

Roundup

»» Every month we compare tons of software so you don't have to!

Firefox Extensions

Did you know you can plug extensions into Firefox? You did? Oh. But do you have the best ones? **Richard Cobbett** makes sure you're ready to take on anything.



How we tested...

With the exception of the very latest versions, we've been playing with all these extensions for a while. All are free, and available online for the price of a single click. Our focus is on how well they do their specific job – after all, if you don't have a use for one, there's no point installing it! All were reviewed with a plain Ubuntu Live distro and virgin copy of *Firefox 2* in the interests of stability, but other versions are generally supported, and you're unlikely to experience any clashes between most extensions. Your experiences may vary on more recent testing builds, or older *Firefox* versions. These plugins are intended for cross-platform use, thus are also usable on most Mac or Windows machines you may have.

Our selection

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On the extensive *Linux Format List of Impossible Things*, covering the whole world of *Firefox* extensions comes in at number 45, just between nailing a rabbit-shaped jelly to a real rabbit, and sneaking a tortured metaphor past the gimlet eye of **LXF's** long-suffering Ops editor. Given that last sentence, we'll bump it to #44.

As such, in this *Roundup*, we're taking a more global look, picking and choosing from a variety of different areas. Much as we love the goofy applets like the Abe Vigoda Death Clock, or the simple quick-fixes to tabs, there's not a vast amount to say about them. You download them with a click. You reload *Firefox*. The feature starts working. You smile, and get on with your day. Instead, we've cherry picked a couple of spin-off projects that have just received

major milestone releases, along with an assortment of the tools we use on a daily basis. A couple are fun, most are useful, all are the kind of thing that make us excited to keep watching *Firefox's* development from version to version.

A second issue is that due to the way *Firefox* works, your older extensions may or may not work with new builds. One crucial tool we don't mention specifically is the Nightly Tester Tools, found at www.oxymoronical.com/web/firefox/nightly, which will let you find out if this is because of genuine compatibility issues, or just the need for someone to update a number.

On a wider level, it's worth remembering that there's no such thing as the ultimate extension. The whole point of *Firefox* is that nobody from Red Hat to Opera to even the big-bad Microsoft can predict exactly what



features you want from your web browser. Take a kitchen sink approach to your *Firefox* installation, and you're asking for bloatware such as the world has never seen. Always try to keep the extensions to the latest versions, and install one at a time so that you can see if one of them causes a problem, and deal with it appropriately.

Mouse Gestures

Back, and to the left. Back, and to the left...

Beware of this extension... but in a good way, like "beware of the chocolate cake", rather than "beware of the sharks". Ever since *Opera* brought mouse gestures to the web, millions have discovered to their cost that few interface tweaks are more addictive than opening pages and skimming back and forth between them with nothing more than a sweep of the mouse. It may not be *Minority Report*-level Hollywood-cool, but the effect is much the same. As soon as you find yourself on a computer that doesn't have them, it's like an unwelcome trip into the distant past.

The *Firefox* implementation feels clunkier than *Opera*'s, but is perfectly acceptable. When you want to make a gesture, you hold down the right mouse button and sweep the mouse in one of the pre-configured patterns – for instance, right, up, left to open links in tabs. Others make use of your mouse's rocker control, with shortcuts that

skip forward or backwards between tabs depending on the mouse button you click.

Learning all of the gestures will take time, but in practice you only ever need a handful. You can flick on an option that makes the mouse leave a red trail while you make your gestures, making it easier to see exactly what you're doing. You can also configure each gesture yourself, if the pre-configured ones aren't comfortable enough, simply by drawing them. The only catch is that when you want to come back to one at a later date, they're saved in code form – written as '*RUL' instead of simply 'Draw This...' Hardly an insurmountable problem, but something that could definitely be clearer in a future version.

“Going back to life without them is like an unwelcome trip into the distant past.”



› Try to pretend the mouse cursor is moving. See the gesture being made? Tailor your gestures to match your own dexterity.

LINUX FORMAT Verdict

Mouse Gestures
Version: 1.5.2
Web: <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/39>
Price: Free (No license stated)

› Sweep your way to a faster web. You'll never want to go back.

