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Flock Evolves the Browser to Web 2.0

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By [Michael W. Muchmore](#)

The Internet is supposed to be interactive, right? It's not just about being a passive watcher of Web sites, but about sharing your input, as well. The [Flock browser](#) is an attempt to bring some of the Web 2.0-style concepts right to the application that gives you a view of the interweb. Built on top of FireFox, Flock incorporates "mashups"—the hip buzzword for web service integration—with social bookmarks (with [del.icio.us](#) and [Shadows](#)), photo sharing (with [Flickr](#) and [Photobucket](#)), and blogging—with tools built into the browser for posting to your blog. In fact, it's this integration on which Flock's creators intend to build their business model, cutting deals with other web services.

Like Firefox, Flock is built on top of Mozilla.org's Gecko engine, so it renders pages just as Firefox would, and handles tabs similarly. It doesn't natively support Firefox's multitude of extensions, though (more on that later).

Flock runs on Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux, and its first beta release just hit this past Tuesday evening. There's still some work to be done, but there's also a lot to like. *Continued...* So once you get past the warning that the software is beta and take the plunge and download the installer, you're in for the typical no-brainer installation process. You arrive at a browser with that telltale Web 2.0 look, with its raised buttons and light blue on white color theme. Next to the standard back, forward, refresh and home buttons, Flock presents picture and news buttons.

As with most browsers, you can customize the toolbars:

To the regular browser window, Flock adds what it calls the "Topbar"—an area just above the browser's main window, in which you can display photos (see section on photos), and used to offer maps and blog post summaries, which we thought was cool, but the Flock powers that be had some reason to eliminate it.

It's in the Tools/Accounts and Services dialog where you customize most of Flock's special features. Here you can choose and enter account info for the social bookmarking service you use (either [del.icio.us](#) or [Shadows](#), currently), photo-sharing ([Flickr](#) or [Photobucket](#)), and blogging. You also set up your news page here.

Flock does include excellent wiki-style help:

But the help doesn't seem to have been updated for the new beta release, as it still shows a Maps choice on the Topbar menu choice and some other remnants from previous builds.

Extensions

Firefox extensions don't run natively in Flock, but their developers can easily edit any Firefox 1.5 extension and add to Flock's developer database so that it will work. There's a tool for adding what Flock extensions do exist, with listings of popular, recent, top rated, etc. *Continued...* During the installation process, Flock will offer to import your favorites from Internet Explorer or Firefox and then asks whether you want to set up the browser to work with your existing photo site, shared bookmarks site, blog. It also asks about your search preferences; Flock's built-in search toolbar works a bit differently than Firefox in that it can bring to the top results that are in your Favorites and in your history.

So by default, search results in Flock will look like this:

Note the results are grouped by favorites, history, and then Yahoo web search. And you'll see that when you start to enter a different search, the results start coming in before you've even finished your query.

Favorites

The prominent orange-framed star next to the address box is a hallmark of the Flock browser—the

Favorites button. With all the emphasis on Favorites, it seems odd that the browser doesn't have an easier way to get to them, such as clicking the left edge of the browser in Opera. You can customize the main toolbar to add a Favorites icon that will get you right to the page, however.

Flock treats Favorites a bit differently from other browsers. The circle with the star to the left of the address starts out blue for any site you visit for the first time:

If you click on that star, it turns orange, and instantly adds the site to your favorites—both local and online at del.icio.us or Shadows.com (if you've specified a social bookmarking site.) This is really nice, saving you from having to go to the site and entering tags and so on. But it would be even nicer if you got a little more feedback that this was happening, at least the first few times, perhaps as a tooltip.

Here's what your Favorites page looks like:

The Favorites manager displays a little globe for sites that are on your web-based social bookmarks—read del.icio.us or Shadows.com. *Continued...* Flock also has a special way of presenting news you're interested in, which it grabs via RSS. The My News button brings up a screen like this:

When you have new articles from your selected news sources, there will be a small orange circle attached to the lower right of the News button. We'll see that the same principle holds true for photo streams.

Note the RSS button to the right of the URL address:

When you click on this for a site that has any associated RSS feeds, you get a dropdown RSS choice. Clicking on one (often there will only be one) displays nicely laid-out news page based on the feed:

(Note that you can add an article summary directly to the blog editor, by clicking the quill icon below each entry. But we haven't gotten to blogging just yet.) *Continued...* Flock has mashups with two online photo-sharing sites at present: the well-known Flickr and the less-well-known Photobucket. The latter seems more ad-ridden than Flickr, but it has video uploading as well as still digital photos. When you get an account at one of these services and specify your login in Flock's installation wizard, the Tools/Accounts and Services dialog, or from the photo Topbar itself, you'll be able to see Topbar thumbnails like this:

Alternatively, you can choose bigger sized pictures for the Topbar:

Flock now uses a separate picture uploader, which lets you crop and rotate pictures before you upload them to Flickr or Photobucket.

You can add tags and descriptions for use at Flickr and the like. You can also add and batch resize multiple files: *Continued...*

Earlier builds of Flock included a Topbar choice for block posts and integrated the blog editor into the browser. Flock's Geoffrey Arone told us that usability testing informed the company that users are more comfortable with a separate window for blog editing, so this is the resulting tool in the current version:

Another, more automated way to add a blog post is by clicking the Blog link at the bottom of any entry in your RSS News page. And even more automated, you can choose Blog This from the right-click context menu when you're at any link:

We found this tool worked like a charm with our LiveJournal blog. And we were all ready to complain that you can't edit existing posts, but lo and behold, you can. Well, at least you can replace existing posts, and if they were entered with Flock before, you can just call up the post, edit it and repost it. All in all, the blogging tool is a winner.

Snippets

Flock's Snippet feature lets you drag images and text from any web page onto a panel where you can save them as snippets, which you can later drop into your blog via Flock's blog editor. To save text or photo snippets, you click on the tiny clipboard icon all the way in the lower right of the browser, and then drag your selected text or photo onto the black bar that appears: *Continued...*

These items, which have a thumbnail for pictures and text, can be dragged onto your blog editing area. There's little downside to using Flock: It's free, built on top of the well-known and loved Firefox, streamlines everyday functions like marking stories as favorites, uploading photos, and making blog entries. If anything we wish Flock looked even less like a standard browser and went out on more of a limb, though its present incarnation will at least feel comfortable to most web-browsing individuals.

We did crash the browser at one point when trying to close search results, so do keep in mind that it's truly beta still, and not rock solid yet.

Check out our review of 3D Browsers.

We wish more of the special tools in Flock—blog posting, favorites—would have been more surfaced in the default interface with toolbar icons. We also wish that the company had kept more uses for the Topbar in the product, like blog posts and maps. That said, we find what's there to be of high quality, particularly the blogging, photo, and RSS tools. So, unless you're completely beholden to Firefox extensions (though a few of the indispensable ones, such as Adblock, are available for Flock), we wholeheartedly recommend you download it and start not only browsing but contributing to the web with more flair and ease.

Product: Flock

Company: [Flock, Inc.](#)

Price: Free

Pros: Nicely integrates blogging, RSS, picture sharing, and social bookmarking; built on top of tried-and-true Mozilla Firefox; no direct support for Firefox extensions.

Cons: Feature set reduced from previous previews; still occasionally unstable--beta; help not updated.

Summary: The Flock browser builds on Firefox's engine to deliver some nice functionality to the basic browser, letting you work with shared bookmarks, photos, and blogging directly from browser tools. Though it's in beta and therefore still not ready to replace your current browser, it's getting close, and as it's free, you may as well take it for a spin.

Rating:

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