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a new kind of dot

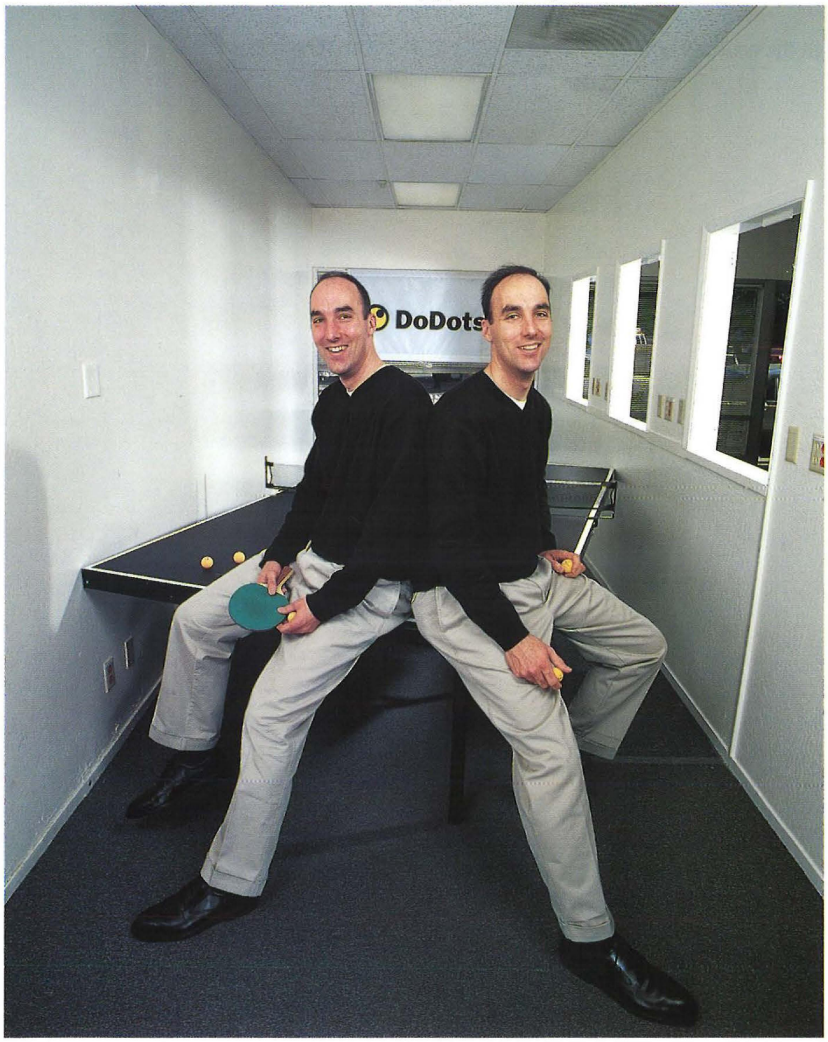
e-COMPANY

Imagining a Web Beyond the Browser

BY MARK GIMEIN ● Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the World Wide Web, thinks it stifles creativity. Jakob Nielsen, the reigning guru of Web usability, thinks it's a disgrace. Bill Gates wishes it would just go away and become "part of the operating system."

What we're talking about, of course, is the browser, the software that serves as the personal computer's window onto the Internet. Some hate the browser because it turns the Web into nothing more than "pages." That metaphor works well for reading text, but less well for other purposes. Like a book, the browser functions best when one is looking at one page, and much worse if one wants to look at several at once. It does little to help people exchange information (unless pasting Web addresses into e-mail is your ideal information-management solution). When it comes to building applications, adapting software to the "page" makes for clunky design. In short, the browser just isn't much fun.

Creating rabble-browsers? DoDots twins John (left) and George Kembel



PETER STEMBER

Hardly anybody believes the browser is on the verge of disappearing, but new applications have been nibbling away at its edges. "Browser companions" run alongside it, giving one-click access to frequently used applications like stock-quote monitors. Still other applications, like Real Media's Real-Player, come with their own dashboards, giving audiophiles a way to bypass the browser entirely. Each begs users to rely less on their browsers. But a desktop full of such disparate programs seems no more appetizing a vision of our computing future. Better, one thinks, to stick with the browser than rely on a mishmash of programs that offer no carefully thought-out alternative.

That's what makes the ideas of DoDots, a Palo Alto startup, so interesting. The company unveiled the prototype of a platform that online companies can use to develop Internet applications that don't feel like Web pages but like handy virtual appliances. DoDots hopes that its partners will begin distributing the free applications, or "dots," in March.

DoDots was started by 27-year-old twin brothers John and George Kembel, both graduates of a Stanford University program in product design.

George is chief executive officer; John (who has also worked as a programmer for Intel) is chief technology officer.

Dots will offer convenience: They can easily be sent back and forth between users and summoned with just a few clicks. In some cases, they'll have the same kinds of functions that one now finds on Web pages. Because dots are built out of the same basic ingredient—hypertext markup language—as Web pages, DoDots' partners can build dots from existing content and applications. DoDots' software, in fact, uses code already present in a user's browser (which won't even have to be turned on) to do most of the heavy lifting.

So what's the difference between using a dot and going to a Web page? For starters, you won't have to hand over most of your computer screen. Second, you won't have to put your other work aside and navigate to a Website when all you need is an often-used appliance.

Most important, desktops will look dramatically different. Unlike Web pages, each dot can be "packaged," with its own logo and look. Demonstrating a prototype, George pulls up a stock-tracking dot created with BigCharts, a Web-based stock analysis service. It looks like a smaller version of BigCharts' Web page, festooned with its logo and lime-green color scheme. But when George keys in a ticker symbol, he doesn't go to a Web page. Instead, a new dot appears with the stock price and other data. Another click and a third dot appears, this one charting the stock's recent progress. Now the screen looks like a mini version of a multipaned Bloomberg terminal. Any of the windows can be quickly closed—or left open—without affecting the others. Soon, a day trader will be able to keep a stock chart in a corner of his screen and have it automatically updated every few seconds.

And new possibilities will emerge. For example, George predicts users will be able to assemble playable packages of songs—"album dots"—that can easily be stored on their hard drives. Music vendors will even be able to create onscreen packaging—a virtual album cover—that makes using the dot resemble the experience of playing a real CD or record (Sergeant Pepper, after all, wouldn't be Sergeant Pepper without the famous album cover). Creating applications that feel like consumer products rather than "pages," George argues, will change the way users interact with the Web.

Indeed. The big marketing battles of the Web today are fought over what pages users visit. That won't be the case forever. It seems likely that in the next few years the battles will be fought not simply over where users go, but how they use the Web in the first place. The winners could turn out to be companies that learn to use tools like DoDots to wean their users away from the browser. Browsers being what they are, it shouldn't be too hard.

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