Google is going to try to win TV for the umpteenth time

Pop quiz: what's the biggest video website on the internet? It's YouTube, duh. Second question: what's the biggest and most important video app on your smart TV or your set-top box? Everybody's answer is different, but I bet most people's first answer isn't YouTube.

Google has the largest and arguably most important video platform in the world and yet barely competes for the largest and arguably most important video screen in your home.

Which is weird! There are certain product domains where Google just can't seem to get it right. When it comes to consumer tech, social networking, messaging, music streaming, and television top the list. Google's got Chromecast and it has pursed a strategy of trying to get Android TV built in to TV sets, but it certainly seems like it isn't keeping up with Roku, Amazon, or even Apple. (Partisans of the Nvidia Shield will tell you otherwise, and bless you all from the bottom of my heart for your steadfast faith, but it's not a big seller.)

I have been watching Google duff its TV shots since at least 2012, when I reviewed Google TV and wrote:

> *Not once during that time did the experience delight me, it often managed to get the job done, and all too often it frustrated me and stymied my efforts to just watch something. Eric Schmidt famously predicted that "By the summer of 2012, the majority of the televisions you see in stores will have Google TV embedded." Luckily for anybody who has ever held a remote control, he was wrong.*

So I was intrigued when I saw that *XDA Developers* landed a scoop yesterday: images of Google's next streaming video

dongle alongside screenshots of its Android TV interface. The hardware itself looks like *9to5Google* first reported a gadget codenamed “Sabrina” would: a bigger, softer, more rounded version of the Chromecast. There’s even an honest-to-goodness remote control, something the Chromecast lacks.

The Chromecast is a great product but it also requires a lot more work from users — both physically and cognitively. Physically, it’s just a huge hassle to have to unlock your phone and hunt down the right software or button to do what you want. Cognitively, the disconnect between using your phone to control content and your screen to receive video signals is much worse than it seems just thinking about it. It’s an extra layer of abstraction and it’s subtly off-putting.

All that is on top of the fact that if you want to choose what you’re watching with other people, you lose the shared interface for doing that. Instead of clicking around on a TV you can both see, one of you has the phone and everybody else either has to huddle around you or just watch whatever it is you choose.

A screenshot showing the new remote control
XDA Developers

So that remote control is a bigger deal than it seems. It indicates that there’s just a standard set-top box (slash dongle) running Android TV. I’m very tempted to turn that remote control into a symbol for what this new TV product is and will be. The remote is an admission that if Google wants to compete with Amazon, Roku, and Apple in the TV space, it needs to start doing *the obvious thing.*

Obvious things on the remote itself: play/pause, home, back, and of course the Google Assistant button. Less obvious: a mute button but no volume buttons? I know getting volume is hard given everybody’s different TV setups but… put volume

buttons on it you cowards! I have no idea what the star button does and while the top bits are surely a D-pad, I hope it's also an iPod-style scroll wheel just because I would love to report on the lawsuit Apple would file.

Put volume buttons on it you cowards

But the most obvious thing for Google to do is truly leverage YouTube. Do more than just create a "lean back" interface, but instead really make it feel integral to the platform. It's what Amazon does with Prime Video. It's also what Apple would *like* to do with its Apple TV Plus content in the Apple TV app on the Apple TV — and I'd explain what I mean by that in more detail but it would require writing "Apple TV" and then specifying which thing I'm referring to a thousand more times and who has the energy for that now or ever (and yes, that's part of the problem!).

Strangely enough, some of the screenshots *XDA* shared show that Google might *not* screw up an opportunity to use YouTube here. One shows a YouTube TV guide built in to the top-level "Live" tab. Another has how-to videos from YouTube itself appear as suggested results from an Assistant search.

I use the YouTube app on my TV near-daily. For me, it's about having short "unicorn chasers" (see below). But those YouTube videos don't appear on the main interface of my smart TV. There's no real reason I wouldn't want YouTube videos intermixed with the other shows I watch.

Except, of course, there is: money! The fights over what smart TV apps do and don't appear on smart TV platforms have turned the streaming wars into a pissing contest. YouTube and Amazon fought for a while, now it's Roku and Amazon and HBO Max. Later it'll be something else. And none of them seem to want to have their shows integrated into the main TV interface — and only grudgingly allow their apps to be searched in the first place.

And speaking of money, it’s simultaneously a reason to find Google’s lack of TV success baffling and an explanation for that failure. It’s baffling because the money in TV is in ads and the money in smart TVs is in tracking. Ads and tracking are two things that Google absolutely excels at, so you’d think TV would be a good fit.

Cable networks are terrified of Google rolling in and drinking their milkshake

But I think that fit is one reason that Google has struggled: the companies that control most of the technology and content that determines what appears on your TV are *terrified* of Google rolling in and drinking their milkshake. As early as 2010, networks blocked the then-named Google TV from accessing its shows. In 2016 the FCC proposed an ambitious plan to force cable companies to let *anybody* make a cable box for their services. The blowback from cable companies was so forceful it was watered down to a plan to ask them to make apps.

