

From Fugu With Love: New Capabilities for the Web

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ABSTRACT

We present a greeting card web application that is useful in all modern browsers, but sees its experience progressively enhanced through new and upcoming browser capabilities such as native file system access, system clipboard access, contacts retrieval, periodic background sync, screen wake lock, web sharing features, and more.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems** → **Web applications; Browsers.**

KEYWORDS

Progressive Web Apps, Web APIs, Web Incubator Community Group

ACM Reference Format:

Thomas Steiner, Pete LePage, Thomas Nattestad, Rory McClelland, Alex Russell, and Dominick Ng. 2020. From Fugu With Love: New Capabilities for the Web. In *Companion Proceedings of the Web Conference 2020 (WWW '20 Companion)*, April 20–24, 2020, Taipei, Taiwan. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 4 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3366424.3383526>

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 The App Gap

Modern web browsers support impressive web applications far beyond the web’s origin as a global space of linked documents. WebAssembly (Wasm) is enabling new classes of games and productivity apps, Web Real-Time Communication (WebRTC) enables new ways to communicate, and service workers allow developers to create reliably fast web experiences almost regardless of network conditions. However, there are some capabilities, like file system access, raw clipboard access, background app refresh, and more, that are available to native desktop and mobile platforms, but that are not available to the web platform. These missing capabilities mean some types of apps cannot be delivered on the web, or that these apps are less useful. In colloquial terms, this is sometimes referred to as the *app gap*.

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WWW '20 Companion, April 20–24, 2020, Taipei, Taiwan

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-7024-0/20/04.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3366424.3383526>

1.2 Using Web Technologies, But Not the Web

The app gap causes some developers to simply not build for the web. However, doing this often means focusing on only one platform, or using more complex toolchains. Frameworks such as Apache Cordova¹ (mobile) and Electron² (desktop) allow developers to build apps *using* web technologies, but also to access more of the underlying capabilities of the device than are available on the broader web platform. This approach leverages the web’s interoperability and relative ease of development, but it comes with security challenges [2, 10], and requires that users pay the cost of downloading and storing an entire web runtime per app.

1.3 The Capabilities Project, Or Project Fugu

The Capabilities Project (or Project Fugu) aims to bridge this gap. We want to enable the web to access native app capabilities *without* having to compromise user security, privacy, or trust, or having to package entire app runtimes. Giving developers these new tools will empower the open web as a place where almost any experience can be created, and make it a first class platform for developing apps that run on any browser, with any operating system, and on any device. We design and develop these new capabilities in an open and transparent way in the w3c’s Web Incubator Community Group³ (wicg) using the existing open web platform standards processes while getting early feedback from developers and other browser vendors as we iterate on the design of these features to ensure its interoperability.

This work is a cross-company effort, with contributors from Google, Microsoft, and Intel. The monthly meetings are open to active contributors and have shared notes,⁴ accessible to anyone in the Chromium organization.

We have identified and prioritized an initial set of capabilities we heard partner demand for and that we see as critical to closing the gap between web and native. People interested in the list can review it by searching the Chromium bug database for bugs that are tagged with the label `proj-fugu`.⁵ Regarding the project’s code name: fugu is a pufferfish that is considered a delicacy, however, if

¹Apache Cordova: <https://cordova.apache.org/>

²Electron: <https://electronjs.org/>

³wicg: <https://wicg.io/>

⁴Project Fugu notes: <https://bit.ly/fugu-sync>

⁵Project Fugu bugs: <https://bit.ly/fugu-bugs>

not carefully prepared, it can be lethally poisonous. This analogy works quite well with many of the capabilities we deal with. We have outlined our vision for a more capable web in a blog post [9] on the Chromium blog and invite interested parties to follow along the project's progress on the dedicated project landing page.⁶

1.4 The Capabilities Process

We have developed a process, depicted in Figure 1, to make it possible to design and develop new web platform capabilities that meet the needs of developers quickly, in the open, and most importantly, without moving feature development outside the standards process.

(1) Identify the developer need:

The first step is to identify and understand the developer need. How are they doing it today? And what and whose problems or frustrations are fixed by this new capability? Typically, these come in as feature request from developers, frequently via bugs filed on bugs.chromium.org.