Rating 8/10

Flock

So many bundled extensions, the browser ends up not even being called Firefox any more.

This one may not be a plug-in as such, but it's definitely an extension – specifically, extending *Firefox* as a whole into a completely different browser. The pitch is simple: all the old internet goodness, mixed with a number of brand new, custom-written features to make *Firefox* both smoother to use, more feature-packed out of the box, and much readier to take on web services. Instead of plain bookmarks, it hooks directly into Yahoo's del.icio.us service. Instead of the Sidebar giving you just Bookmarks and History tabs, you get built-in access to sites like Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and YouTube. And so on.

The final browser reminds us of *Opera*, if only because unlike most browsers, it's an attempt to package everything you need into one simple download. Although you still have access to Themes and Extensions, and many of *Firefox*'s offerings will work, the reason to run it is to combine the biggest names in Web 2.0 into one carefully balanced release.

At that, it's very successful. Elements like the Media Bar – a window-sized panel

that pulls content from either your own accounts, or general feeds on sites like Flickr – are extremely well integrated. The built in RSS reader is one of the best we've seen, with the ability to save stories, as well as sort through feeds. The sidebar now pulls in everything from Twitter (for updating friends on what you're doing) to del.icio.us (for live bookmarks). And if you're a blogger, the ability to clip bits and pieces from around the web, and post them live to your website, will likely be a great timesaver.

“Of course, none of this matters if you're not into your Web 2.0.”

Of course, none of this matters if you're not into your Web 2.0. Using *Flock* was an interesting diversion, but even web addicts like the **LXF** team simply don't need all of these features to hand all the time, and the extensions we do have on tap are still going to be developed for *Firefox* proper.



› We apologise for the use of the words 'Web 2.0'. To suggest alternative names, please write to the usual address.

LINUX FORMAT Verdict

Flock
Version: 1.0
Web: www.flock.com
Licence: Free (MPL/GPL/LGPL)

› Should it target your interests, this first major release offers plenty to sink your teeth into.

Rating 7/10

AdBlock Plus

If you don't have it installed, you're not using Firefox properly. Or you love adverts...

Adblock Plus is the best way to get advertisements out of the browser. We could end the review there, really. It's such a powerful, widespread extension that it sparked a minor anti-Firefox crusade. It's so easy to use, you'll start to scratch your head when people even mention being annoyed by online adverts. Banners? What are these things you call banners? Flash pop-ups? Sorry...

Like most security/annoyance killers, AdBlock's in a perpetual war with the people who really, really want us to see those adverts for dating services and free wallpaper downloads. When you first sign up, you subscribe to one or more central lists, which regularly update you with the latest filters, no effort required. This deal with the majority of the adverts you'll encounter, and certainly the most annoying ones. You can also create your own filters, targeting specific adverts, or wildcarding whole domains and keywords. If anything slips through the net, just right-click on it and choose Adblock Image from the menu.

Tools like AdBlock are important, not just for your sanity, but for general web viewing. An obvious complaint? Skipping adverts robs sites of revenue – we sympathise, but there's no getting round the fact that if internet advertising wasn't such a brain-crushingly huge pain in the, er, neck, there wouldn't be such a huge army of folks desperate to side-step it. Notably, very few people seem to bother quashing Google's text-based adverts, and the decent response rate shows it. There's no fighting tools like this – any time an advert makes it past the filters, it won't be long before something else shows up to take its place. If AdBlock is defeated, its successor won't be. The Firefox slogan might be 'Take Back The Web', but it's tools like this one that really give you the power to do so.

“Banners? Ban.. Ners? What are these things that you call ‘banners’?”



› Not pictured: reams of annoying adverts. Amazing, isn't it? Get used to the lovely view!

LINUX **Verdict**
FORMAT

AdBlock Plus
Version: 0.7.5.3
Web: <http://adblockplus.org/en/>
Licence: Free (MPL)

» Save time, bandwidth, and your patience. Scrub those annoying, pointless adverts out of your life for good.

Rating 9/10

StumbleUpon

Take a break. Explore the far-flung corners of the web in a Sisyphean quest for infotainment.

