

TechMatters: Shiny, Happy, Beta Browser? First Impressions of Google Chrome

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What does it mean when we say “Tech Matters?” Sometimes technology matters because it can improve the quality of our teaching, and facilitate learning for our students. Sometimes it matters because it can make our work more efficient. And sometimes it matters simply because it peaks our curiosity and provides the promise of a new discovery. What follows is an account of my first foray into true beta technology exploration, and my resulting analysis of whether or not I have discovered a new tool that “matters.”

The Announcement

On Monday, September 1, 2008, Google announced their plan to unleash the beta version of a new browser the very next day. Normally, I am not one to jump on the beta software bandwagon, preferring instead to sit back for a while and let others discover the inevitable problems that seem to be standard during this “testing” phase of any new piece of software. This time, however, I couldn’t contain my curiosity. Google’s initial announcement promised a browser that would make the web faster, safer, and easier to use. Having just spent a good portion of the day fighting to persuade Microsoft’s Internet Explorer to display the web pages that I was developing properly, I was more than ready to explore the possibility of a new browser alternative.

The Download

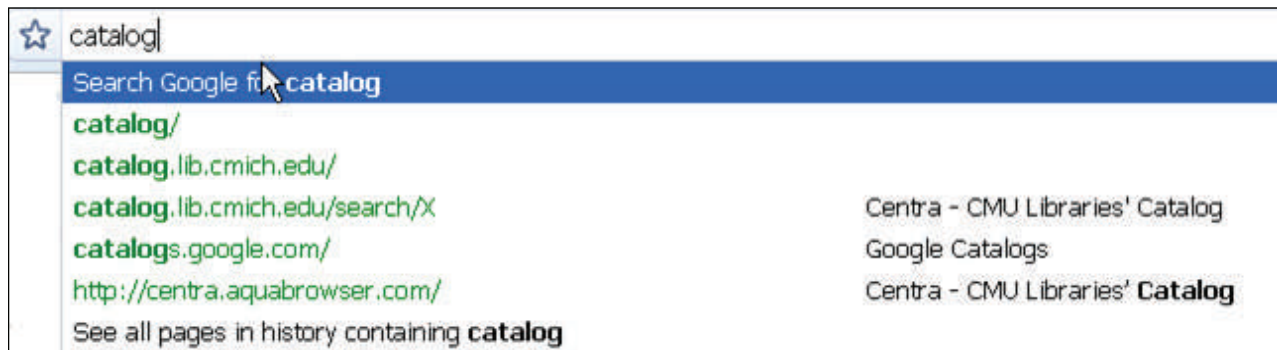
Just as initially advertised, Google Chrome is extremely easy to download and install. Starting from the Chrome web site [<http://www.google.com/chrome/>], all that is required is a click on a large button marked “Download Google Chrome,” an agreement to the terms of service, and another click to “Accept and Install.” On my home computer with a standard cable modem connection, Chrome took less than two minutes to download and install.

The Features:

One Search Box

In Google Chrome, the address bar doubles as the search box for your default web browser. As soon as you start typing, a drop down box appears (see Figure 1), containing sites you’ve already visited, as well as popular sites containing your search term(s). In addition, you may choose to search either the entire web using your default search engine, or just the pages in your search history; this latter option is really convenient as it models where information we typically search for is actually located – in web sites we have previously visited. Although not entirely unique functionality, the one search/address box combo is certainly convenient.

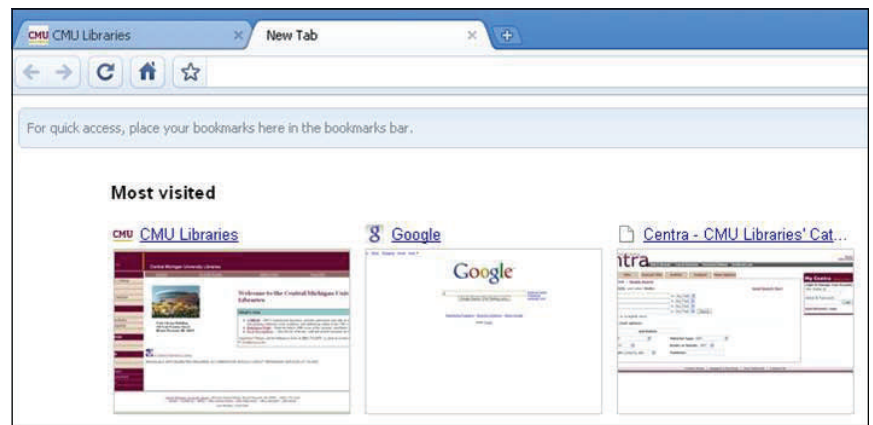
Figure 1: Google Chrome search box in action



New Startup Page

Whenever you open up a new tab, you are taken to a startup page (see Figure 2) that provides a tiled display of your most frequently visited pages. With one click, you can then navigate directly to the page of your choice. In addition, the startup page also provides direct access to your most frequently used search engines, as well as recently viewed bookmarks and pages from closed tabs. Overall, this functionality is designed to make it extremely easy for users to retrace their steps and re-find information that they have found useful in the recent past.