(2) Create an explainer:

After identifying the need for a new capability, create an explainer, essentially a design document that is meant to explain the problem, along with sample code showing how the API might work. The explainer is a living document that will go through heavy iteration as the new capability evolves.

(3) Get feedback and iterate on the explainer:

Once the explainer has a reasonable level of clarity, it is time to publicize it, to solicit feedback, and iterate on the design. This is an opportunity to verify the new capability meets the needs of developers and works as expected and to gather public support and verify that there really is a need for this.

(4) Move the design to a specification and iterate:

Once the explainer is in a good state, the design work transitions into a formal specification, working with developers and other browser vendors to iterate and improve on the design. Once the design starts to stabilize, we use an origin trial⁷ to begin prototyping and to experiment with the implementation. Origin trials allow developers to try new features with real users, and give feedback on the implementation.

(5) Ship it:

Finally, once the origin trial is complete, the spec is mature, and all of the other launch steps have been completed, it is time to ship it to stable. We still iterate with other implementations and developers to refine the spec, explore improvements and fixes to the design with other vendors, and work toward promoting the spec to a formal standard.

Nota bene, many ideas never make it past an explainer or origin trial stage. *Not* shipping a feature because it does not solve the developer need is fine. Key milestones here are formalized with public discussion and approvals via Chromium's API launch process.⁸

1.5 Permissions

Some of the capabilities we work on are potentially harmful for users if not handled appropriately (we recall the code name of this project). In a position paper [12] presented at the w3c Permissions

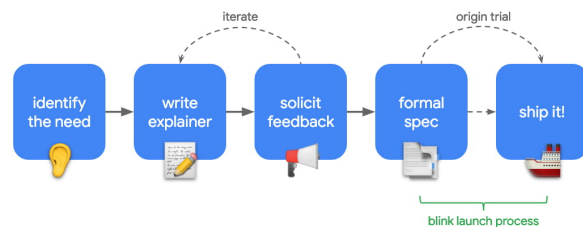


Figure 1: The Capabilities Process

Workshop, we have outlined our standpoints regarding evolving the current permission model. We propose the following steps:

- Permission-requesting APIs need to introduce the ability for developers to register interest in a capability before ever being allowed to prompt users and to be called back when the situation changes, e.g., if increased site engagement is noted, when before the threshold would not have been reached.
- Since different web APIs currently have disparate ways to signal a developer's intent to use them, permissions requests should be centralized on a single method [13] to enable better user controls and bring much needed developer consistency.
- The Permissions API [8] should be extended with a revoke method, so developers are able to ensure their applications operate with least-privilege.
- The Web Application Manifest should be extended to include fields which allow sites to identify to the runtime a maximum set of permissions. Requests for permissions not included in this list should fail.

1.6 Access to Powerful Web Platform Features

Allowing users to control which sites are able to access powerful APIs is crucial for maintaining the security and privacy properties of the web. The impact of restrictions on the developer ergonomics and user utility of the API and the web platform overall must also be considered. The following general principles [11] summarize the overall approach of the Chromium project to evaluating how powerful new features should be controlled on the web:

- Access to powerful APIs should be available to the entire web of secure contexts, with control managed exclusively by user consent UX like prompts or pickers at time-of-use.
- API-specific restrictions on the scope of access may also be used to guard against potential abuse.
- Usage of powerful APIs should be clearly disclosed to users, ideally using a central hub that offers users control over what sites can use which capabilities.
- Installing a web app is associated with persistence, and thus persistent and/or background access to powerful APIs may only be granted (possibly subject to additional requirements) to installed web apps. Non-installed sites may still request and be granted permission to use powerful APIs, but should not have their access persisted.
- Installation or engagement alone should not act as a vote of trust for either granting access or enabling the ability to ask for access to powerful APIs.

⁶Project Fugu landing page: <https://developers.google.com/web/updates/capabilities>

⁷Origin Trial: <http://googlechrome.github.io/OriginTrials/explainer.html>

⁸Chromium (Blink) launch process: <https://goo.gle/blink-launch-process>

- Separately, efforts should be made to curtail the existing persistency on the web platform outside of installed web apps, e.g., time-limiting permission grants, more aggressively expiring cookies, and restricting background task execution.