By any conservative estimate, the internet is a Really Big Thing. Whatever your interest, no matter how much time you've got to kill, there'll be a website out there to turn a productive afternoon into hour after hour of zombie clicking. And that's a good thing. The downside is that most of us only have a relatively small number of sites we visit regularly; finding something genuinely new can be harder than it sounds. StumbleUpon is the biggest of the extensions trying to lend a hand and annoy the hell out of your boss/teacher/spouse/cat.

Once installed, a new toolbar has one-click access to the three most important buttons: Stumble, to bring up something random, and the Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down buttons to rate it. Thumbs Down whisks you off somewhere hopefully more interesting. Thumbs Up registers your approval, and makes it more likely that other people will be sent the site's way.

Aside from the basic web browsing, there are a few simple organisational

features that you're unlikely to use much. You can leave reviews of pages you find, build up yet another friends list, and keep yet another collection of bookmarks online. The only genuinely useful part is being able to mark down specifically what kind of websites you're interested in. Categories are reasonably wide, stretching from Activism to Buddhism, with a fairly hefty technical slant. You'll occasionally get a wildcard in your results, but for the most part that just adds to the fun.

But what can you get? Click. **Maninthe dark.com**, featuring a rubbery Flash guy who floats around following the cursor. Click. Four horses who sing when you click on them. Click. Fifty tools to help with your writing. Click. How To Tick People Off. Click. The Open Design Community. Click. Click...

“What can you get? Let's find out. Click. Click. Click. Where did the day go?”



› Your profile tells the system what you're looking for, but what you get is down to a spin of the wheel.

LINUX **Verdict**
FORMAT

StumbleUpon
Version: 3.15
Web: www.stumbleupon.com
Price: Free

» Hey, wasn't it Tuesday just then? Never mind. One of the most enjoyable wastes of time on the web.

Rating 8/10

Greasemonkey

The single slickest plug-in this side of the Abe Vigoda Death Clock.

Where the average plug-in adds a few features to the browser, *Greasemonkey* wades into the DOM itself, doing everything from stripping out adverts, to performing mashups, such as such as combining Gmail and Google Reader into one beautiful messaging platform, and even building in whole new features, like one-click downloading of YouTube videos, or filtering results in Google Image Search.

While a full extension may be beyond many peoples' programming skills, a *Greasemonkey* script can be as simple as a little Javascript. While you might not be able to produce an all-out total conversion on Google Reader, almost anyone could make a simple script to, say, snip an annoying forum user out of their life forever, or remove a particularly annoying advert. The extension takes care of the heavy lifting: cataloguing scripts you've installed, automatically installing them as and when you find them, and making it as easy to switch them on and off on demand.

One of the most useful things about *Greasemonkey* is that it can save on the number of extensions you have to install, and thus the points of failure you're open to. The majority of scripts are written for a specific page (or part of a web service), greatly reducing the chances that they're going to start fighting over your browser, and you never have to pay any attention to how the magic is being done. That said, the same rules still apply when it comes to installing scripts – be sure you can trust them. There have been rogue scripts in the past, notably one that forwarded cookies to the bad guys, and a handful of newborn scripts that wound up fighting websites instead of working with them. For the most part, if you only get to take one extension to a desert island, make it this one.

“If you only get to take one extension to a desert island, make it this one.”



› You shouldn't have to do a web developers' job for them, but if you have to, you can indulge your personal preferences...

LINUX
FORMAT **Verdict**

Greasemonkey
Version: 0.7.2
Web: www.greasespot.net/
Price: Free (MIT)

› Roll up your sleeves and apply your favourite rules to your favourite sites.

Rating 9/10

BlueOrganizer

When is a CD not a CD? When it's a way of diving into the wider web

Every web browser offers bookmarks, but *BlueOrganizer* goes further. It's capable – in theory – of working out whether what you're looking at is a site, an image, a book, a CD, a restaurant, or a number of other things, and sorting them appropriately. In practice, it's not that advanced yet, and the problem becomes immediately obvious.

