Google launches Chrome browser for Android smartphones

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With more and more people connecting to the Internet through a phone or a tablet instead of a PC, Google Inc. is bringing its fast-growing browser, Chrome, to the newest Android-powered mobile devices.

The launch Tuesday of Chrome for Android Beta caps an engineering effort of more than one year within Google, and marks a convergence between two of the company's fastest-growing products. Both Android and Chrome launched in the third quarter of 2008, and both have had powerful growth spurts, with Android becoming the world's most popular mobile operating system last year and with Chrome on a track that could make it the world's most popular browser later this year.

"This is a big moment for us," said Sundar Pichai, Google's senior vice president for Chrome and applications. "The world is going mobile at a pretty phenomenal rate. Using the Web on a mobile device, I think, is in its early stages, and we think this a big step toward where we're headed."

The analytics firm StatCounter said Monday that the share of Internet visits that came from a smartphone nearly doubled over the past year, to 8.5 percent in January from 4.3 percent a year ago.

Chrome overtook Mozilla's Firefox to become the world's No. 2 browser behind Microsoft's Internet Explorer in November, according to StatCounter, and currently has more than 26 percent of the worldwide browser market and is growing, while Internet Explorer has about 40 percent and is slipping.

Google hopes the convergence of Chrome and Android will drive more smartphone users to try its browser, and will also attract independent software developers to focus more on apps that run on Google's products. And while native apps remain the centerpiece of smartphones and tablets, Google believes that's changing as browsers become ever more powerful under the latest standards of HTML5, the newest computer language for the Web.

"All our data shows increasing usage of the Web on phones and tablets," Pichai said. "So our goal was to build a mobile browser from the ground up that provides the same fast, simple experience people have come to expect from surfing the Web on their desktop, and really push the boundaries of what is possible on the mobile Web."

Another goal was to unify a user's Chrome account on desktop with their mobile devices, so bookmarks - and, soon, passwords - will be synced between a PC and any other device on which users log in to their Google account. The mobile version of Chrome echoes the desktop version's

emphasis on speed, as well as on tabs that allow users to open multiple Web pages at the same time.

"This is not 'Chrome Lite,' " said Arnaud Weber, engineering manager for Chrome. "This is the full Chrome."

That is one reason why Chrome for Android is limited to a handful of newer devices with more powerful chips that also run the latest 4.0 version of Android, dubbed "Ice Cream Sandwich" by Google - Samsung's Galaxy Nexus and Nexus S smartphones, and the Motorola Xoom and Asus Transformer Prime tablets. Future Ice Cream Sandwich Android devices will all be able to run Chrome.

"These devices are very powerful, but they are a lot less powerful than a desktop" computer, Weber said. "On a device like this, we just have to push the device as hard as we can go," with more reliance on the phone's Graphics Processing Unit, or GPU, chip.

Touch-screen functions are another major feature that Google engineers had to import to the mobile version of Chrome. The mobile version allows users to lay separate Web pages on top of each other like a virtual venetian blind, and to swipe one tab off the screen to close it. There is also a zoom feature that allows users to blow up one small section of the screen, making it easier to find links that are tiny on the screen of a phone.

Writing the code to add those functions and to better capitalize on mobile hardware better was a big job, one that took Google well over a year to complete.

"This was a long effort for us," Pichai said. "The project was quality-driven: We wanted to build something great."

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