Microsoft's new IE9 Promises Zippier Performance

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SEATTLE (AP) -- Microsoft Corp. is unveiling the "beta" test version of Internet Explorer 9 on Wednesday, the first of a new generation of Web browser programs that tap into the powerful processors on board newer computers to make websites load and run faster.

IE9 also arrives with a more minimalist look and a few new tricks that start to blur the distinction between a website and a traditional desktop application.

Following the lead of Google Inc.'s stripped-down Chrome browser, Microsoft's IE9 comes with far fewer buttons, icons and toolbars cluttering up the top of the screen. Its frame is translucent, and as people browse the Web, IE9 can be subtly adorned with small icons and signature colors of the websites being viewed.

The new browser also takes cues from Windows 7, Microsoft's most recent operating system software for personal computers. In Windows 7, people can "pin" favorite programs to the task bar at the bottom of the screen, creating a one-click shortcut. They can also customize a menu of options for each program, such as opening a frequently used file in Microsoft Word.

IE9 lets people pin individual websites to the taskbar, and some sites have already customized their so-called "jumplist" menus. For example, when people pin USA Today's site, the icon in the taskbar can display a menu that mirrors the color-coded sections of the newspaper.

The aesthetic changes bring IE9 in line with Microsoft's newer software, but the changes under the hood push Microsoft's technology a step ahead of its competition. The browser can take advantage of multi-core microprocessors to crunch website code faster. It also uses the PC's graphics processing unit — the same chips that make the images in elaborate video games run smoothly — to make images, animations, movie clips and other visuals appear or play faster.

The new browser works on PCs with Windows 7 or Vista, but not on older Windows XP computers or on Macs. At a media event in San Francisco Wednesday, Microsoft is showing off several big-name websites that have been designed to take advantage of the new browser, including ones from Amazon.com Inc., Facebook and Twitter. The sites are built with code that older browsers can understand, but most of them will be sluggish without IE9.

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