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30 Years of Browsers: A Quick History

Thirty years ago, Tim Berners-Lee released the WorldWideWeb browser, unleashing the power of the internet and creating a race among the day's tech giants to dominate how people accessed the web.

By [Chandra Steele](#)
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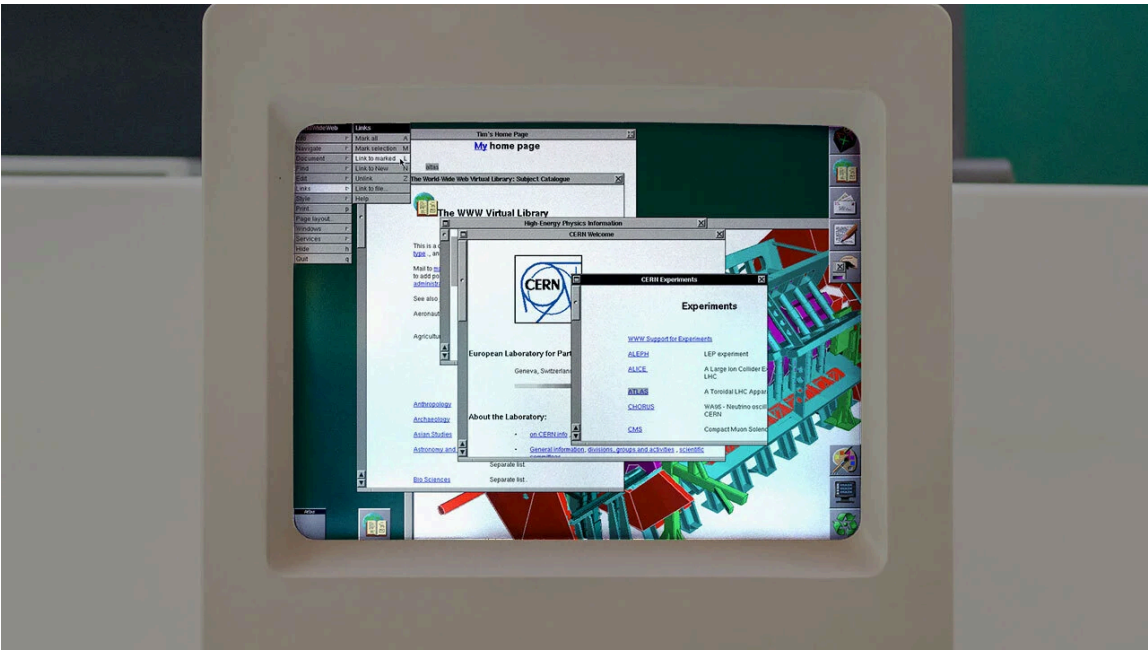


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You're likely reading this story on a browser. You might take how you access the web for granted, or you might get into passionate Safari vs. Chrome arguments. Either way, the interface has now been with us for 30 years, and its life has not been without controversy.

There are five widely used browsers right now (Google Chrome, Apple's Safari, Microsoft Edge, Mozilla Firefox, and Opera) and they emerged from a long, litigious war. But in the beginning, there was only one. It



