

The Guardian

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Netscape: the web browser that came back to haunt Microsoft

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Sun 22 Mar 2015 03.45 EDT

Bill Gates's Internet Explorer killed off Netscape... but it rose again in the form of Firefox, and has now had the last laugh



Bill Gates at the launch of Internet Explorer 4.0 in 1997. Photograph: Dwayne Newton/AP

So Microsoft has decided to “retire” Internet Explorer, its web browser. So what? For most internet users the news probably ranked somewhere near the latest information about bond yields on Romanian debt. But for old timers like this columnist, it draws a line under an interesting chapter in the modern history of the computer industry.

So let’s spool back a bit – to 1993. By then, the internet was roughly 10 years old, but for its first decade had been largely unknown to anyone other than geeks and computer science researchers. Two years earlier, Tim Berners-Lee had created and released the world wide web onto the internet, but initially no one noticed. Then in the spring of 1993, Marc Andreessen and

Eric Bina released Mosaic – the first graphical browser – and suddenly the “real world” realised what the internet was for, and clamoured to get aboard.

But here’s the strange thing: Microsoft – by then the overwhelmingly dominant force in the computing world – failed to notice the internet. One of Bill Gates’s biographers, James Wallace, claimed that Microsoft didn’t even have an internet server until early in 1993, and that the only reason the company set one up was because Steve Ballmer, Gates’s second-in-command, had discovered on a sales trip that most of his big corporate customers were complaining that Windows didn’t have a “TCP/IP stack” – ie, a way of connecting to the internet. Ballmer had never heard of TCP/IP. “I don’t know what it is,” he shouted at subordinates on his return to Seattle. “I don’t want to know what it is. But my customers are screaming about it. Make the pain go away.”

But even when Microsoft engineers built a TCP/IP stack into Windows, the pain continued. Andreessen and his colleagues left university to found Netscape, wrote a new browser from scratch and released it as Netscape Navigator. This spread like wildfire and led Netscape’s founders to speculate (hubristically) that the browser would eventually become the only piece of software that computer users really needed – thereby relegating the operating system to a mere life-support system for the browser.

Now *that* got Microsoft’s attention. It was an operating-system company, after all. On May 26, 1995 Gates wrote an internal memo (entitled “The Internet Tidal Wave”) which ordered his subordinates to throw all the company’s resources into launching a single-minded attack on the web browser market. Given that Netscape had a 90% share of that market, Gates was effectively declaring war on Netscape. Microsoft hastily built its own browser, named it Internet Explorer (IE), and set out to destroy the upstart by incorporating Explorer into the Windows operating system, so that it was the default browser for every PC sold.

The strategy worked: Microsoft succeeded in exterminating Netscape, but in the process also nearly destroyed itself, because the campaign triggered an antitrust (unfair competition) suit which looked like breaking up the company, only to founder at the last moment. So Microsoft lived to tell the tale, and Internet Explorer became the world’s browser. By 2000, IE had a 95% market share; it was the *de facto* industry standard, which meant that if you wanted to make a living from software development you had to make sure that your stuff worked in IE. The Explorer franchise was a monopoly on steroids.

But it turned out to be a double-edged sword. Companies and large organisations built their IT infrastructure around Internet Explorer. The NHS, for example, has hundreds of thousands of PCs, and for years, if you wanted to sell software products to it, then they had to be able to run not just on IE but on a specific version (6) of the program. For all I know, that may still be the case.

So the very success of Microsoft in dominating the browser market in effect locked some of its biggest customers into an increasingly dysfunctional and insecure time warp. But Microsoft’s

monopolistic grip on the PC operating system and office software market also rendered it blind to what was happening in the computing industry generally. Just as it missed the internet when it first appeared, Microsoft also missed the switch to cloud computing and mobile devices.

And because Internet Explorer was so dominant, Microsoft had little incentive to update and improve it. So, in the end, other - more innovative - browsers like Opera, Safari, Firefox and eventually Google Chrome appeared. In comparison with these newcomers, IE looked increasingly tired and impoverished, the software equivalent of a former heavyweight champion grown fat and arthritic. And the intriguing thing is that the contender that triggered its decline was Firefox, the product of the Mozilla Foundation, an organisation created from the ruins of... Netscape. Who said there's no justice?

