

Google's ahead in the cloud

February 3 2011, By Mark W. Smith

There is perhaps no company more entrenched in the cloud than Google.

To prove that point, the search giant has created the first computer operating system that's entirely online, so your computer won't even work without a Web connection.

The [operating system](#) - named Chrome after the company's popular Web browser - replaces traditional standalone computer applications. [Google](#) is hoping to rival the hold of Microsoft's Windows and Apple's Mac - more traditional operating systems.

It won't be made public until this summer, but Google has launched a pilot program, putting free netbooks - an unbranded bare-bones [laptop](#) called the Cr-48 - running the OS into the hands of a few thousand early testers.

It's not fair to write a true review of the laptop or OS, given that it's still in testing phase, but I've been using the Cr-48 for a couple months now and there is much to be excited about as other operating systems inevitably enter the cloud.

Some early observations:

- In the beginning it's a little strange using a computer that's just a Web browser. Users may find themselves trying to close out of the browser window to get to the computer's desktop - which isn't there. It's all in the Web browser.

- Instead of computer programs, [Chrome OS](#) users will use Web applications - Web sites that will perform many of the same tasks - such as word processing and digital picture storage and manipulation.
- The biggest perk of the Chrome OS is clear: Because everything is saved online, if anything happens to your laptop - Google's example is seeing your laptop get run over by a steamroller - users can sign into a new laptop using their Google account and everything is the same.
- The keyboard has been rethought, forgoing the caps lock key for a new search key and replacing the traditional F-keys with keys that move from tab to tab or refresh the current Web page. It's an instantly welcome change.
- There are limitations. Users won't find the same litany of high-powered traditional applications like Adobe Photoshop or music jukebox programs. The current slate of apps is still limited. The Chrome OS also can't yet view all multimedia content online, including Netflix streaming video.

Users can apply to be a part of the Chrome test pilot program at google.com/chromeos

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