2 PRIOR ART

This is not the first attempt at making the web a powerful application platform. We list three examples that went to market with this promise. While there are more,⁹ these four are very representative.

2.1 Palm webOS

Palm webOS,¹⁰ announced in 2009, was exclusively for mobile. It recognized that users wanted their people, calendars, and information to move with them, wherever they were, wirelessly, as opposed to being bound to a personal computer. At its core, webOS leverages industry-standard technologies, including web technologies such as CSS, XHTML, and JS. It changed owners several times and lives on as an open-source project¹¹ now powering smart devices, e.g., TVs.

2.2 Chrome Apps

In 2013, Chrome Apps [6] promised to bring together the speed, security, and flexibility of the modern web with the powerful functionality previously only available with native software. Chrome Apps were designed to work offline, could run in stand-alone windows, were launchable directly from the desktop, supported notifications, and could interact with USB, Bluetooth and other devices. They were kept updated automatically and synced their state to the cloud. Chrome Apps could use a set of proprietary `chrome.* APIs`.¹² Chrome Apps were deprecated in August 2016¹³ and support for Chrome Apps in Chrome will end by June 2022.¹⁴ Project Fugu is a direct successor to Chrome Apps. Progressive Web Apps built using Fugu APIs are one of the recommended migration strategies.¹⁵

2.3 Firefox OS

Firefox OS, also known as Boot 2 Gecko¹⁶ and first commercially released in 2013, is a discontinued open-source operating system designed by Mozilla and external contributors. It was based on the rendering engine of the Firefox web browser, Gecko, and on the Linux kernel. The applications used standards like JS and HTML5, and web APIs that could communicate directly with the underlying hardware. A fork of Firefox OS now gains traction under the name of KaiOS,¹⁷ especially in emerging markets.

2.4 Super Apps Like WeChat

WeChat is a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app developed by Tencent. In 2017, WeChat launched a feature called *Mini Programs*.¹⁸ Developers can create mini apps

in the WeChat system, implemented using JS and a proprietary API that grants access to device capabilities like QR code reading, the file system, Bluetooth communication, system clipboard, *etc.* Other super app platforms exist, and there is ongoing standardization effort happening in the w3c MiniApps Ecosystem Community Group.¹⁹

3 DEMO DESCRIPTION

3.1 Core Contributions and Intended Audience

In March 2003, Nick Finck and Steve Champeon stunned the web design world with the concept of progressive enhancement, a strategy for web design that emphasizes core webpage content first, and that then progressively adds more nuanced and technically rigorous layers of presentation and features on top of the content. While in 2003, progressive enhancement was about using at the time modern CSS features, unobtrusive JavaScript; progressive enhancement in 2020 is about using modern browser capabilities. We will present a greeting card web application that is useful in all modern browsers, but sees its experience progressively enhanced through new and upcoming browser capabilities.

The target audience are academia and industry web developers, browser engineers, and people involved in the w3c standards process, as well as web privacy researchers.

3.2 Demo Link and Demo Requirements

The demo is publicly available at <https://glitch.com/~fugu-greetings>, where it can either be explored directly, or where its source code can be inspected and cloned. We recommend running the demo in the latest Chrome Canary²⁰ or Edge Canary²¹ browsers (both at version 82 as of February 2020). Since this demo is about bleeding edge web APIs, some browser runtime flags need to be set (below, replace `chrome://` with `edge://` on Edge):

- `chrome://flags/#native-file-system-api`
- `chrome://flags/#enable-experimental-web-platform-features`
- `chrome://flags/#periodic-background-sync`

3.3 Baseline Application

Progressive Web Applications (PWAs) are a type of application software delivered through the web, built using common web technologies including HTML, CSS, and JS. They are intended to work on any platform that uses a standards-compliant browser. As such, we will start with a simple drawing web application that serves as the baseline greeting card app that is offline-enabled, can be added to the user's home screen, *etc.*, and step-by-step add new browser capabilities as progressive enhancements that are dynamically offered on supporting browsers. We note that the currently rudimentary visual design of this application is *not* focus of the demo.