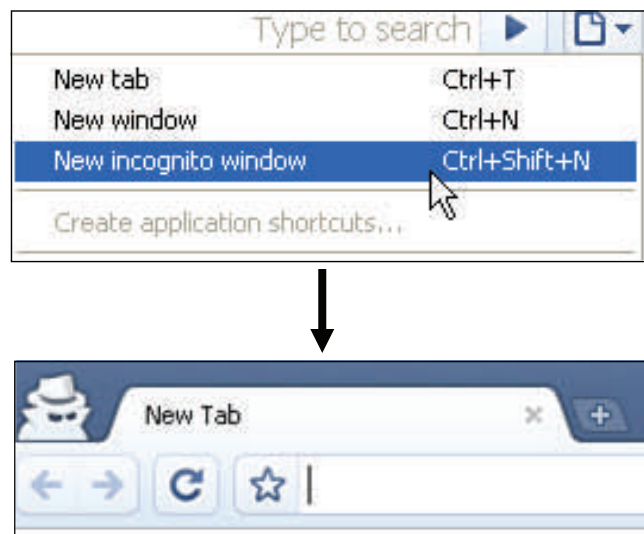
Figure 2: Startup page displays thumbnails of most visited pages



Incognito Mode

Google Chrome provides an option to allow you to browse the web without storing any information on your computer. To do so, you select the “Page” icon and then select “New incognito window” from the drop-down menu (see Figure 3). Any pages that you view while in this mode will not be saved in either your browser or search history. In addition, cookies won’t be stored on your computer after you close the incognito window. In a library setting, this feature could prove very useful for patrons browsing the web on public computers. For example, the next patron on that computer will not be able to tell that the previous user visited a health site about a particular medical condition. However, be aware that while nothing is stored in the Google Chrome browser or the local computer in this mode, the websites you visit may still record your activity there. You are “incognito” only on one end.

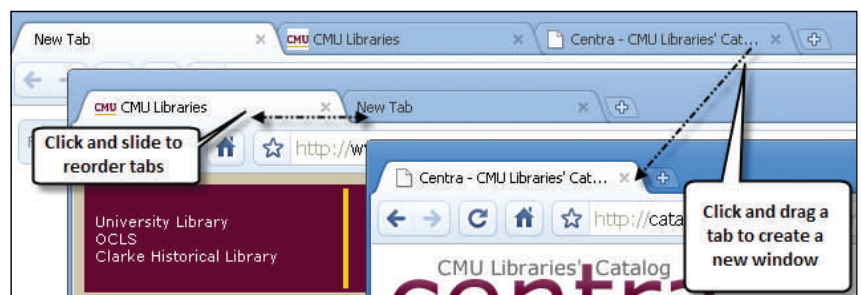
Figure 3: Incognito Mode



“Drag and Drop” Tabs

In Google Chrome, tabs are dynamic. As in Internet Explorer and Firefox, their order can be changed by dragging them to the desired location in the open window. In addition, however, they can also be pulled out to create new, independent windows (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Dynamic tabs in action



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(A Trip Back in Time ...Continued from page 9)

While it is possible for students to search for these old newspapers and periodicals online, there are distinct benefits to having them encounter these documents physically. The immediacy of handling a magazine from an earlier period offers a strong feel for the context of articles – the advertisements, color, layout, and even the size of the magazines affect how students engage with the content and their sense of history.

Conclusion

An assignment which requires students to work with bound periodicals and newspaper collections demands time to acquaint students with how to locate the materials and ideally, some class visits during the research period. The benefits are significant: the library’s rich holdings of print publications get a workout, and students frequently enjoy and feel empowered by their research which is a win-win situation for students, professors, and librarians.

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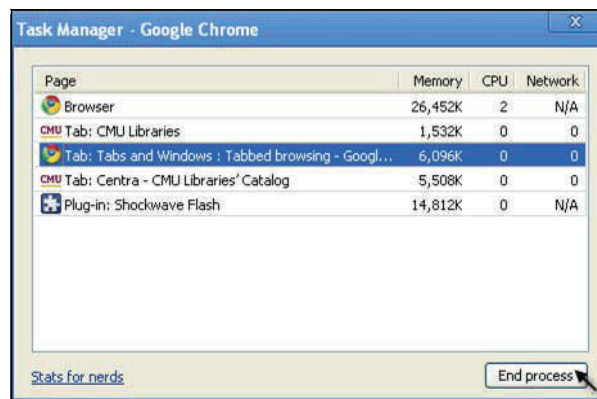
Download While You Work

When you initiate a download in Chrome, a progress bar appears at the bottom of the window (see Figure 5). You can then monitor the status of your download, while continuing to navigate the web and using your browser as normal. Once the download is complete, you can drag and drop the file onto your desktop or click on the download button to open the file directly.