It's a shame, because when everything goes well, this is a useful extension. The main functions fall into two camps – bookmarking, and exploring the web. In the first, you build up clippings from around the web, public or otherwise, with widgets available to put your latest finds onto your blog. The second tries to use the aforementioned content-identification to give you instant access to related sites. As a totally random test, the recent Terry Pratchett book, *Making Money*, offers a context menu that hooks into LibraryThing to add it to your collection, a link to add it to your Amazon wishlist, and a variety of other bookmarking tools. It also pulls both

the title and the author into their own menus, with links to Google search results and Wikipedia articles. And it pulls out a variety of tags, including 'science-fiction' and 'discworld' for continued exploration.

Sadly, that's only on **Amazon.com**. On **Amazon.co.uk**, not only did *BlueOrganizer* not recognise it as a book, its options were all hyper-general waffle like finding links to Amazon in general, and uploading the link to Twitter. If the service gets expanded to take less of an American slant – even if only on the major sites like Amazon – this could be a worthwhile addition to your browser. For the moment though, it's not that much use to us poor cheese-eatin' surrender monkeys over here in the Third World, and you can safely take a wait-and-see approach for future releases.

“Could be a worthwhile add-on to your browser when less US-centric...”



› While performing well on Amazon.com, the equivalent on Amazon.co.uk offers considerably fewer options.

LINUX
FORMAT **Verdict**

BlueOrganizer
Version: 3.3.2
Web: www.adaptiveblue.com/
Price: Free

› Call us again when it's got a better grip on the international web.

Rating 4/10

iMacros

Write once, repeat. Write once, repeat. Write once, repeat. Write once...

Firefox isn't just for browsing the web – it's an increasingly powerful tool for handling your whole life. Finance, networking, data gathering... if it involves the net, it's up for grabs. The *iMacro* plugin makes it easy(ish) to code up macros that do the grunt work: pulling information from sites, filling in forms, or simply navigating around the web. On a practical level, this *Firefox* extension is a taster for iOpus' commercial web editing tools, but a fully functional one, so that's OK. It's free for both personal and commercial use, lacking only higher-end features, such as automating Flash applets, with a wiki full of both hints and sample macros. That's particularly important here, as while you can create a new macro by just hitting record and browsing as usual, the full power of *iMacros* only emerges if you're willing to get your hands dirty with a little well-placed Javascript. Simply recording and hoping for the best can lead to difficulties, especially if multiple tabs and web pages are brought into the equation.

The result looks somewhat unusual, with your macros listed down the left-hand side, and the main window constantly seeming to visit the iOpus site for information. In practice, everything's running on your machine, with the plugin intercepting those requests. You can share macros, and save them online, but otherwise nothing is sent out from your machine. At the moment, there isn't a vast collection from which to build, although there is a del.icio.us group with a number to choose from. One interesting thing about how the system works is that you don't have to download a macro to use it – a simple click on a link will trigger it – making it easy to build up a decent archive that's accessible on any *Firefox* installation you need to use.

“Finance, networking, data gathering... if it involves the net, it's up for grabs.”



› Let's just see... data form... web browse... darn. No 'write review' macro.

LINUX FORMAT **Verdict**

iMacros
Version: 6.0.0.1
Web: www.iopus.com/imacros/firefox/
Price: Free

› If you need *Bookmarking, Web data, Alerts, Widgets or Social and Sharing capabilities*, check it out.

Rating 7/10

Web Developer Toolbar

The Swiss Army Knife of website editing, and the best toolbar around.

If you dabble in web building, the Web Developer toolbar is nothing short of essential. Can't work out why your ids are rolling into each other? Click a button to highlight and label every part of the page. Want to sneak a peek at a particular web page's CSS? Another click digs up every stylesheet it references, listing them all on a single page. Need to take a look at your page at a different resolution? The Resize option shrinks *Firefox* down, ready for you to hit the Refresh button.

All the features on offer are incredibly simple, but perfectly aimed. The most useful is the Edit CSS tool, which lets you experiment with a page live, adding new stylesheets and prodding at your code with impunity. When everything's working, you can copy the changes into the main stylesheet. If it all collapses in front of your eyes, a quick Refresh of the page puts it all

back as it was. And as it's just *Firefox* re-rendering the page, you can experiment on a live site without fear of breaking anything.

Obviously, the Toolbar has its limits. You still need to test in other browsers, and just because *Firefox* displays something correctly is no guarantee that they all will. But, most of the tools are useful regardless of the platform you're targeting, especially when it comes to the details. Replacing images with their ALT attributes makes it obvious which ones need to be flagged up, just as the Ruler tool is perfect for checking dimensions and confirming the locations of absolutely positioned elements.

