

Google launches Microsoft's big fear

John Capper

They do things differently in Mountain View.

After years spent denying that it was working on its own internet browser, Google this week unveiled, ahem, its own internet browser. "It just happened to migrate from being false to being true," Sergey Brin, Google's co-founder, said airily.

Mr Brin, who had the dishevelled look of the true software engineer, spoke at a press conference at Google's headquarters in the Silicon Valley town to unveil Chrome.

Chrome is free so I downloaded it and took a look. I concluded that it lacks some basic browser features and is not obviously better than the alternatives, notably Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Mozilla's Firefox.

"I think it is a web browser. I don't think it is the first or the best browser," says Dean Hachamovitch, general manager of Internet Explorer, which is now in its eighth iteration.

If one accepts the first part of that statement, it is hard to quarrel with the second. Without Google's name on Chrome, I doubt whether many people would bother to switch.

The problem is that the first part is not the whole truth, In fact, Chrome's ambiguity is what makes it so threatening for Microsoft, perhaps not today or tomorrow but in the next few years.

For Chrome is not only a browser: it is also a web platform. Chrome is, in fact, what Bill Gates feared in 1995 when he wrote a memo to Microsoft executives about Netscape Navigator, then the leading web browser. Mr Gates warned that Netscape could "commoditise the underlying operating system" - in other words, render Windows irrelevant.

Mr Gates' paranoia about his biggest franchise, and Netscape's exaggerated claims that it might do this, led to the "browser wars" of the 1990s. Microsoft pushed Internet Explorer so hard that it got into trouble with the competition authorities in the US and Europe.

At the time, Microsoft's claim that its web browser was part of its operating system was self-serving baloney. With the arrival of Chrome, however, it has migrated from being false to being true.

Google's engineers made the most this week of how well and fast Chrome displays web pages, especially those with Javascript, the software used most for video. That may be true but Firefox, with which Chrome has elements in common, already runs pretty snappily.

In my view, what makes Chrome stand out is the way that it deals with web services, such as online mail, word processing and spreadsheet packages.

Most people still use desktop-based software such as Microsoft Word, Outlook and Excel for these tasks but some are migrating. If you use different computers - in the office or at home, for example - web-based applications are more convenient because your documents are stored remotely on servers run by Google, Yahoo or others. Provided you have an internet connection, you can work anywhere.

Web applications such as Google Docs or Mail, or Yahoo's Zimbra, have other advantages. They are upgraded constantly without your having to worry about buying the next version, and they are free. They are less sophisticated than traditional software but good enough for many tasks.

As a result, I am a convert to web applications: this column was written on Google Docs. But they have, until now, faced the problem that they span the divide between web pages and software applications - they are a little bit of both - so computers do not display them well.

Chrome solves that problem by treating web applications differently: it lets you open them in their own application-like windows while internet sites are displayed in browser tabs.

It is hard to imagine this without trying it out - which I encourage you to do - but the effect of Chrome is like having a substitute desktop on your screen. If you use a browser and web applications for most things, then your work can be arrayed entirely within Chrome.

Chrome jostles up against Windows on the screen, with Chrome's line of browser tabs at the top rivalling Windows' task bar at the bottom. You need not be Bill Gates to grasp the significance of this - or, more accurately, the potential significance.

Chrome's biggest flaw is that it is built for the world as it could be rather than the world as it is. Sundar Pichai, the head of the Chrome programme, says he does "pretty much everything inside a browser" already, but he is hardly the average consumer.

Still, I would not take much comfort from that if I were Microsoft. Mr Gates turned his company upside down 15 years ago because he grasped what the internet might do to his business. He may have been right too early, and have overreacted, but his instincts were good.

Chrome is not going to replace Windows. A computer requires an operating system such as Windows, Apple's OS X or Linux to make the machine work. It does, however, have the potential to do what Mr Gates feared: make the choice of operating system less important.

It is perfectly plausible that, in a few years' time, a lot of people will have switched to using web applications rather than relying on software on their hard drives. If so, a computer running Linux and an improved version of Chrome could be all they will need.

Like many Google initiatives, Chrome is as much a philosophy as a product. And the philosophy is: never mind the computer, the action is on the internet. That is getting truer by the day.

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