

Web browser enters a golden age

July 1 2009, By Troy Wolverton



It's been a long time coming, but the humble Web browser is finally entering a golden age. Some 20 years after creation of the World Wide Web and more than 10 years after Microsoft crushed Netscape, the browser market has become increasingly dynamic. Not only are a range of competitors vying for the turf that Microsoft's Internet Explorer once had almost to itself, but they also are spurring an increasingly rapid cycle of innovation.

As a result, consumers are able to load Web pages faster and do more things with their Web browsers than ever before.

In the early days of the Web, Netscape and Microsoft battled over trying to set the standards for how sites would be designed. Now, browser

makers have generally accepted third-party design standards and are instead trying to make the programs better and easier to use.

"In terms of users, they can have their cake and eat it too," said Ray Valdes an analyst who covers the market for Gartner, a technology research firm. Users get "an improved experience, but one that still will work in a standards-compliant manner."

Each of the major PC browser makers has rolled out significant updates recently -- or plans to do so soon. Apple released [Safari 4](#), the browser that comes pre-installed on Macs, earlier this month. The [Mozilla](#) Foundation, whose Firefox browser has been steadily gaining share, just released version 3.5 of the software with significant new updates.

Meanwhile, Microsoft, whose Internet Explorer still dominates the browser market, released an update to the software in March. Right now, Windows users have to download [Internet Explorer 8](#) from Microsoft. But the program is likely to become more widespread in October when the company releases Windows 7, which will include the browser pre-installed.

What consumers will notice about the latest browsers -- no matter which they choose -- is that they're a lot speedier. All makers are claiming that their latest updates will significantly decrease the time it takes users to load Web pages. And most companies are adding new features to make it easier for users to search and find information on the Web.

The latest version of Firefox, for example, will include a feature to detect users' physical location to allow the browser to display more relevant search results when users are looking for local restaurants or movie theaters. Firefox 3.5 also has a new private browsing feature to allow users to surf the Web without the browser keeping track of where they've been. In addition, it will allow them to erase from the browsers'

records of visits to particular Web sites or surfing done within a particular time period.

Opera, long an also-ran in terms of market share but frequently an innovator in the browser space, will have several tweaks for users when it launches its new software later this summer. Among them is a service that will automatically streamline Web pages -- thereby increasing download speeds -- when it detects that a user has a slow Internet connection.

But a more intriguing service, dubbed Opera Unite, essentially builds a Web server into the browser. The service allows consumers to directly share photos or host online chats from their browser, rather than through a Web site such as Flickr or Facebook.

Those aren't the only innovations out there. Microsoft's latest Internet Explorer adds a host of new features, including what the company calls "accelerators." These are tools that speed up everyday browsing tasks, such as searching for a particular address on a Web map.

Instead of having to copy an address and paste it into a mapping Web site, a consumer using the latest version of Internet Explorer can simply right click on the address and ask the software to map it right in the same browser window.

Analysts expect the browser battles -- and the innovations -- to continue, particularly as the center of gravity for the Web moves to the mobile phone. Apple's iPhone has shown that many consumers are eager to have a full Web experience on their mobile device.

Thanks to the iPhone and others, such as the Palm Pre and the T-Mobile G1, a rapidly growing number of handheld devices these days include full Web browsers. Analysts expect that number to eventually surpass the

number of consumers who access the Web via a PC.

And unlike the PC, where Microsoft's Windows has long ruled, no operating system -- or [Web browser](#) -- is yet dominant on mobile phones.

"It's the battle of the browsers all over again," said Al Hilwa, who covers the browser market for IDC, a research firm. "We don't know who's going to win."

A BREWING BATTLE

Rivals have steadily sliced into Internet Explorer's lead

BROWSER...MARKET SHARE MAY 2007... MAY 2008... MAY 2009

Microsoft Internet Explorer...78.9%...73.8%...65.5%

Mozilla Firefox...14.6%...18.4%...21.4%

Apple Safari...4.8%...6.3%...8.4%

Google Chrome...N/A...N/A...1.9%

Opera...0.4%...0.7%...0.7%

(Note: Includes all PC and smartphone versions. Share represents portion of visits by unique visitors to a sample of sites.)

RAISING THE BAR

The browser battle is heating up with the latest software updates.

BROWSER...LATEST VERSION...RELEASE DATE...COMPATIBLE OS...KEY NEW FEATURES

Microsoft Internet Explorer...8.0...March...Windows. (Pre-installed with Windows 7)...Accelerators; improved security; Web slices, which show parts of a Web page without having to load the whole thing

Mozilla [Firefox](#)...3.5...June 30...Windows, Mac OS X and Linux...Faster load speeds; HTML 5 support; private browsing mode; location awareness

Apple Safari...4.0...June 8...Windows, Mac OS X...Thumbnail previews of frequently visited pages; can search full history of recently viewed pages; support for HTML 5

Google Chrome...2.0...May...Windows...Faster page loads; autofill for forms; improved bookmarks

Opera...10.0...Later this summer...Windows, Mac OS X, Linux...Speeds page loads for slow Net connections; built-in Web server to share pictures, other content

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