

The Spartans of antiquity were known for their very basic existence – no frills, no decorations, just basic practicality. Microsoft has taken the same approach with their new web browser, code-named Spartan. Spartan will come out of beta testing along with the new Windows 10 operating system later this year.

I tried it out recently, and I can say that they are not kidding, it is Spartan. Some may call it spare, basic, stripped down, skeletal. I prefer to call it “free of legacy Internet Explorer Baggage”. That is probably the main driver for Microsoft to ditch the Internet Explorer legacy code and brand name. While the current version of Internet Explorer 11 rates very well in terms of security, prior versions were not so great.

The new Spartan browser uses the same design principals as Google used with their Chrome browser. Which is to say don't allow 3rd-party add-ins, and if you do, make sure you control them with updates and patches yourself. What third-party add-ins am I talking about? Adobe Flash, Adobe PDF Reader, Java, and Microsoft's own buggy ActiveX and BHO add-ins. You know and dislike them probably as much as I do. The add-ins are the primary reason for internet based malware, pop-ups, and viruses getting through Internet Explorer. Google solved the add-in problem by incorporating their own versions of Flash, Reader, and Java into Chrome, and then managing the updates and patches themselves through their own Chrome updating mechanisms. It's not perfect, but a big step up from the Internet Explorer model of “hands-off, update it yourself” that makes us, the users keep things afloat.

Microsoft has now read the same chapter in the browser design book, and Spartan is the result. Upon first look, the lack of menus, icons and other distractions is pretty weird. But it's a very clean look, and you can add back menus and icons if you like. The basic interface only has 7 icons total: “Back”, “Forward”, “Refresh Page”, “Bookmarks”, “Add Favorites”, “Web Notes”, and “Settings”.

Six of the seven icons are pretty standard stuff, but the seventh, “Web Notes” is new... and pretty cool. The Web Notes feature allows you to circle, highlight, mark an area, cut a section, save directly to One Note or other programs, and finally add the marked up page to your Reading List. What is a Reading List you may ask? Well, think about this situation: you are browsing away searching for some topic, and see a different, interesting topic. You want to follow up on the second topic when you have time later. Well, you use the marking tool to highlight what you want to read later, then add it to the Reading List. Meanwhile, you continue on the first topic. Next day, you go back to your Reading List, and there are the pages you marked up with highlighter waiting for you. It's not the salvation of the web, but it is a nice time saver...

Spartan will be integrated with the Windows 10 “Cortana” voice-command system, so you can talk to and search within your browser. It's also integrated with Microsoft's OneDrive cloud storage, which allows you to save and retrieve from your cloud storage, again with only voice commands. How well all this works is subject to experience in the real world, but it sure looks cool.

-John Becker