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A blue banner advertisement for Lotus. On the left is the Lotus logo in a yellow box. To its right is the text "CONQUER COLLABORATION FOES." in bold, followed by "Take back control with IBM Lotus middleware." and three yellow arrows. On the right side of the banner is an illustration of a man in a white shirt and tie, looking frustrated with his hands on his head, standing next to a computer monitor on a stand.

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Battle lines drawn again between browsers

By [John Fontana](#), *Network World*, 09/05/05

Late on the night of Sept. 30, 1997, a group of Microsoft employees strategically placed a large metal likeness of the Internet Explorer logo on the front lawn at Netscape Communications in Mountain View, Calif. - a signal that the browser war was fully ignited.

Earlier that evening, Internet Explorer 4.0 had been released in San Francisco and hailed by critics as more stable than Netscape's Navigator, which enjoyed 72% market share. In five years, that number collapsed to less than 4%, and what little was left included an open source skunkworks project called Phoenix.

Fast-forward to 2005, and a second war appears to be heating up.

Phoenix is now [Firefox](#), which is the new upstart, gaining more than 8% market share since its release in November, based on more than 82 million downloads. Firefox also has eclipsed [Internet Explorer's](#) feature set at the same time Microsoft's browser has dragged users through another round of security flaws.

Last month, non-profit Mozilla.org, the Firefox creator that was established by Netscape in 1998, [spun off a for-profit subsidiary](#) to explore Firefox's potential and service and support options, a move clearly targeted at winning over IT shops.

Also last month, IBM, with tens of thousands of employees on Firefox, began offering internal tech support on the browser and encouraging staff to download it from internal servers. Last year, Penn State University urged its faculty and students to dump Internet Explorer in favor of Firefox, Opera, Safari, Netscape and other browsers.

And long-simmering application development models, tied together earlier this year and called Asynchronous JavaScript and XML ([AJAX](#)), are heating up after Google used them to develop eye-popping browser-based applications that have Microsoft crafting plans to add AJAX into its developer tools.

"As far as whether there's a new browser in town, I think the numbers speak for themselves," says Blake Ross, one of the co-creators of Firefox. "But I never look at this as a 'browser war.' Firefox is not a war on Microsoft; it is a war on complexity."

On the defensive

In February, Microsoft's Bill Gates reopened the browser battle, saying development on a new stand-alone version of Internet Explorer had begun after four dormant years. Microsoft delivered a beta of Internet Explorer 7.0 in July and has the final product slated for release next year. The offering is designed mostly to address security issues.

But perhaps most important, Microsoft retains legions of corporate developers who have used its Active X technology, which provides a connection to a PC's local hard drive, to build rich features into Web-based and intranet applications.

"We are very married to IE. Our online banking fully supports IE and has only partial support for Firefox and Netscape," says Jay Leal, vice president of technology for Inter National Bank in McAllen, Texas. "We still have 85% to 90% of our Internet traffic come from IE. The population using the alternatives is still too small to have an impact on what our developers are doing."

Leal says that even if Firefox use exploded, it would still be hard to get off Internet Explorer internally, where Web-based tools, such as teller applications and virus monitoring, rely on the Microsoft software's features. "Switching browsers isn't a decision we could make lightly. We would have to work with countless vendors to ensure their applications run," he says.

Improving security

Microsoft knows it has a lock on users and that it has to improve security dramatically to keep them, which is the goal with Internet Explorer 7.0. It is scheduled to ship with Microsoft Vista in 2006 and as a stand-alone application for Windows XP SP2.

Microsoft also plans to enhance important features for developers, including support for Cascading Style Sheets, HTML 4.0, and Portable Network Graphic. Those are key standards, says the Web Standards Project (WaSP), a grass-roots coalition focused on standards support.

While Microsoft says Internet Explorer 7.0 won't pass WaSP's Acid2 check, a standards support test that does not guarantee conformance and that Firefox has yet to pass, it appears to point IE in the right direction.

"As a wish list, we view [Acid2] as a valuable tool, but we are focused on security and compatibility," says Margaret Cobb, group product manager for Internet Explorer. "We will evaluate supporting this test in the future."

Firefox also is working diligently to correct its flaws. Last February and May, security holes in the browser had to be patched, including the first vulnerability rated "extremely critical." Those flaws exposed another Firefox shortcoming, and a patch required reinstalling the entire application.

With Firefox 1.5, which is in beta and is expected to ship later this month, the update system will eliminate that shortcoming and more.

"Organizations will be able to set up their own update system that uses the same client-side piece, so they can control what gets updated and when," says Mike Shaver, technology strategist for the Mozilla Foundation. "And we are scaling our own infrastructure to deal with our growing user base."

This browser war also could turn on development techniques, much like Microsoft trumped Netscape using Active X to entice developers, even though the technology became a playground for hackers.

The new twist is AJAX, which experts say represents the future of Web-based applications. It is a collection of well-established technologies, including XML HTTP Request, which Microsoft introduced in the late 1990s.

AJAX lets users develop applications that behave like desktop software, reducing page reloads by allowing JavaScript to make server calls asynchronously. It dovetails nicely with recent developments in Web services and service-oriented architectures and applications, experts say.

Google has invested heavily in AJAX, making it the basis for such projects in the last year as Google Maps and Gmail and generating a buzz around the technology.

In fact, Microsoft this month plans to preview a tool code-named Atlas designed to ease creation of AJAX-like applications.

"I would say going forward that AJAX is going to have a ton of focus and support behind it," says Joshua Porter, research consultant and director of Web development for research firm User Interface Engineering. "Because it is built on open standards, it is going to be the next plateau that we reach on the Web, like with HTML."

Developers say the beauty of AJAX is that it is cross-platform and can be supported on all browsers, which could eliminate the need for plug-ins to support sophisticated application functions and break the Active X lock-in.

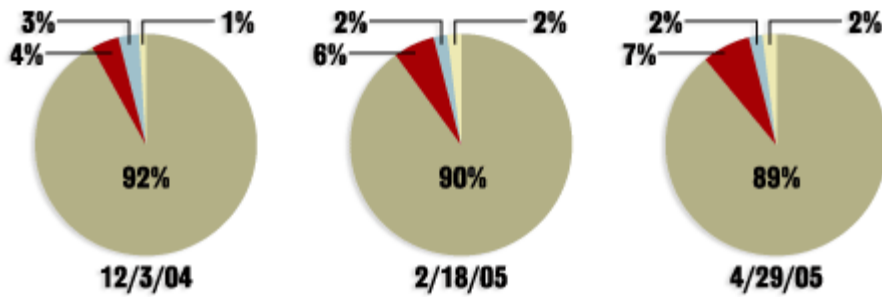
However, experts say AJAX does not replace Active X, which still provides more functionality.

"There are things Active X can do that AJAX can't, but the rich graphical user interfaces, which have historically been the domain of things like Visual Basic apps or Java Swing applications - AJAX enables you to deliver that without any dependencies on anything other than the standard browser," says Kevin Hakman, founder of General Interface, a development tool vendor acquired by Tibco last year.

With those capabilities, AJAX along with security and manageability improvements are likely to become the must-win battles in this next browser war.

Browser shares

Firefox is gaining in popularity, but has a long way to go before overtaking Internet Explorer.



Note: Percentages are rounded off to the nearest whole number.

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