

COLUMNS

Finally, Google invents the mobile browser

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By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

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Self-driving cars? Hot-air balloon Internet-delivery? Alchemy-tech projects from Google X's laboratory in Mountain View, CA? Now, finally the tech scientists at the search giant launch a moonshot project that has immediate impact on our digital economy: the invention of the mobile browser.

Google X's ability to "stream" application functionality without requiring the user to download the heavy app chassis is a watershed technology. It is the first step in delivering the mobile browser content experience that we, the diehard mobile consumer, deserve.

It also is the first salvo on the sanctity of the App Store in the same way that streaming music services are forcing iTunes to reinvent its business model and Wi-Fi in the car is the death knell for satellite radio subscription services.

When you click the "stream" link on nine beta app partners, including the Weather Channel, Hotels Tonight and The New York Subway, the content will render in the cloud, as it does on a Google's Chromebook. The phone simply pulls down the resulting visual data from Google virtual computing platform.

Invention of the browser

"Invention of the mobile browser?" you ask. "We all have a super-app called a browser on our phone."

Well, you are correct.

There is a search portal on billions of phones globally that opens up mobile-friendly responsive media to a small-screen consumer.

Chrome, Firefox, Opera Mini and Safari lead the phone-top browser wars. However, for the iOS an "open" browser does not provide a market advantage.

The open browser search portal has been out-gunned by the marketing muscle of Apple. It knows all too well that content-sells-hardware and the company that can show more apps exploding from its billboards wins.

I have always said the Apple SDK for its App Store is the best marketing investment the company ever made outside of the legal dollars it spent on patent grandstanding.

The fact that Apple and grudgingly Android and even more grudgingly Windows has a segregated digital portal of mobile apps (many clunky, forever updating, getting lost in folders and soon forgotten after the impulse download)

seems to be an accepted evil.

Many apps are built using Web technology such as PhoneGap or React Native, packaged as a native app with considerable complexity and are being live-streamed back into Web search with considerable complexity. Unquestionably, Apple has a unnatural chokehold on content distribution.

Apple does not want to give up its content control to the universal browser which would be an attack on its Big Data and differentiation and thus loosen its walled-garden hold on its customers.

Heavyweight to featherweight champion

The app developer community sees as a great "preview" opportunity Google's ability to "stream" app functionality without requiring the user to download the heavy app.

Audiences can find and taste test their apps via a simple search. However, ultimately, this has to be Google's first attack on the legitimacy or outright pragmatism of many heavy app downloads.

Initially, streaming apps are limited to Wi-Fi connect devices due to the large amount of data transferred in a virtual rendering. However, it is a stepping-stone to completely rethinking the traditional Web application.

AngularJS and other frameworks enable client-side developers to build powerful and compelling user interfaces the hallmark of the heavy mobile app.

As the mobile browser matures to allow UI moves to the client, the server becomes simpler, and owners can manage the totality of the app. Using App Engine Datastore access and OAuth authentication, developers can focus on business logic instead of backend technology.

The first phase is tying native apps to browser-based search.

Google has gone to great lengths to get its app community to "index" its content to be searchable and allow for deep links. Google now can search inside the app for deals and news.

Second, is the ability to view a rich app experience through the browser without the usual slimmed-down, reductive UI of the browser.

Initially, the streaming data will not be optimized but as developers see this as an opportunity to become more searchable and more accessible without mandating the multi-megabyte initial download to the phone, they will design for cloud functionality.

While the service may appear to cannibalize the market for app developers, there is an inevitable shift in the way the mobile consumer finds data.

THE STREAMING APP maybe a half-step, as my developer friends tout: it is part of an evolution.

Mobile CPUs and Javascript compilers, newer Web technologies such as service workers, webgl, canvas, hardware-accelerated animations and local storage as well as fantastic performance debug tools in Google Chrome have enabled new Web apps to closely match the potential of native for many applications.

Perhaps the native shopping app is soon to be the vinyl of the phonetop.

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