3.4 Web Share (Target) API Support

Creating an advanced greeting cards app is nonsensical if there is no one out to appreciate the cards. We thus add a feature that allows the user to share their drawings with the world. The Web Share API [3] allows for the sharing of files using the native device's share

⁹Others: Adobe AIR, Windows Hosted Apps, Blackberry WebWorks apps, w3c Widgets

¹⁰Palm webOS announcement: <http://bit.ly/palm-webos-announcement>

¹¹webOS open-source project: <https://www.weboose.org/>

¹²`chrome.* APIs`: https://developer.chrome.com/apps/api_index

¹³Chrome Apps deprecation: <http://bit.ly/chrome-apps-deprecation>

¹⁴Chrome Apps end of support: <https://goo.gl/chrome-apps-support-end>

¹⁵Transitioning from Chrome Apps: <https://developers.chrome.com/apps/migration>

¹⁶Boot to Gecko: https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Archive/B2G_OS

¹⁷KaiOS: <https://www.kaiostech.com/>

¹⁸WeChat Mini apps: <https://goo.gl/wechat-miniapps>

¹⁹MiniApps Ecosystem CG: <https://www.w3.org/community/miniapps/>

²⁰Chrome Canary: <https://www.google.com/chrome/canary/>

²¹Edge Canary: <https://www.microsoftedgeinsider.com/en-us/download>

mechanism. Figure 2 shows the user initiating a share of a drawing on an Android device. Both the native Google Hangouts app as well as the native Facebook app offer itself as share targets. The other way round, through the Web Share Target API, the greeting card application itself can become a share target that one can share images to as card sources, for example, from the photo gallery app.

3.5 Native File System API Support

Drawing everything from scratch is hard. We thus add a feature that allows the user to import a local image into the application. Figure 3 shows the file import dialog where, after granting access, the user can open a local image file and add it to their drawing. Later, they can also save their creation to disk. Both operations are enabled through the Native File System Access API [7] and not to be confused with legacy workarounds that required uploading a local file to a server and downloading a copy.

3.6 Contact Access API Support

At times it can be hard to correctly type a greeting card recipient's name, for example, when it is written in a different script that the present keyboard layout does not support. We add a feature that allows users to pick one (or multiple) of their local contacts and add their names to the greeting card message. This is a one-off operation facilitated by the Contact Picker API [1]; no continuous contacts access is granted and the user can choose the contact details.

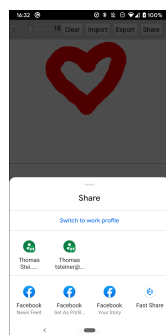


Figure 2: Web Share API

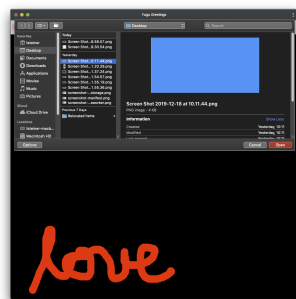


Figure 3: Native File System Access API

3.7 Clipboard API Support

Occasionally users might want to paste a picture from another app into the greeting card app, or copy a drawing from the greeting card app into another app. We add a feature that allows users to copy and paste images from and to the app. The Clipboard API [5] allows for the asynchronous copying and pasting of image data (currently limited to Portable Network Graphics images).

3.8 Badging API Support

If the greeting cards app is installed on a user's device, it will have an icon on their home screen. This icon can be used to convey fun information on the icon badge like the number of brushstrokes a given drawing has taken. The Badging API [4] enables apps to set a numeric badge on the app icon that increments with each stroke.

3.9 Other APIs Support

The demo will showcase a number of other APIs, namely the Shape Detection API to detect shapes like faces, the Wake Lock API to keep the screen awake while the user waits for drawing inspiration, the Periodic Background Sync API to surprise the user with a new greeting card template each day, the Idle Detection API to clear the greeting card when the user is no longer interacting with the application (for example, when it is running in a kiosk setup), and the File Handling API, which allows the app to register as a file handler to integrate with the operating system's file explorer.

4 CONCLUSIONS

We hope to gather feedback on these proposed features from the conference attendees, as well as trigger conversations about future challenges around permissions, security, and browser compatibility, and invite interested parties to learn more about Project Fugu.

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