was created by [Tim Berners-Lee](#)
to have had a tremendous part in

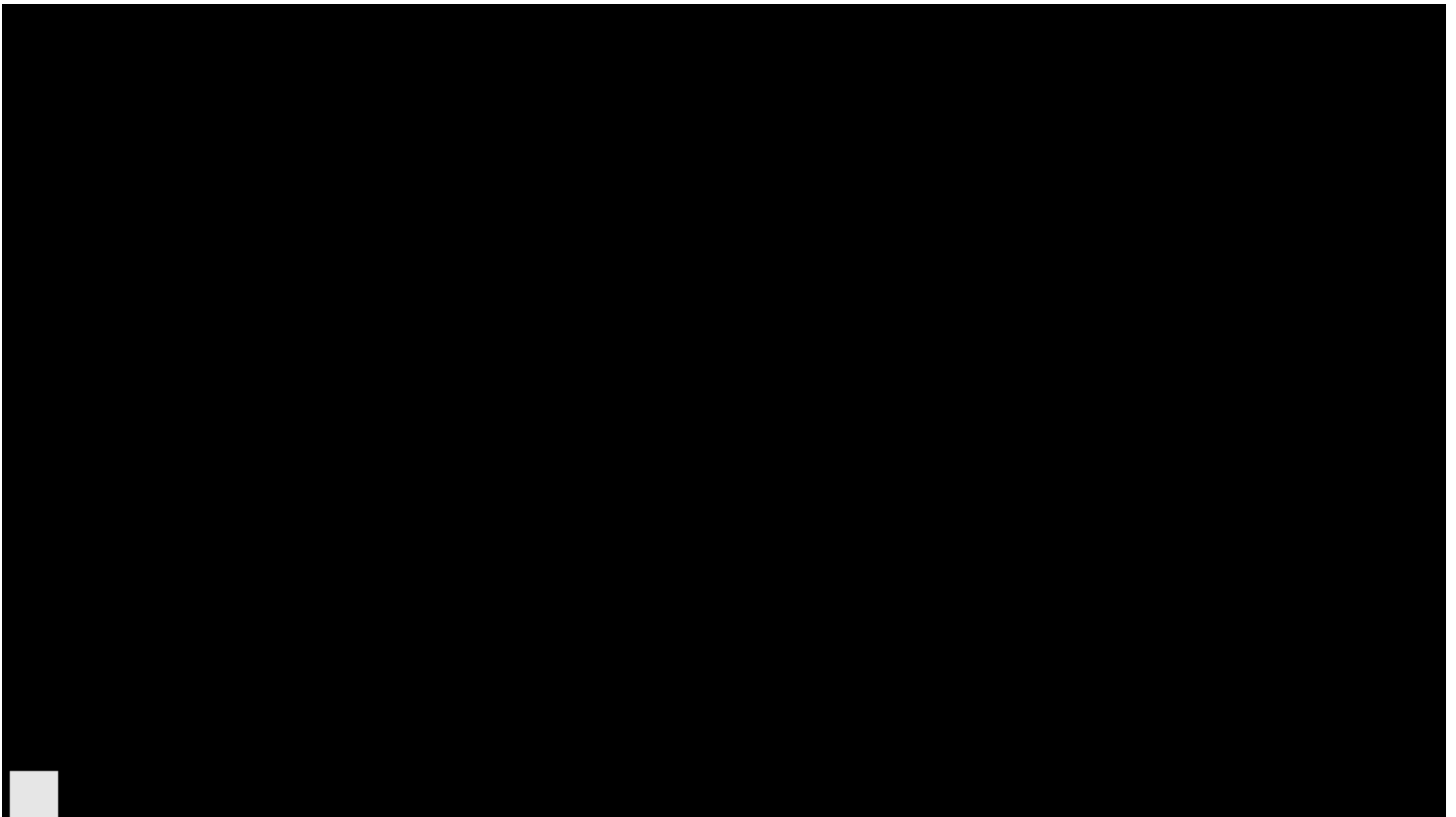
Internet, which he also happened

A NeXT Computer and a Vision

When the Internet was confined to a small group of people, Berners-Lee, who was working at CERN, sat down [at a NeXT computer](#), wrote up a browser, and called it WorldWideWeb. To not confuse it with the information it was the gateway to, it was later renamed Nexus.

When it was time for a browser to make its public debut, Nexus posed a problem: it could only be used on NeXT computers. So the browser was rewritten by several of Berners-Lee's CERN colleagues, with most of the input coming from intern Nicola Pellow, to work on a broader array of computers. The browser came to be known as a Line Mode Browser because of the line-by-line text input method it used. It was first available across CERN and then was [introduced](#) on the alt.hypertext Usenet newsgroup.

