

Internet Explorer 4

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The news recently splashed the demise, disappearance, and final “good riddance” of Internet Explorer. I remembered the first time I encountered the beast. In 1997, Internet Explorer 4.0 was soooooo good compared to anything else, it was hard to believe.

My first contact with the “Internet” was through a gloomy terminal connected to a VAX microcomputer running the VMS operating system. FTP, `talk`, Usenet, and eventually `lynx` were the first impressions I had from the online world. The computer room in my university had a few PCs and Macs scattered here and there, but not all of them were connected to the wider Internet; most were just standalone Windows 3.1 computers meant to run Word and Excel.

It was in one of those few PCs that had a network card where I ran Netscape Navigator 3.0 for the first time. That was around the Summer of 1996, at a time when I felt that I had chosen the wrong carrier (physics). I was so impressed with the web that I ran to the Librairie Ellipse in Geneva to buy Elizabeth Castro’s excellent “HTML Visual QuickStart Guide,” and following her advice, I got my first website up and running on August 28th, 1996.

The web became an instant obsession for me. I dropped out of college, I left everything for a two-month-long holiday in Argentina. When I came back to Switzerland, I rented an apartment, worked handling luggage in the Aéroport de Genève during the day to pay the rent, and I taught myself JavaScript, Java, and whatever I could learn about web technologies during the night.

By October 1997 I started my first job as a software developer. It all went very, very fast.

One day in September 1997, before I left Switzerland to start my job in Buenos Aires, I went to the said bookstore, Librairie Ellipse, my favorite place to hang out in all of Geneva. Near the cash register, there was a pile of free CD-ROMs, and I picked one.

It had Internet Explorer 4.0. I installed it and fell in love with it. Think about the time when you used Google Chrome for the first time. Same idea.

People like to bash and mock and laugh about Internet Explorer nowadays, but

the comparison between it and Netscape Communicator 4.0 (the successor of Netscape Navigator) was absolutely in favor of the former. Internet Explorer 4.0 was lightweight, fast (really fast, particularly considering the kind of hardware it had to run on: 386, 486 and Pentium chips), and it was perfectly compatible with Netscape and had lots of great features.

Internet Explorer 4.0 was packed with many features I won't enumerate here, but the most impressive (and the one that arguably had the biggest impact from a historical point of view) was Dynamic HTML. We might laugh at this idea now, but in 1997 being able to manipulate the DOM of a webpage using JavaScript was akin to black magic.

Of course, crafting a website in those pre-jQuery days meant a lot of

```
if (document.all) {  
    // yes, this was a way to access any DOM object...  
    document.all(...);  
} else {  
    // This is not IE, remember to use  
    // document.layers['...'] to access <LAYER> tags  
    // (no <DIV>s in Netscape!)  
}
```

Check the archived Netscape documentation if you don't believe me. If you wanted to create complex HTML pages with <DIV> tags, you had to use a server-side rendering technique to change them to <LAYER> objects for Netscape. I'm not kidding.

All things considered, Internet Explorer 4.0 was the browser that crushed Netscape to the ground. It was not a victory by knock-out, it was murder. Two years later, Netscape had virtually disappeared from the market. The thing is, Internet Explorer 4.0 was too good to be true. Thanks to its successors and Microsoft's marketing machine behind, it would take a whole decade for an alternative browser to gain some kind of decent market share. A whole decade. Think about that.

In 1997, I started my career with Internet Explorer 4.0, and yes, it was quite a revelation.