SFGate.com | (Print This Article) | Back to Article
SFGate.com

Firefox rises from ashes of abandoned Netscape

Tom Abate, Chronicle Staff Writer

Monday, January 28, 2008

As of Friday, AOL officially will end its support for Netscape, the fabled browser that helped transform cyberspace from a fraternity of software geeks into a community of consumers who could point and click their way through news and entertainment.

Netscape as a company had the trajectory of a ballistic missile. Its public offering in 1995 set off the dot-com boom. But Microsoft Corp. fought its efforts to make browser software the new operating system of the digital economy, and not even a Justice Department antitrust investigation could save it.

In 1998, Netscape was acquired by AOL, another late '90s star whose fortunes have faded.

But this is not a story about the death of Netscape, because 10 years ago, just before the AOL acquisition, the company's leaders made a gutsy play. Led by former chief executive James Barksdale, technology guru Eric Hahn, marketing maven Mike Homer and co-founder Marc Andreessen, they decided to make their browser's source code - the working core of the program - publicly available to be tweaked and improved.

And here's the kicker - this born-again browser, which is today called Firefox, has captured about 16 percent of the U.S. browser market, stealing back its share from Microsoft's once-impregnable Internet Explorer.

Microsoft declined to discuss how this reincarnation of Netscape has arisen to challenge its browser dominance.

But Mountain View software engineer Brendan Eich, an early Netscape employee and one of the technical architects of Firefox, explained how the decision to free the source code came about.

"By 1998, the writing was on the wall. Microsoft was driving their monster truck after us and they were about to pin us to the wall. The idea was to give the code away so it wouldn't be lost," said Eich, who continued to be paid by AOL to be one of the primary technical custodians of the free Netscape code

The most famous open-source software - that is, a program whose operational core can be used and changed by anyone with the technical skill - is the Linux operating system that was developed by volunteers from the start.

The Netscape situation was different because it had been developed by a commercial firm. After Netscape was bought by AOL, there were fears the new owner would back away from the open-source pledge. AOL's then-Chairman Steve Case tried to assuage these concerns by pledging to "maintain the autonomy" of Mozilla.org, a nonprofit organization that Netscape had created to manage the open-source code.

For several years after 1999, the Netscape source code existed in limbo. AOL paid a core team of full-time engineers, including Eich, to coordinate and supplement the efforts of dozens of volunteer programmers who fixed or improved aspects of the Netscape browser.

"It was in a weird, half-alive, half-dead state," said Mitchell Kapor, who helped develop the Lotus spreadsheet and became one of the tech pioneers muscled out by Microsoft.

In 2003, Kapor, by then an investor in and proponent of open-source software, helped persuade AOL to spin off Mozilla.org with a $2 million cash cushion to become fully independent.

Eich, who survived these changes at Netscape, said AOL originally had wanted to give the Mozilla organization a smaller get-lost package, but Kapor, who was a friend of former AOL big-shot Ted Leonsis, helped marshal support for a more-generous send-off.

"I wanted to make sure Mozilla could take on a new life," Kapor wrote in an e-mail last week from the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland.

After that 2003 spin-off, Mozilla.org, though a nonprofit entity, began to move at startup speed under the leadership of former Netscape attorney Mitchell Baker, who had helped prod the open-source decision in 1998.

With the clear authority to improve the free code , and the need to make the project self-supporting before the cash ran out, the Mozilla group re-branded the browser. After two false starts - Eich says two early names, Phoenix and Firebird, ran into trademark conflicts - the group settled on Firefox.

This renamed and revised Netscape heir started to gain in popularity, partly because it premiered at a time when many Web developers and consumers were becoming disenchanted with Internet Explorer. For instance, the Microsoft browser was plagued by pop-up ads that annoyed users, while Firefox made it easy for users to stop such distractions, Eich said.

Andrew Lipsman, an analyst with market research firm comScore, said Firefox has become so popular that in December, the Mozilla Web site drew 15.3 million unique visitors. Eich said that traffic is now bringing Mozilla enough in advertising revenue to support about 150 paid staffers who keep improving Firefox.

It's tough to say exactly how deeply Firefox has penetrated the browser market, where Microsoft once held a better than 90 percent share. OneStat.com, a Dutch browser-tracking firm, gave Firefox 16 percent of the U.S. market in January compared with 78 percent for Microsoft. Apple's Safari browser had about 4 percent, with the barely measurable remainder distributed between another alternative browser called Opera and the remnants of the old Netscape.

Eric Raymond, a computer programmer whose 1997 essay, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar," is one of the best early explanations of the open-source approach, said the success of Firefox in the aftermath of Netscape's disappearance proved that the advantages of this community approach outweighed the downsides.

"It can't be traced back to who is responsible," said Raymond, noting the frequent problems that arise with the open-source encyclopedia Wikipedia. But the advantage, he said, is that any programmer in the world can improve open-source code - attracting a world of eyeballs helping to improve Firefox.

"Victory goes to the organization that can put together the largest consortium of brains," he said.

E-mail Tom Abate at *tabate@sfchronicle.com*.

http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/01/28/BULFULUNF.DTL

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle Sections ⇕ Go