Download Manager is cool in many respects — you can resume downloads, get detailed information on the files you've previously downloaded, and more — I detest one thing about it. Imagine this: you're at a web page which lists five things you'd like to download. You click the first link and a window (the Download Manager) appears, indicating that you've begun the download. You click back on the web page and click the next link. Nothing happens. You switch to the Download Manager to see that yes, that download has begun. Repeat as necessary? Yes, please. There's got to be a better way.

### Histories Span More than Three Days, Dangit!

I was one of those people which instructed Netscape Navigator to remember the web pages I'd visited in the past 120 days. I could quickly retrace routes to software updates or see which websites I'd visited with this fine feature. IE 4.5 limits me to 1000 web pages — a total I often reach within a few days' time. Phooey!

### Lack of Other Goodies

You can't reload an image (should it come through corrupted) or "Copy this Image Location." IE 4.5 doesn't handle all forms correctly and it doesn't

intelligently reload pages, which can make page counters act unreliably. One more? Sure. There are ten items in the Favorites (bookmarks) menu before you get to your darn bookmarks, so you've got to move the mouse over them just to get to your Apple Wizards bookmark.

## n to the Email

I must admit that I didn't use previous versions of Outlook Express. In fact, I haven't spent more than ten minutes with any email application since I first installed Claris EMailer 2.0x many moons ago. Were it not for the "fun" errors EMailer grew fond of causing, I'd still be using it. It is interesting to note, also, that Jud Spencer, the former EMailer lead programmer, is now the lead programmer for Outlook Express. Unfortunately, he has yet to implement all of EMailer's features within OE.

That doesn't mean that Outlook Express is not a "worthy" or "good" email application. From feature lists I can tell that it's undergone fewer changes than Internet Explorer, but these enhancements, like those in IE, are subtle and enhance the usability.

OE comes with a standard set of features, including coloring of quoted text, multiple email accounts (though OE can't get AOL email like EMailer), multiple (and random) signature files, encoding of attachments, status indicators (i.e. "replied to"), etc. For example, the graphic at right shows a message of high priority (!) which has been replied to, two normal priority messages, and one low priority email. None of the messages have attachments. A list including more things which I consider "standard" (such as hierarchical mail folders or advanced contact management) can be found at the OE website: <http://www.microsoft.com/mac/oe/> .

## How Good Can Free Be?

### Three-Pane View

Outlook Express was the first free email client on the Mac (and that's a lot of conditionals) to support three-pane views. Yippee. Many people like this method of viewing emails, though I enjoy two-pane views and separate message windows. Both methods are accommodated in OE 4.5, and can be toggled by clicking a single and ever-present button.

## The Nifty Hover Trick

People with small monitors or friends who don't understand the concept of short email subjects will appreciate this feature. If any information (date, subject, sender, etc.) extends beyond the boundaries you've set for it, OE 4.5 displays all of the information when you hover your mouse pointer over the area. Just have a look at the image below.

## Auto Text Clean Up

We've all gotten messages which look like:

```
> >> Going t  
> >> o go to the store today to get  
>> some milk  
> right?
```

Auto Text Clean Up attempts to fix these problems, on incoming and outgoing messages, and does a decent job at least most of the time.

## Multiple Outgoing Options

After you write an email, you've got three options: Send Now, Send Later, or Save as Draft. That is, unless you count deleting the message as an option, in which case you've got four :-)

## AppleScript Me, Baby!

I love AppleScripts, and from what I've seen and read, everything in OE 4.5 is AppleScriptable. Thank goodness! I've found some scripts which have helped to ease my transition from E-mailer, and some which make up for big holes in OE's functionality.

## Relative Dates and Cool Scrollies

OE 4.5 can utilize and display relative dates — Today and Yesterday — within its list views. This quickly enables you to view just what you didn't do "Yesterday" and what you probably won't get to "Today." OE 4.5 also uses another Mac OS 8.5 nicety — proportional scroll bars. Wheee!!!

## Sorting, Filtering, and Finding, Oh My!

OE offers three methods of finding information fast: sorting, filtering, and finding. Within any message folder, you can filter messages to display only those which contain some text string in their subject, are from a certain sender, or were sent to a particular person. Sorting is accomplished by

clicking on the column headers, and email can be sorted by size, date sent, subject, status, and more. If you're looking for something and you haven't got a clue where it is, the Find feature is fast and trusty.

### Spell It Right!

Go ahead, fire that email off to your boss. He won't care if you spelled "chocolate" or "kompakt" wrong, right? Wrong. OE 4.5 offers an Office '98-like spell-checker which comes in handy (see graphic below). Just don't enable the option to check spelling upon sending or you'll never get any work done.

### More More More!

Outlook Express has many other features which make it worthy of your attention. I can't list them all or I'd bore you to tears.

## Not All Is Well, Part Deux

Because many folks use their email applications each and every day, it's important that they be well-rounded. An email application which excels at something and falls flat on its face in other areas would not be a very good choice for many people. OE has some problems which, though not serious, hamper its ability to be deemed "best email application."

### Folders? Y'know, Those Things You Put Files In.

Outlook Express allows users to drag files to the message window to attach them to messages. Alternatively, you can select "Add Attachment..." and locate the file(s) on your hard drive. But there's no way to add folders to your messages — no drag and drop, no dialog box, nothing. Users are forced to compress the folder outside of OE and then attach the resulting file to a message. This is a pain in the butt. How long has the Mac used folders again? Oh yeah, over 15 years.

### Whither the Command Key for Drafts?

I like to save email as drafts. Sometimes I type just a recipient and subject line to an email I know I need to write later. It's kind of like a "to do" list. Yet Outlook Express doesn't have a command-key for "Save as Draft." I love my mouse and all, but I like to keep my hands on the keyboard too.

### Whither Redirect?

I used the redirect feature in EMailer quite frequently, and it was nice to

have that button located in the toolbar. OE 4.5 does have a Redirect feature, but you won't find a button for it in the button area. Instead, you'll find a button for Preferences. Yippee. I don't know about you, but I use "Redirect" more often than I change my preferences.

### I'm Limited to Three

Mail Rules are cool. With a proper setup, email can be filtered, moved, colored, automatically replied to, and more. In fact, OE provides over 15 actions. However, mail rules can only be compared against three criteria in Outlook Express, and this is not enough. My E-mailer "Auto-File Digests" mail action, for example, contained around ten criteria. Three just doesn't cut it. As a result of this limitation, I've had to "work around" this problem and get creative — something I shouldn't have to do for something so simple as mail rules.

### Leave On Server and Partial Downloads

Outlook Express lacks the ability to leave messages on a server for a set number of days (this is critical if more than one person needs access to the same email), and it lacks the ability to partially download files from POP-based email accounts. This means that if someone attaches a copy of that cool (but 40 MB) sound file and sends it off to you, you're gonna have to sit through that download before you can get the rest of your email. Sorry.

### HTML Is For IE

OE's default sending format is in HTML, not plain text. Blech. I for one hate HTML email, and I realize that many users won't remember to change this preference. Great...

## umming It Up

Internet Explorer and Outlook Express 4.5 are fine products. I made IE 4.5 my default browser the day it was released, and aside from a few problems, have been satisfied. I made OE 4.5 my email application after I realized that E-mailer was indeed causing my problems, though my transition has not been as happy as I would have wished. But hey, it's free right?

In fact, they're both free, so give them a try. Each is a relatively small download, and it may just make your Mac experience more pleasant. With Microsoft products?! Sure, anything seems to be possible nowadays...

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