Figure 5: Download progress bar at the bottom of the browser window



Figure 6: Disable a single tab using the Task Manager



Speed and Stability

As I have worked with Chrome over the past few months, I have grown to appreciate the performance advances that have been made with this browser. In terms of both initial startup and page loading time, I have found Chrome to be noticeably faster than other browsers. In addition, there seems to be general agreement amongst users that Chrome outperforms its competitors when processing pages that contain web applications such as web mail or productivity software (e.g., Google Docs).

With regard to stability, Chrome has work to do in this area, but it has made at least one significant improvement over other browsers: Unlike either Firefox or Internet Explorer, it is not necessary to completely shut down the browser if you experience problems in one of your tabbed windows. Instead, simply right click the top of the Chrome window, and then open the “Task manager.” At that point, you may easily disable the problematic page by selecting it from the list of active windows and pressing the “End process” button (see Figure 6).

The Verdict

So, what did I find? Is Google’s Chrome browser the next big “tech that matters?” Is it, as I optimistically hoped on that sunny September afternoon, an Internet Explorer killer? Much to my disappointment, I think the answer to these questions is a definite “no.”

Of course, that doesn’t mean that Google Chrome isn’t a great alternative browser. Overall, I found the new browser simple to install, easy to use, and packed with convenient features. That being said, a number of those features are already available in the established browsers

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Conducting Research Literature Reviews : From Paper to the Internet)

Having been out of the loop for a year or so during my Middle East sojourn, I was feeling a bit rusty and anxious. The content of the presentation was familiar enough, but the approach and the audience, a stretch from the usual, were enough to give me the willies. I compensated by overcompensating. Handouts, PowerPoint, online guides, sign-up sheets, evaluations. There was no way I was going to wing this.

I was warned by people who know, that the actual turnout would be far less than the number who had registered, but on the day, they came; they came early and they stayed late. It was weird.

“How can I find evidence based practice? Do I really have to read a hundred articles? How do I know if this is a peer reviewed publication? What’s the best way to organize the lit review? Is there a way to find who has cited whom? How do you know when you’re done?”

These were not blank eyed questions from FYers; these were questions from serious students with serious interest in doing bibliographic research in a mature, proficient and professional way. For whatever reason (e.g., motivation from their professors, pressure from peers, nagging from their families) they were sitting in a crappy lecture hall wanting answers... from me.

All of us who have been in the lib biz for a while know that teaching grad students is the best... and the worst. On the one hand, they are keen, interested, acquainted with the discipline, and adult. On the other hand, they are keen, interested, acquainted with the literature and adult! They can have an overzealous passion for the esoteric, fail to see the larger picture and take an all too serious, narrow approach to their research. Even more disconcerting, however, is their unending quest to find exactly what they think they need, when you and I know, that, a.) it doesn’t exist; and, b.) the continuous search is symptomatic procrastination based on fear to start writing.

*For the Snark's a peculiar creature, that won't
Be caught in a commonplace way.
Do all that you know, and try all that you don't:
Not a chance must be wasted to-day!*

The Hunting of the Snark, Lewis Carroll

On this day, another thought occurred to me. Perhaps, for some of these overstressed and underserved students, this was a coming of age. Wikipedia, Yahoo, dog-earned articles from bygone classes, and dead leads from their cohorts wasn’t going to cut it anymore. Snagging a couple of citations from findarticles.com or E-reserves may have gotten them through Psych 251, but that was during their minor league days. This was the real deal. Perhaps they were actually beginning to accept themselves into the discourse community to which they aspired.

All I do know for sure, is that no one brought a long board.

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or can be added via extensions (see: <http://lifehacker.com/5044518/enable-chromes-best-features-in-firefox>), and the rest will likely soon be co-opted by developers and integrated into the established browsers. Also, because it is beta software, Chrome may not be as stable as it eventually will be, nor does it have nearly all the add-ons that have been built for Firefox. But, as I’ve said many times in the past, when it comes to software development, I view competition as a positive force that pushes competitor companies to continually improve the quality of the products they produce.

Despite the fact that this time I didn’t discover the next “killer app”, I don’t regret my decision to dive into the deep end and try out a new technology early in its life cycle. As a result of this experience, I am eager to try again and would encourage you to do so as well. In the end, I am certainly convinced of the value of such experimentation and the potential it provides for identifying “technology that matters.”