When Google is able to make the incentives align for everybody, it cleans up. That’s one reason it had early success on the web and on YouTube — it created programs to help people get paid. It’s also why Android now dominates somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of the worldwide smartphone market: it’s open enough to let other companies profit off of it.

With TV, though, the company was never able to figure out how to get those incentives aligned — or faced too much resistance to make it worth trying. The fact that some of its early TV products were just not that *good* from a user perspective didn’t help!

Anyway, sometime later this year, Google’s going to take yet another shot at success on the big screen in your living room. All of the things that kept it from succeeding on TV are still there, but their relative size and import seems smaller. And if Google is willing to actually use YouTube in a larger way,

maybe this time it will work.

(A "unicorn chaser" is a light, relaxing, ideally short thing to watch after you've just watched something more intense. Xeni Jardin at Boing Boing came up with it for blogging purposes, back in the days when people actually visited home pages. If you have a stack of heavy dramas on your binge list, I strongly suggest building out a stable of unicorn chasers. They don't have to be YouTube videos either. The combo of Euphoria then She-Ra, for example, is basically what got me through the first half of May.)

 Ban them all. T.C. Sottek wrote the clear, step-back look at what big platforms should be doing right now. Even as somebody who knows that whataboutism is a trap, I often get caught internally debating nuances that are too small to actually worry about.

The house is on fire and Jack Dorsey and Mark Zuckerberg are worried about turning on the firehose because too much water can cause mildew.

 Blackout Tuesday posts are drowning out vital information shared under the BLM hashtag. Your job on social media right now is to boost the signal, not hide it. Please take an extra moment before you post anything to think about whether it's helping. Use that moment to search around and see what's actually needed. (And, as a bonus, you can also use that moment to re-scan your post for typos. Or mabye it's just me that needs that.)

 'Out of context' Twitter accounts are turning into protest accounts.

 Trump's Twitter order violates the First Amendment, new lawsuit claims. Makena Kelly on the first of many lawsuits to come:

> *In its lawsuit, the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) called Trump's order "retaliatory" because it specifically attacked Twitter for using its First Amendment right to comment and moderate the president's tweets. By attacking Twitter, the organization claimed that Trump's order could discourage other platforms from exercising their free speech rights to moderate the president's posts out of fear of retaliation from the federal government.*

More from The Verge

 Android 11's first beta lands early for some Pixel owners.

 What the future of the space station looks like after SpaceX's historic launch. Loren Grush:

> *With this change, eventually other people might join NASA astronauts on journeys to the space station. Bridenstine has made the main goal of the Commercial Crew Program very clear: return human spaceflight to American soil. But a second goal of the program has been to open up access to space, allowing both SpaceX and Boeing to sell seats on their vehicles to private customers. NASA is also making the space station available for commercial opportunities, something the agency has been strictly against in the past.*

 Microsoft finally gives AppGet developer the credit he deserves. Credit in words is nice, but it sort of seems like there's another kind of credit this developer should be getting. The kind you can spend.

 HP's Omen 15 gaming laptop has a sleek new design. Monica Chin on the new look and the new specs:

> *HP says the new design is meant to reposition the Omen as a multifunctional PC, catering to users who want a laptop for work or browsing as well as games. It's a simpler and more*

> *sophisticated look than the Omens we're used to, and certainly an aesthetic that might blend better into an office or coffee shop setting — it's now much closer to a Razer Blade than a Helios 300.*

 HBO Max won't hit AT&T data caps, but Netflix and Disney Plus will. Perhaps you won't shed a tear for Netflix, but this kind of zero-rating is a subtle disincentive for anybody who would want to create a new company that requires a lot of bandwidth. It raises the cost of entry and consolidates power. Nilay Patel also calls out how AT&T's supposed mechanism for letting anybody zero-rate is only used by… AT&T.

> *According to an AT&T executive familiar with the matter, HBO Max is using AT&T's "sponsored data" system, which technically allows any company to pay to excuse its services from data caps. But since AT&T owns HBO Max, it's just paying itself: the data fee shows up on the HBO Max books as an expense and on the AT&T Mobility books as revenue. For AT&T as a whole, it zeroes out. Compare that to a competitor like Netflix, which could theoretically pay AT&T for sponsored data, but it would be a pure cost.*

 Where to start with Studio Ghibli. Everybody has weird cultural blindspots and misses. For me, Studio Ghibli is one of them. I'm not sure why they didn't hit my radar early on, then later on it all seemed just a little daunting for some reason. So I'm grateful for this piece by Sam Byford:

> *Rather than outright ranking the movies, which would be a truly impossible task, I thought I'd put together a guide that would hopefully help people getting into Ghibli for the first time. This is obviously very subjective, and even then I'm not necessarily putting my favorites toward the top of the list; this is about easing you into the studio's work and making sure you don't write it all off after accidentally watching Tales from Earthsea.*

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