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LESSON

WORKING WITH PLUG-INS

In this lesson, you learn about using plug-ins to play multimedia files found on the Web. You also learn how to locate, download, install, and uninstall plug-ins.

WHAT ARE PLUG-INS?

Netscape Navigator 4.0 comes with the capability to view many types of graphics on the Web; however, many Web page designers are adding multimedia files to their sites. Netscape Navigator can easily display graphics files, such as JPG and GIF files, and some audio files, including AU, AIF, MID, and WAV files. But, if you come across a Web page document containing a movie or video clip, you will not be able to play the file without the help of a plug-in.

Plug-ins are programs created to extend Netscape Navigator's capabilities. You can easily add, update, or remove plug-ins from the Netscape browser. By plugging other tools into your Netscape program, you can expand the browser's capability to see and hear video, audio, and other types of multimedia files you may come across on the Web.



Plug-In A program incorporated into Netscape Navigator to expand its capabilities for viewing multimedia files found on the Web.

There are many plug-in programs available. Plugging one into Netscape 4.0 is as simple as downloading and installing the plug-ins onto your browser. You'll find dozens of plug-ins listed on Netscape's site, including RealAudio (a plug-in for listening to audio files) and Shockwave (a plug-in for viewing animated graphics).

PLUG-INS VERSUS HELPER APPS

Many people confuse plug-ins with helper applications (also called *external viewers* or *helper apps*). Helper apps are additional programs you can use along with Netscape to view certain types of files on the Web. Unlike plug-ins, you have to open helper apps as separate windows on your desktop. Helper apps work independently of Netscape. Plug-ins, on the other hand, become an integral part of your browser program.

In the early days of Netscape, helper applications were a popular way to view non-native file types on the Web. For example, when you clicked a link that Netscape Navigator could not manage, the program prompted you with an Unknown File Type box. If you had a helper app installed to view the document, you could open the additional program and play the file.

With improvements to Netscape Navigator, plug-ins have become the norm. Plug-ins work more quickly and you don't have to worry about file type associations as with helper apps. Once you install the plug-in, you can view any site that uses the same plug-in technology, without having to open a separate window each time you come across a particular multimedia file.

Many helper apps are also available as plug-ins today. When it comes to making a choice between helper apps and plug-ins, it depends on how you intend to use the programs. If you prefer to save multimedia files and view them later, when you are not connected to the Internet, helper apps are the way to go. Since they open independently of Netscape, you can download multimedia

files and play them later. You can also install and use helper applications on computers that do not have Netscape installed.

Helper apps generally offer more features that enable you to work with files you download. Unfortunately, helper apps take up more memory on your computer than plug-ins. You also have to wait longer to fire up the separate program window. Many users prefer to play a multimedia file on first contact while surfing the Net, without having to go to the trouble of opening a separate program. Hence, plug-ins are faster, sleeker, easier to use, and are the preferred choice among Web surfers.



Which Plug-Ins Do I Want? It's not a good idea to download and install every plug-in you encounter. It would take up too much room on your hard disk, thus causing Netscape to run more slowly. Determine which multimedia files you want most to explore and then choose a plug-in designed specifically for that type of file.

LOCATING AND DOWNLOADING PLUG-INS

Plug-ins are easy to find on the Web. There are several places to look. The first place is the Netscape Web site. Log on to your Internet account, open Netscape Navigator 4.0, and then follow these steps:

1. Open Netscape Navigator's Help menu and choose About Plug-ins. This opens a document page telling you which plug-ins are currently installed.
2. Choose the Click Here link to open a page on the Netscape home site that lists various plug-ins you can try (see Figure 8.1). From here, you can select a plug-in link for downloading onto your computer.

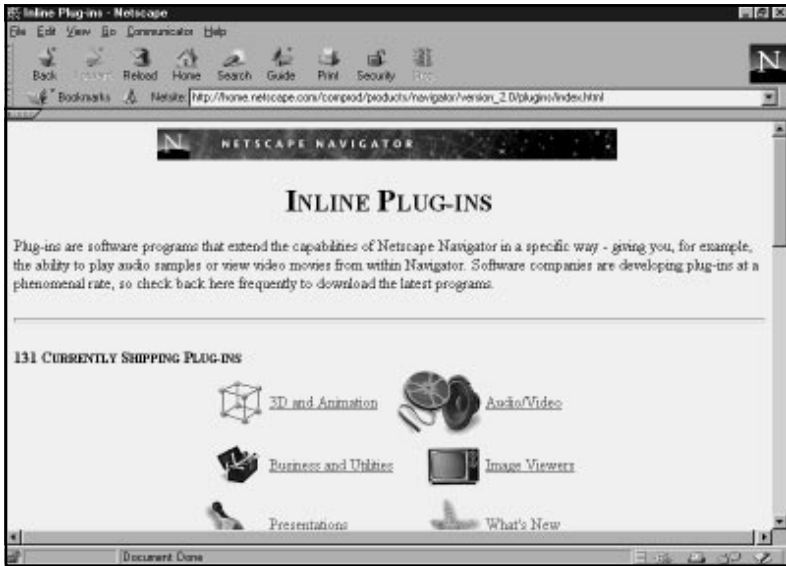


FIGURE 8.1 Netscape's Plug-Ins page provides links to all kinds of plug-ins you can try.

