

Google, Mozilla are tweaking browsers for Web-based games

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As electronic titans Microsoft Corp. and Sony Corp. spend billions of dollars redesigning the video game console, the next leap forward in digital games may come from the unlikeliest of places.

In what could transform the [video game](#) industry, Web browser developers Google Inc. and Mozilla Corp. are in the early stages of developing ways for users to play games simply by opening a Web page.

The gamer would no longer be tethered to an expensive game console: A game could be played from anywhere and on any device as long as there is an Internet connection, creating a potential game audience of billions that could be worth billions of dollars annually.

So far, the games that have been developed for the Web browser are not nearly as sophisticated and graphic-rich as game console titles such as "Grand Theft Auto V" or "Call of Duty: Ghosts."

But eventually, as more [software developers](#) jump in, browser-based games could become just as entertaining and complex as the current generation of video game titles, analysts say.

Software advances, notably HTML 5, are making it possible for developers to create games for Web browsers that are more complex than those on Facebook and don't require users to install any extra software.

HTML 5 is the latest version of the markup language used to develop Web pages. Previous versions of HTML were limited in their capabilities, but HTML 5 enables developers to embed all sorts of items, such as video and complex audio files, into the code for their websites without requiring users to install plug-ins and other software.

Google has been at the forefront in adopting HTML 5 and this year began showcasing the video-gaming capabilities of its Chrome browser. Among them: "Cube Slam," in which players face off against each other over the Internet in a modern-day take on the classic game of "Pong" that incorporates users' Web cameras.

The Mountain View, Calif., company best known for its Internet search engine has also teamed up with Warner Bros. and the creative agency North Kingdom to develop a new Chrome game based on the "Hobbit" movie trilogy. The game is expected to be released before the film "The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug" comes out in December.

Rival browser maker Mozilla is also optimizing its browser for Web-based games.

This year, the creators of the Firefox Web browser teamed up with Epic Games to create a video game demo called "Epic Citadel." The demo doesn't feature any characters, but it enables users to walk around in an elaborate 3-D world and imagine the possibilities of the games they could one day play on their browsers.

Mozilla Director of Engineering Vladimir Vukicevic said these games won't be on par with what PlayStation 4 or Xbox One game consoles can do, but they're a vast improvement over what users have been limited to on their browsers.

"The work that Epic is doing and other developers who are used to

squeezing the last bit of performance out of any platform that they interact with - I think we'll actually be amazed by what they're able to do with the Web," Vukicevic said.

HTML 5 browser games offer tremendous potential for users and developers alike. Unlike the current generation of video games, which require a console or a specific type of operating system, HTML 5 browser games can be played on most modern Web browsers, including Firefox 25 and Chrome 30, the latest versions of both browsers. That could potentially create the [video game industry](#)'s biggest market.

"With the Web, game developers can easily reach an audience of upwards of 2 billion users," Vukicevic said. "As a [game developer](#), that is an extremely interesting and lucrative size of audience that crosses all demographics and all people who are interested in gaming."

And companies are trying to leverage that massive audience with HTML 5 browser games.

Over the summer, HBO released "True Survival," a game based on the popular TV series "True Blood." HBO commissioned the game as a way to promote season six of the show. It chose to build an HTML 5 browser game instead of a smartphone app so that users could play the game seconds after clicking its link.

For users, the advantage of HTML 5 browser games lies in the simplicity - all they have to do is type a Web address and they immediately have access to a video game.

"There's no download, there's no plug-in, no hassle. You can just play the game," said Marcus Kruger, executive chairman of Goo Technologies, a Swedish company that provides a graphics engine and creative tools for developers and artists to create the visuals for HTML 5 browser games.

In many cases, these games will be accessible through users' desktops, laptops, tablets, smartphones and even smart TVs. With so many compatible gadgets, developers are presented with the challenge to come up with innovative games.

"You and I might be at the bar at the same time and there's a game on a big screen and we would like to play it. Then, instead of trying to find some controllers in the bar, we can just pick up our phones and connect to the game and play," said Jonas Jacobi, co-founder and chief executive of Kaazing Corp. Jacobi's company helped create the HTML 5 WebSocket standard, which makes it possible for developers to create games that connect multiple devices to one another.

"The fact that you now can combine the Web," Jacobi said, "with smartphones, smart devices like this, we're going to see a tremendous amount of very innovative solutions coming out."

But there are a few technical issues that could hold back HTML 5 browser games.

Wedbush Securities research analyst Michael Pachter said browsers may struggle to handle online multiplayer games because that typically requires a lot of coordination by the game server.

"You have to have the software on your hard drive because (of) the interaction - you're moving one character, I'm moving another character, and we both see what the other guy is doing on the screen at once - that requires all the background stuff to be accessible quickly, and browser-based doesn't do that," Pachter said. "You still need a big client or disc or something. You have to have something in your machine."

Another issue is whether a user's computer and Internet connection can handle all that it takes to render video games from the Web at real-time

speeds, said video [game](#) analyst P.J. McNealy, the CEO of Digital World Research.

But those pushing the platform say the time is ripe for HTML 5 browser games.

Mozilla's Vukicevic said users will start to see major HTML 5 [browser](#) games launch for desktop browsers during the first quarter of 2014. Games for the mobile version of browsers will arrive during the second quarter of next year.

"In 2013, we were really focused around proving that the Web is ready for games of all kind, including high-end games," Vukicevic said. "So we think that we'll see a lot of very compelling content in 2014 that will really show that, 'Hey, this is here to stay.' "

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