What If Microsoft Threw Its Weight Behind Mozilla's Firefox OS?

Forbes

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Open source veteran Matt Asay [2], currently at 10Gen [3] (the company behind the popular MongoDB database) just posted a provocative take on the mobile landscape on ReadWrite, Firefox OS: The Future of Microsoft's Mobile Ambition? [4] In it he argues that Microsoft [5] should throw it's lot in with its former enemy, Mozilla, and its disruptive mobile OS as a way to develop a strong alternative to Apple [6]'s iOS and Google [7]'s Android.

Back in the day, Microsoft blocked the ambitions of Netscape and locked the majority of web users into its inferior Internet Explorer browser. Out of the ashes (and source code) of Netscape, Mozilla was born, eventually leading to the release of the Firefox browser. Recently (and ironically) Microsoft bought all of Netscape's patents from AOL [8] for $1 billion. These include such foundational patents of the web as Secure Socket Layer (SSL), cookies and JavaScript.

One motivation for Microsoft's acquisition of Netscape's patents could be to use them in a patent war with Google to stop the Chrome browser's ascendance in its tracks. The mobile version of Chrome will be a major competitor to Apple's Safari as well as Mozilla's new Firefox OS.

But stopping Google is not enough, of course. Microsoft needs to have a compelling horse in the race. Although Windows Phone is innovative from a design perspective, and has a small but devoted user base, it does not solve the salient problems of mobile in a way distinctly different from iOS or Android. Firefox OS [9] does.

The Mozilla entry is not only a browser, but a full-on operating system that can run mobile devices. It replaces the “walled gardens” of its competitors’ app stores with some innovative ways of accessing HTML5 web apps. As Asay writes in his post, “The company isn’t going after high-end smartphones, but rather after low-end, emerging market phones. To accomplish this, Mozilla can’t wait around for hardware to get better. Instead, it needs to make the web stack better—**now—**such that it can work on even barebones phones, including in areas of limited or no bandwidth. Mozilla has therefore developed its web apps to be offline from the start, and to use equal-or-less bandwidth than native apps.”

Combine these offline capabilities with device APIs that allow web apps to access hardware features like cameras, battery level, microphone, etc and Mozilla could effectively break down the barriers not only between HTML5 and native apps, but between high-end mobile devices and low.

The developing world still has a ton of locked-in Microsoft users. Android, not iOS, is the biggest threat to this continued hegemony. By embracing the democracy of the low end and giving up the control of the closed source, Microsoft help could open up a third way in the mobile wars and earn a significant share of its users.

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