



# Drawing the browser battle-lines

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Just when you thought the decision of which Web browser to use couldn't get harder, Netscape decides to give Navigator away. Although industry analysts have been expecting this for some time, Netscape has gone a step further by also promising to release the next version's source code into the public domain.

Netscape has been losing ground to Microsoft in the browser market. This move acknowledges that the company cannot match Microsoft's development muscle. It hopes that adding thousands of freelance developers will increase and improve its browser's capabilities. Netscape will provide a forum and promises to include the best developments in its standard release.

## Secrets of success

While many people deride free software as being difficult to use, poorly documented and lacking the overall quality of commercial products, vendors have reaped many benefits from developments in the freeware arena. The GIS industry is no stranger to free software, from C compilers by the Free Software Foundation to fully fledged GIS packages such as the US Military's Geographic Resources Analysis Support System (GRASS).

It is no secret that the success of such products lies in their price (or lack of it), yet this is not the full story. The fact that government and academic research groups make widespread use of such systems shows how important the availability of source code can be. Such openness lets developers get to the bare bones of the product, and a diverse user base can share discussions on a common theme, through such forums as newsgroups.


As a result, some free products can do more than their commercial counterparts, because they are targeted at particular research projects in which the accuracy limits can be controlled. Developers can also try ideas that may seem at first to have little commercial use, but that may then filter through to the mainstream. And free software's army of independent developers can tackle even mundane tasks, such as fixing bugs, much faster.

In the GIS industry, many of today's commercial applications and new capabilities, such as Internet mapping systems, were developed because users of free software (such as GRASS) proved there was a demand.

One upside of Netscape's decision for GIS users could be the development of the spatial side of the browser market. There is talk of using new 3D spatial interfaces, although these are still theoretical, to access large datasets from various sources. If GIS vendors were to tie such products into their own commercial software as a freely available front end, they could exploit a wide range of new capabilities.

## Risky business

Netscape is undoubtedly taking a risk. For its strategy to succeed with the developer community, the company will need to provide good-quality documentation and promise continuing support. The successes of freeware, such as the UNIX operating system Linux and the Apache Web server, have been achieved on the back of a total commitment to openness. Netscape needs to be aware of this and allow access to all the major components of its browser. Otherwise it will alienate the developers it needs most.

It is hard to gauge what effect Netscape's decision will have on the corporate user in the short term. Microsoft may have so tightly integrated Internet Explorer into its next operating systems that the US Department of Justice won't be able to remove it without affecting the underlying operating system, even with a crowbar. Netscape's move may be too late. 

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