OTHER LOCATIONS FOR PLUG-INS

If the Netscape site is busy, you can find plug-ins listed on the Stroud's List site. Follow these steps:

1. Open the File menu and choose Open Page to display the Open Page dialog box. Type `http://cws.iworld.com/` and press Enter. (You can also type the URL directly into the Location text box on the Netscape window.)
2. The Stroud's List home page appears. Click the big Stroud graphic to open another page detailing this site.
3. Select one of the buttons—16-bit Apps or 32-bit Apps—and then scroll down the page to find a menu of plug-in categories, as shown in Figure 8.2. Click the Plug-in Modules link to open a page of popular plug-ins.

From here, you can link to specific plug-ins for downloading onto your computer.



FIGURE 8.2 Stroud's List site reveals a variety of plug-ins and other categories to explore.



The Sites Are Too Busy! If you have trouble connecting to the Stroud's List site, you can try a clone site. Type **<http://www.yahoo.com>** and perform a search for **stroud's**. This will produce a list of sites you can access to find the same plug-ins. You may try **www.browserwatch.com** or **iworld.browserwatch.com**.

When searching for a plug-in to download, it's important that you read the product review first. Find out if it's the correct version for your computer. Look at the file size to get a general idea of how long the download will take. If you're looking for plug-ins

on the Stroud's List page, you will find ratings listed for each product reviewed.

DOWNLOADING TIPS

When you're ready to download a selected plug-in, just follow the links to the download instructions. Be sure to locate the correct version of the plug-in: Windows 95, Windows 3.1, Macintosh, or UNIX (X Windows). It's a good idea to prepare a temporary folder or directory for the files you download with Netscape.

When you reach the final download link, click it to start downloading. Netscape connects to the server where the file is stored and, depending on your operating system, a dialog box appears where you can specify the location for the file on your computer's hard drive.

As the download begins, a progress box appears on-screen, showing how much of the file is downloaded. Depending on the file size and your modem's speed, the download may vary greatly in the time it takes to complete.

When the transfer is complete, you can install the plug-in. Be sure to exit Netscape first.

INSTALLING PLUG-INS

Most of the plug-ins you download from the Web are self-extracting files. All you do is double-click the file name. This decompresses the file while an installation program installs the application.

However, if you're using a Mac or UNIX-based system, you may need the help of a utility program to decompress downloaded files. For example, Mac files that end with the file extension HQX or SIT are compressed. To decompress the files, you need a program, such as Stuffit Lite or Stuffit Expander. If you're using UNIX and come across file names ending in Z, you will need to use the UNIX `uncompress` command to reverse the file compression; you can also use a package such as GNU GZIP to convert the compressed file to something your computer can process.



Shut Down Be sure to close the Netscape program and any other programs you have running before installing your new plug-in. Some plug-ins overwrite or update system files and will not properly install if these system files are in use. Also, you have to restart Netscape to use your newly installed plug-in since Netscape loads plug-ins only during its startup.

PERFORMING THE PLUG-IN INSTALLATION

With some plug-ins, the files may have to be installed using a `setup.exe` file. Most programs today use an installation program to help you install the files onto your computer. When you start the program, the installation program takes over and you're given on-screen instructions to follow.



Delete the Downloaded File Once you're sure the plug-in you installed is working properly, you can return to the temporary folder or directory and delete the file you downloaded, thus freeing up some space on your hard disk.

UNINSTALLING PLUG-INS

You can remove most plug-ins by using their uninstall utilities. For example, if you are using Windows 95, open the Control Panel and double-click Add/Remove Programs. This opens the Add/Remove Programs Properties box. Select the plug-in name you want to uninstall and then click the Add/Remove button.

If you're using Windows 3.1, you need to change to the directory where the plug-in's program files are located and then double-click the plug-in's uninstall icon. You need to follow the on-screen instructions to finish removing the program. For Mac and UNIX users, uninstalling plug-ins is as simple as opening the

plug-ins folder within the Netscape folder and throwing the plug-in files into the trash. If the plug-in does not come with an “uninstall” program, you can attempt to uninstall the plug-in by deleting the directory containing the plug-in. There is no guarantee that the plug-in will be completely removed since some plug-ins install files in more than one directory. Make sure that you are not accidentally deleting another program or plug-in you want to keep.



Which Plug-Ins Do I Have? To check, open Netscape's **Help** menu and choose **About Plug-Ins**. This opens a page listing the plug-ins you've installed.

In this lesson, you learned about using plug-ins to extend Netscape's capabilities. In the next lesson, you learn about two popular plug-ins, Macromedia's popular Shockwave and Live3D.