

Don't delete your Flash player just yet

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For a technology that was supposed to die years ago, Adobe's Flash has shown remarkable resiliency.

So while you might think recent moves by Google and Mozilla to reduce support for the technology mean you can finally stop worrying about updating your Flash player, don't be surprised if you keep running into sites that require it for years to come.

"This is the story of technology transitions," said Al Hilwa, an analyst who covers application development. "It just takes time."

A program that plugs into a web browser, Flash is commonly used to deliver ads, stream video and provide games to PCs users. For years, it was a crucial technology for the web, in part because HTML - the web's native language - lacked comparable capabilities.

But Flash has been on the deathwatch for years. It's been criticized for being a memory and energy hog, for causing browser crashes and for opening gaping security holes.

Thanks to such complaints, most famously voiced by former Apple CEO Steve Jobs, Adobe could never establish it on smartphones or tablets, which have replaced PCs as the center of computing. Meanwhile, web standards bodies have moved to replace it on PCs with HTML5, which promises to give web browsers the ability to do much of what Flash did without the plug-in.

Given that history, Mozilla and Google's announcements - which are only the latest blows for the technology - would, at first glance, seem like the final nails in its coffin. But even their announcements acknowledge that the technology will linger on.

When Mozilla said last month that it was backing away from Flash, it made clear it wasn't going to drop the technology right away. Instead, it plans to move gradually.

Starting this month, Mozilla's Firefox browser will start blocking some Flash files that are invisible to users, ones that are used by websites to do things like track usage. Later this year, Firefox will block other Flash files that are used to determine whether consumers view particular advertisements.

Some time next year - Mozilla hasn't said when - Firefox will block all Flash content by default. But even then, consumers will still be able to run Flash in Firefox and they'll be able to access Flash files by simply clicking on them.

Google is likewise taking a gradual approach. It announced in May that its Chrome browser would start blocking Flash files by default for most sites starting in the fourth quarter of this year. But it would allow Flash to run unimpeded on the top 10 sites. And as with Firefox, Chrome will continue to support Flash and will allow users to view Flash files by simply clicking on them.

Oh, and neither Mozilla nor Google has said if or when it plans to completely dump Flash.

"We'll still continue to ship Flash Player with Chrome for the foreseeable future (and) we intend for it to be simple to enable on a per site basis," Anthony Laforge, who helps oversee Chrome development at

Google, said in an online forum targeted at web developers.

That's likely because as bad a reputation as Flash has developed, it's still widely used to deliver videos, ads and, especially, games on the web. It's going to take time to move away from it.

One of the obstacles is the daunting task of converting the millions of Flash videos or other files to HTML5, a move that will take significant time and investment.

"It's not just a flip of a switch," said Nick Barber, an analyst who covers video technology at Forrester Research, a consulting firm.

Another obstacle is getting Flash developers up to speed on HTML5 and related technologies. HTML5 isn't difficult to learn, but it can be intimidating to those who haven't worked with it before, said Cory Hudson, the creative director of Jellyfish, a digital ad agency. His agency moved development from Flash to HTML5 over the past year or so as Google first moved to block the autoloading of Flash ads in Chrome and then announced that it would bar Flash-based ads from its advertising networks.

HTML5 "definitely could be perceived to be challenging for some, especially if they don't know where to start," said Hudson, who also serves as the chairman of the Interactive Advertising Bureau's working group on HTML5.

One other factor that's inhibiting the move away from Flash is that while native web technologies have improved, they still come up short in some ways compared with Flash. While Flash offered a common format for web videos across browsers, browser vendors are pushing competing and incompatible technologies for encoding and distributing web videos. And game developers say that web technologies aren't yet ready to

replace Flash.

"When technologies fall out of favor it's usually because other better technologies were created, and the market reacted," one game developer said on the Google Chrome forum. "That's not what is going on with Flash. We don't have a better technology for games."

And there's also just plain old inertia. It can be hard to get people and companies to change what they're doing, whether they're individual [web](#) developers or midsize gaming companies or large enterprises that have vaults full of Flash videos. Given just how popular and established Flash was, it's going to be even more difficult to displace than the average [technology](#).

So don't uninstall your Flash Player just yet. For better or worse, you're likely to need it for some time to come.

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