Interview

BROWSERS:
SPEED IS THE KEY

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

Going against conventional wisdom, a small Norwegian company prepares to take on the world

The Opera Web browser has taken on software giants like Microsoft and Netscape. CHIP talks to Jon Stephenson von Tetzchner, the co-creator of Opera, about his business plans, the competitors, and his vision of the Internet. Jon was in India in April to address the first CHIP Forum in Mumbai.

What prompted you to start Opera Software?

In 1994, while working on Net-related software for the Norwegian Telecommunications company, Telenor, we found that the existing Web browsers were not really all that good. That's why we started work on the Opera Project.

Soon after, Netscape entered the market. Even though theirs was not a bad browser, we decided to continue with the Opera project. Telenor, however, needed some time to decide what they wanted to do with the project. They decided they wanted to do nothing—they were a telecommunications company and were not doing software. So we got the rights for the software, founded Opera Software

and started on the run.

How is Opera different from other browsers?

Main improvements in Opera are speed, size and functionality. We tried to focus on the functionality that a browser should have. So what you love about Opera is its speed.

What made this possible? Can you elaborate on the programming or the technical aspect of Opera?

By not following the normal way of doing programming today. As mentioned in CHIP [*Going, Going, Almost Gone...*; *April 1999*], the new, modular way is a normal and accepted way of getting things done fast. But it also means that the modules include more functions than you actually need.

You end up using only 10 percent of the actual functions. The rest take up space which means that less memory is available for data, and which leads to more disk swapping.

Opera uses modular programming but they [modules] are all optimised for the

task. We opted against the track Drop MFC and we didn't do the Borland thing as well. We didn't want to tie ourselves with one vendor. We wanted to do something global, so we just did Win 32.

Is there a flip side to this?

More work.

What about the users' point of view? For example, would Opera be incompatible with a particular Internet technology because of your approach to programming?

No. There isn't any incompatibility because of general programming.

What about third-party support for plug-ins and vendor support? How do you plan to get more support for your browser?

Opera supports Netscape plug-ins. We have used these to get Java working in the latest version of Opera.

We have implemented JavaScript, which we found was more important. We get Java to do plug-ins and they [Java

applets] work brilliantly. Professional Web pages do not use ActiveX, so we dropped support for it.

How do you intend to compete with Microsoft and Netscape? They definitely have more resources at their disposal.

This is very big question. Basically we try to get all the revenue streams we need. We need to grow up. We are attacking competition from all directions. The first thing is to continue making the best browser for Windows. Second is to get more people to use this browser. When they [vendors] realise that we are actually competing with Microsoft and America Online, they will have added reason to choose us. We also plan to port Opera to different platforms.

Which ones?

The first thing is to continue making the best browser for Windows. Second is to get more people to use this browser.

Opera for Linux is on the way. It's getting there, but is still a few months away. Then we have Opera for the Mac which too is close to being released. It uses HTML, images and is being tweaked to work with JavaScript.

And what about BeOS?

The BeOS version of Opera is going to be released the earliest! Five people in Sweden are doing the port and have done a good job. It is almost ready now.

Do you think BeOS is going to catch on?

BeOS is the coolest system for programming. A lot of companies are also thinking about its uses. 'Be' has been very careful in saying that they are not really going after Microsoft. When Microsoft officially recognises 'Be' as a competing OS, 'Be' actually sends out a press release denying it. I think they want to keep a low profile.

There has been much talk of an Amiga resurgence. Do you plan to do anything about it?

We started work on an Amiga version but unfortunately the people doing the job considered the market to be too difficult and they gave up. We have also been monitoring Amiga. The bad part is, a lot of work needs to go into their new system,

which is based on QNX.

We are also considering a few other Operating Systems—Epoc from Symbian is one of them. Let me put it this way—I anticipated Windows CE taking over this [handheld] market until Symbian [founded jointly by Psion, Motorola, Ericsson, and Nokia] entered the market.

What is your opinion on open source software? Do you plan to give away the source code of Opera?

I cannot say what we will do in the future. We do not have immediate plans to release the source code. It is something we want to keep secret.

But it has been fundamental in the growth of Linux...

There is nothing wrong with open source. While working at Telenor, I made a program called FrameMaker, which converts fragmented documents to HTML. And we put that out in open source.

Opera is our product and we need to sell it. Putting software out in the open and allowing people to work on it works sometimes and sometimes it doesn't. A hundred people are working on the Netscape project within the company and only 13 outside. This is a very low number. When working on FrameMaker, I got contributions from tens of people but only about two actually made anything more than a single line. Changing a line here and there might fix some bugs, but the bad part is it sometimes introduces bugs. Also you have to spend a lot of time evaluating the work. For open source software to work, we need a lot of good people.

Do you have any plans for diversifying into other end-user applications?

We are doing Internet applications in general but we are focusing on the browser or the browser suite. We will be adding features to the browser as time goes.

What about office suites?

No. We have been often asked about that. We are a small company, we would need more programmers to take on Microsoft.

Where would you say is the Net heading?

A number of things are happening. It is just a question of who wins. A big American company is trying to take over the Internet and has almost managed to do it. A large number of people are using their browser. They are also trying to infiltrate HTML and other standards.

Many companies are now pushing for standards. We want standards—not this stupid thing of having to generate different pages for different browsers. A number of forces in the market want to make it [HTML] proprietary. Microsoft has tried to introduce ActiveX, which is very much a proprietary technology.

There will be more interesting services. You will be doing telephony on the Internet. The technology is already there but it will be easier to use, and the quality will be better. You will also be able to do presentations [on the Internet]. A software allows you to run a PowerPoint presentation which a guy sitting somewhere else in the world can view using just the browser. He doesn't need to have PowerPoint. This is a very interesting development. I see more and more multimedia coming in.

What about the convergence of television and the Internet? Will it work?

Yes!

Porting television to the Net would be interpreting one medium in terms of another, where both the media are fundamentally different. Do you agree?

Well, it is all going to be on the cable anyway. And there are some benefits. You want Web-television? OK, so your television is Web-enabled. What does this mean? You go in there, and you have channels and small windows for different things. You can maybe click [on a hyperlink] and read what a program is about. It is all related. More information is available. It is a natural evolution.

Finally, Jon, do you really, truly, believe in yourself?

Yes! And people can already see it. Opera got the best Norwegian product award. I was chosen the Internet person of the year (1999). Organisations in Norway have been citing this as an example to follow.

SAMEER KUMAR