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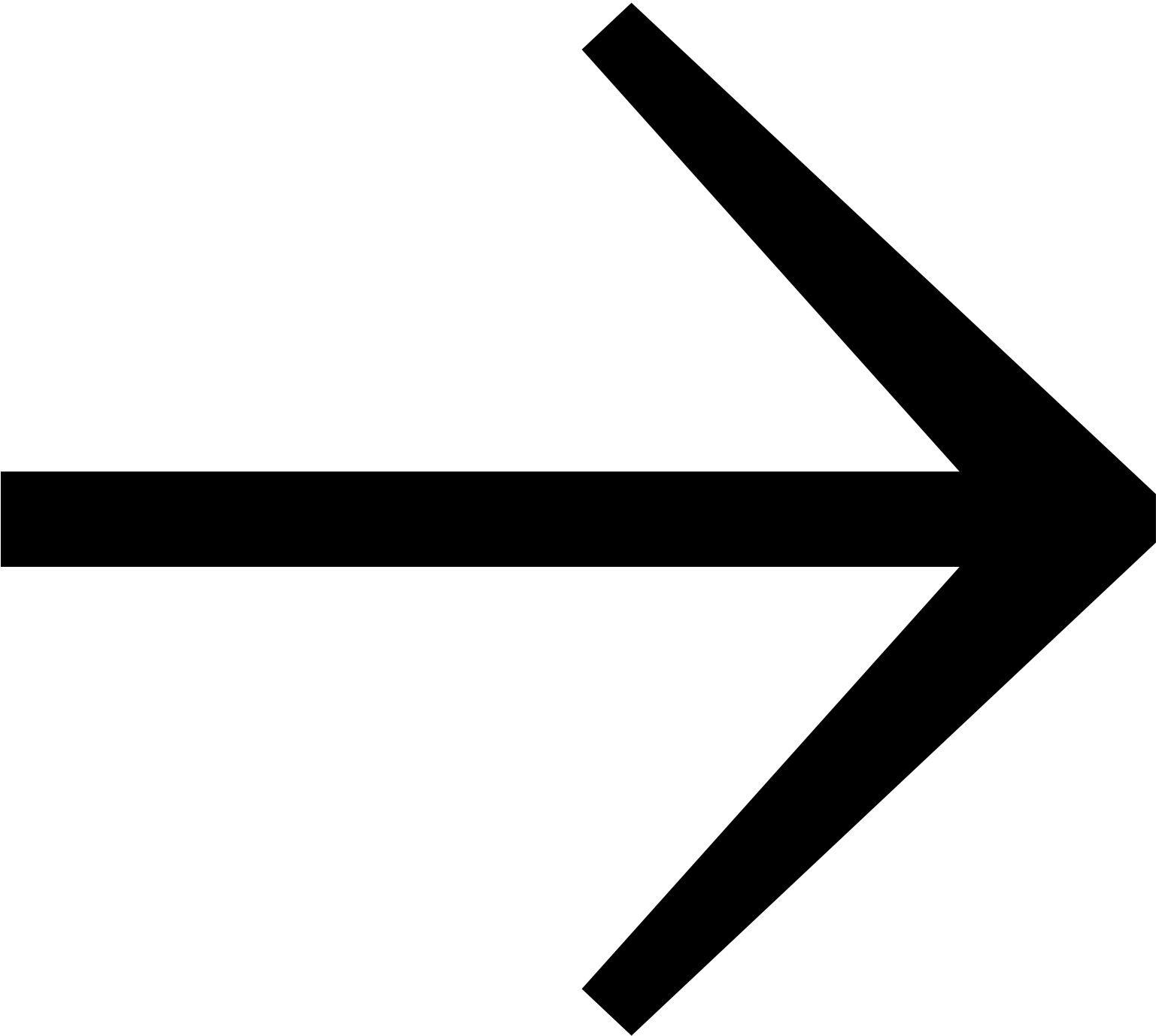
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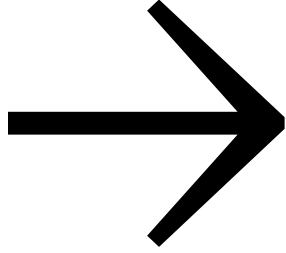
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