# Tech giants battle for control of the car

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The Audi Sport Quattro Laserlight Concept car is displayed at the 2014 International CES in Las Vegas on January 7, 2014

As the car becomes a connected Internet device, the titans of the tech sector are battling for control of the wheel.

The war is shaping up a lot like the computer sector, with Google, Apple and Microsoft and others fighting to be in control of the vehicle's "operating system" to deliver apps, navigation and other services.

Some of those battles were played out this week at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, which included a record nine auto manufacturers and scores of equipment makers, including software and related tech companies.

"People want consumer apps in their cars, they want to connect to their smartphones, they want to connect to the cloud," says Grant Courville, director of product management at QNX, which makes the on-board systems used on tens of millions of cars.

But the battlefield is wide open because "there's no clear dominant app ecosystem in automotive," Courville told AFP from the CES floor.

At CES, Canadian-based QNX unveiled a partnership with Qualcomm to support the chipmaker's new automotive platform, which connects to smartphones and offers apps for maps, speech recognition, geolocation, and vehicle analytics.

At the same time, Google unveiled a partnership with General Motors, Audi, Honda and Hyundai in a new partnership to bring the Android mobile system to vehicles in a new Open Automotive Alliance.

The moves come with Microsoft in a longstanding partnership with Ford, and Apple widely expected to expand its system for connecting the iPhone with automotive electronics systems.

"Carmakers are conflicted," said Tim Tang, an analyst with IDC attending the Las Vegas expo.

A Tesla electric car on display at the Panasonic booth at the 2014 International CES in Las Vegas on January 7, 2014

"They are trying to decide whether to build their own systems or partner with another company. If they partner, they mitigate a lot of the risk, but they give a lot away, looking at future services, like apps, pay-as you go insurance. No one is certain where it is going but carmakers don't want to be left out. The car is becoming a mobile accessory."

Tang said a key question for automakers is whether the cars should have a dedicated connection or use the smartphone.

"If it is a smartphone model, it's easy to get traction quickly, you don't need to design the system five years in advance. But if it is built into the car you have some advantages. If the car is stolen, for example, you can shut it off."

The General Motors division Chevrolet said this week it would deploy fourth generation (4G) Internet connections on several models to help motorists who want to stay connected with the growing number of apps for automobiles.

But compatibility issues in the nascent "infotainment" technology can mean some systems deliver apps from Android or Android but not both.

Mazda this week at CES announced a partnership with the US software firm OpenCar to launch a new standards-based app system that allows the on-board screen to act as a browser and use a wide range of applications on the Internet.

Paul Boyes, head of telematics and standards for Seattle-based OpenCar, said carmakers using the system would have more control of the apps, being able to choose those deemed safe for the road, and be able to draw from the full Internet, not just Android or Apple.

"With us, the carmakers are tied to a browser, not a company," he told AFP. "If you have Apple or Android, you are married to their system."

The Ford C-Max solar energy concept car is displayed at the 2014 International CES at the Las Vegas Convention Center on January 8, 2014

Mazda staff manager Hideki Okano told AFP automakers are being forced to consider these new systems when designing vehicles, to keep up with what consumers are demanding.

"In the US market, infotainment and connectivity is becoming a major decision-making factor for car buying," Okano said. "It is also growing in other markets."

QNX's Courville said his firm, a unit of BlackBerry, is benefitting from the growth in new technologies, because it can deliver the overall platform which can interact with Android, Apple, and others.

"You need that battle-hardened system," he said. "We're the market leader in infotainment."

Even if carmakers want to use a system like Android, they still need to integrate into the car a system designed for smartphones and tablets.

"There's no automotive version of Android," he said, adding that QNX is a partner with Apple as well for automotive.

"We provide a framework and platform for automotive that is reliable and secure."

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