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Google's 'Native Client' Is a Go on Mac OS X

Web developers to craft web apps that directly tap the power of the OS / processor

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Google has released an alternative to Microsoft's ActiveX, the component object model (COM) used by developers to create software components with particular functions or sets of functions. The tool will run on Mac OS X, web experts say, allowing developers to write more powerful applications that can work directly with the operating system, rather than through a browser.

Reports say that Native Client looks similar to Microsoft's ActiveX technology, but it also resembles an Adobe technology, called Alchemy. Alchemy is a research project that allows users to compile C and C++ code that is targeted to run on the open-source ActionScript Virtual Machine (AVM2).

Native Client was released by Google engineers under an open-source software license. While still in the early stages of development, Google says it can help web developers create faster and more responsive web apps. For example, Native Client could be used to speed up a photo-sharing website. Memeo Share, an app we covered in one of our weekly Mac picks, is akin to the concept.

Google spokesman Brad Chen wrote on a company blog that "Modern PCs can execute billions of instructions per second, but today's web applications can access only a small fraction of this computational power," suggesting the imminent adoption of the Native Client sometime in the future.

Still, Google doesn't expect the software to be widely used just yet. "Native Client is a research technology, so the goal of this release is to expose it to the research, security and open source communities for their feedback and contributions," a Google spokeswoman said.

Robert Hansen, CEO of security consultancy SecTheory, chimed in adding that "Google is clearly reaching for ways to take more control over the desktop, the web browser and user content. Native Client appears to be another way to reach into people's computers and use as many resources as possible. It's not a matter of whether it can be done. It's a question of if it should be done. We haven't even solved yesterday's problems yet, let alone another ActiveX clone."

Apple has more ambitious plans in tapping unused processing power. Those include a certain "OpenCL" standard, that has been recently ratified and fully disclosed. The open, royalty-free standard for cross-platform, parallel programming of modern processors should enable developers to take better advantage of existing hardware (GPUs, CPUs) to deliver faster software performance for the end-user.