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## Comment: Google Chrome OS reinvents the wheel

Hasn't this already been done?

by Chris Hall published on 8 July 2009

Google announced their Chrome OS late last night on their Official Google Blog. A "new" platform that promises to provide a system for those who live online. Initially targeting netbooks, the company says the system will power a range of devices right up to desktops.

Google is careful however to point out that this is a new and separate project from Android, which might send those calling for an Android-powered netbook into a spin. The move means that Google can concentrate on a separate mobile phone platform and a traditional PC platform.

Why does this matter? Mobile phone manufacturers (and I'm looking at you Apple amongst others) are telling us that their devices offer the internet experience on the move. They don't. They give you the Internet in a 3.x-inch display: it isn't as digestible as something with an 8- or 10-inch screen.

Google, or rather open source developers, can now focus on optimised applications for handsets and optimised applications for netbooks, which ultimately will make better use of screen real estate and the control options at their finger tips.

"The software architecture is simple - Google Chrome running within a new windowing system on top of a Linux kernel", says Sundar Pichai, VP Product Management and Linus Upson, engineering director on the Official Google blog. This is possibly the most significant line in the original post, as it pretty much tells us what to expect.

The move is one that is likely to annoy the likes of Asus with their ExpressGate technology, an existing Linux-based, fast start system that allows owners to jump straight into online activities



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without starting the Microsoft Windows OS already installed. In this sense, Chrome OS is nothing new: it's been done before, it's already available.

Those companies developing these proprietary systems will now be feeling the pressure however. Google's brand power and the open source nature of Chrome OS can't help but attract developers. Whilst this means that companies like Asus lose one thing that differentiated them from other manufacturers, we think this is an encouraging move.

Technologies like ExpressGate give you a startup in a couple of seconds, which makes a difference to netbook users, especially if you shutdown to preserve battery life and then just want to send a few emails - you don't want to be waiting for Windows XP to crank itself into life.

If Google's Chrome OS makes this sort of netbook experience more widespread then we applaud it wholeheartedly: they'll achieve their aim of "better computing experience", but it isn't really a new concept.

Google also takes a swipe at Microsoft: "People want to get to their email instantly, without wasting time waiting for their computers to boot and browsers to start up. They want their computers to always run as fast as when they first bought them - they don't want to [Ö] have to worry about constant software updates".

So will Chrome OS knock Windows XP, or the incoming Windows 7, out of the netbook arena? If the experience of existing Linux netbooks is anything to go by, then no. Whichever way you look at it, Windows XP has done amazingly well on netbooks over the past year.

A big factor here is inertia. The average customer sees a netbook with Windows XP as a fully-fledged PC, albeit with some performance restrictions. As sales have shown us, customers

are willing to part with more cash to get that operating system, rather than opt for the relatively unknown Linux offerings.

Out of the box, most computer users know in a roundabout sort of way how to make anything work with Windows XP. It comes from having it on a PC in the office or on a home computer and a massive long-tail community thanks to Windows XP's extended lifecycle. Google will face the challenge of convincing buyers that they'll be able to integrate their Chrome OS netbook into their lives without compromise.

But that is probably besides the point. It isn't clear whether Chrome OS is going to be an either/or product. If it follows the tread of existing Linux systems, then dual boot is likely to be popular. Ok, you might be able to get a cheaper netbook by taking Chrome OS only (and not paying a licensing fee to Microsoft), but it will be a challenge convincing people to step in that direction and that's where the real battle lies.

Google's high profile will bring successes where other Linux offerings have failed. After all, Google can afford to throw millions into development, millions into marketing. Much of the look and feel will already be familiar, it's going to be the Chrome browser and Google Apps all wrapped in a tidy package. People already know and use these things, so convincing them to go Google should be that much easier. They already have an existing platform to monetise the final product should they need to, so things are stacked in their favour.

Will Chrome OS reshape the computer world? In the mainstream probably not, we think that your office PC will still be owned by Microsoft, but in the highly portable netbook market, it might just. The people who could really lose out are those pushing their own Linux offerings who now find themselves staring into the eyes of the Google giant.

It's going to be interesting times ahead, that's for certain, and we'll bring you all the developments

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as they happen.