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While Mosaic wasn't open-source, it was free for non-commercial use. As PC Magazine wrote in 1994, "Mosaic has probably done more to popularize the internet than any other single piece of software has," thanks to its "snazzy combination of slick design and solid code." It competed with Cello out of the Legal Information Institute at Cornell Law School, but in 1994, Mosaic was "becoming the most widespread internet browser," we wrote, pointing to its domination of the Unix internet world.

But while Mosaic was supported and developed further by the National Science Foundation until 1997, it had some competition from its own creators. Marc Andreessen and Eric Bina left the NCSA in 1994, and went on to found a company they (eventually) called Netscape.

Marc Andreessen in 1998 (Photo by Bromberger Hoover Photo/Getty Images)

Netscape was the beginning of the name-brand browser, but the company originally bore the name Mosaic Communications, and its first product was Mosaic Netscape 0.9. A lawsuit settlement with the NCSA resulted in a name change for the company and the browser.

Netscape Navigator took over the market almost immediately, and continued to dominate it throughout most of the 1990s, peaking at 90% in 1995, according to Visual Capitalist.

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The Browser Wars

Meanwhile, Microsoft realized that it had a huge advantage when it came to browsers since most of the world was using machines that ran on the Windows operating system. In 1995, Microsoft bundled a browser called Internet Explorer with Microsoft Plus for Windows 95.

Windows 95 launch in 1995 (Photo crec

It didn't take long for Internet Explorer (IE) to win over most internet users, but that did attract the attention of the US government, which brought antitrust charges against Microsoft for its practice of preventing computer manufacturers from uninstalling IE and installing other browsers. The case was finally settled in 2001, but IE had three more years of being the preeminent browser ahead of it, peaking at 95% of the market in 2003.

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A Contender

By the late 90s, Netscape was limping along. It was acquired by AOL in 1998, several months after Netscape made its browser free to license and released its source code. That allowed for the creation of the Mozilla project, which initially focused on innovation in the Netscape browser, but later branched out on its own. Mozilla 1.0 arrived in 2002, and following the launch of the Mozilla Foundation in 2003, Firefox 1.0 landed a year later. AOL finally pulled the plug on Netscape Navigator in 2007.

Google was founded in 1998, and though it dedicated its early years to search, in 2008, it developed a browser with some hires from Mozilla. Google Chrome had a slow rollout in its initial year, with about 1% of the market, but now it has the largest share, with about 64% of internet users.

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Doesn't Fall Far From the Tree

Of course a look at the history of web browsers would not be complete without that other major OS maker, Apple. In 2003, the company released Safari for Macs. While it gave Mac users something proprietary, the browser really came into its own in 2007 with the introduction of the iPhone, when it went mobile. Safari has a quarter of the mobile browser market overall.

Modern Times

Thirty years on, it's a relatively quiet time in browser history. At Microsoft, IE gave way to Edge, which now runs Google's Chromium engine, and there are a number of alternative browsers for those with specific needs. Apps compete with browsers for eyeballs, but the five major browsers exist in relative peace, for now.

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About Chandra Steele

Senior Features Writer

My title is Senior Features Writer, which is a license to write about absolutely anything if I can connect it to technology (I can). I've been at PCMag since 2011 and have covered the surveillance state, vaccination cards, ghost guns, voting, ISIS, art, fashion, film, design, gender bias, and more. You might have seen me on TV talking about these topics or heard me on your commute home on the radio or a podcast. Or maybe you've just seen [my Bernie meme](#).

I strive to explain topics that you might come across in the news but not fully understand, such as NFTs and meme stocks. I've had the pleasure of talking tech with Jeff Goldblum, Ang Lee, and other celebrities who have brought a different perspective to it. I put great care into writing gift guides and am always touched by the notes I get from people who've used them to choose presents that have been well-received. Though I love that I get to write about the tech industry every day, it's touched by gender, racial, and socioeconomic inequality and I try to bring these topics to light.

Outside of PCMag, I write [fiction](#), [poetry](#), [humor](#), and [essays on culture](#).

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