“Makes it worth keeping Firefox even if you usually use other web browsers.”



› Perfect for web developers of all kinds to pinpoint exactly where your classes are at war, or you've slipped your <divs>.

LINUX FORMAT **Verdict**

Web Developer Toolbar
Version: 1.1.4
Web: www.chrispederick.com/work/web-developer/
Price: Free (GPL)

› Essential part of any web developer's toolkit, no matter how complex their sites.

Rating 9/10

Firefox extensions

The verdict

Greasemonkey 9/10

With a *Roundup* like this one, there's no way to pick a winner as such. Not only do the extensions we've covered not compete against each other, they're all freely downloadable, and as comfortable sharing your *Firefox* installation as they would be on their own. You can have all of them, just as easily as having none of them, and many more besides.

So why have we chosen to give the

ways we're still trying to compensate for. Even though *Firefox* is still a minority player, its effects are obvious. *Internet Explorer 7* – a surprisingly good browser, given the shortcomings of its forbears – is as much Mozilla's child as its own actual developers' hard work. Browser extensions, for years the province of spyware and useless search toolbars and other corporate-branded tat, became something to get excited about again. The balance of power was shifted.

“Firefox was created to lead the assault on the old web, once ruled by IE in all its stagnant rubbishness.”

accolade to *Greasemonkey*? Put simply, it's the perfect complement to *Firefox*. Browsers are like canvases, not simply tools, both growing and becoming more powerful with every new extension someone writes. They're weapons, there to shift the balance of power. *Firefox* was created to lead an assault on the old web, one ruled by *Microsoft Internet Explorer*, in all its stagnant rubbishness. For years, Microsoft had barely bothered upgrading the old thing, even as it drowned in security flaws and missing features and an attempt to embrace and extend the basic structures of the web in

Instead of taking what the browser manufacturers wanted us to have, we built what we wanted.

Greasemonkey is the next level. It's the shift from the web as its creators built it, to the web as we think it should be. Need a feature? Add it. Find something annoying? It's gone. It, and predecessors like *AdBlock Plus*, are the next quantum leap forward for the web – from a static, immutable collection of pages, to a worldwide pile of data where the viewer rather than the writer is in ultimate control. We see this across the board, in RSS feeds and Start pages, and web scrapers and blog search engines, and



› **Greasemonkey scripts for specific sites aren't a long-term solution: sites' changing over time can render them inoperable.**

browsers like *Opera Mini* that re-parse whole pages for platforms they were never originally designed to appear on.

That kind of change is always going to be slow, and fought tooth and claw by content providers, advertisers, and anyone else with a vested interest in the status quo. However, when you've sampled the benefits that come from being in the driving seat, you can't say it's not the future. And with extensions like *Greasemonkey*, there's no reason not to enjoy it right now. **LXF**

Over to you

Which *Firefox* extensions do you find the most essential? Which haven't been up to the job? Do you prefer another browser rather than *Firefox*? Have you tested the *Firefox 3* beta yet? Email your list and recommendations of extensions (large or small) that you think other readers would benefit from knowing about to lxformat@futurenet.co.uk or share them with other readers of **LXF** at www.linuxformat.co.uk/forums.

Table of features

	Update Frequency	Size (KB)	License/Cost	Version	Type
<i>AdBlock Plus</i>	Regular (subscriptions)	228	MPL	0.75.3	Extension
<i>BlueOrganizer</i>	Sporadic	282	Free	3.3.2	Toolbar
<i>Flock</i>	Active development	10.7MB	MPL/GPL/LGPL	1	Browser
<i>iMacros</i>	Regular	183	Free	6.0.0.1	Scripting
<i>Greasemonkey</i>	Frequent script releases	99	MIT	0.7.2	Scripting
<i>Mouse Gestures</i>	Frozen	172	Free	1.5.2	Extension
<i>StumbleUpon</i>	Occasional	212	Free	3.15	Toolbar
<i>Web Developer Toolbar</i>	Sporadic	174	GPL	1.1.4	Toolbar