Report: Google wants to bring the Steam game store to… Chrome OS?



Enlarge / Pictured: a hotrod gaming device.
Valentina Palladino / Ron Amadeo

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We have a wild report from Android Police this morning, as the site claims that Google is working to bring official Steam support to Chrome OS. Yes, *Valve's* Steam. The gaming platform. On Chromebooks.

The story apparently comes from a direct source: Kan Liu, the director of product management for Chrome OS. During an

interview with Liu at CES, the site says Liu "implied, though would not directly confirm, that Google was working in direct cooperation with Valve on this project." The idea is that, according the Liu, "gaming is the single most popular category of downloads for Play Store content on Chromebooks," and Steam would mean even more games.

Anyone can put Steam on Chrome OS now. Chrome OS supports Linux apps. Steam has a Linux client and sells Linux games. You can install Steam and use it as a Chrome OS game store right now. You wouldn't get the entire Windows collection of Steam games, but there is a modest-and-growing collection of games that support Linux. No one does this because Chromebooks are not gaming hardware. They usually have just enough GPU power to run YouTube, scroll a webpage, and that's about it—3D graphics are not really going to happen. To make matters worse, Chrome OS' hardware acceleration for the Linux sandbox is actually pretty bad, and nearly identical hardware can run games at a higher FPS using Windows or a real distribution of Linux.

There's also the issue that Google already has a gaming-focused solution for Chromebooks: the Stadia game-streaming platform. Stadia offloads game rendering to the cloud and only streams a live video to your Chromebook, so it doesn't require hot-and-heavy gaming hardware. It's a perfect solution for a light, limited Chromebook. A push for Steam on Chromebooks would muddy Google's Chrome OS gaming strategy. Muddying its own strategies with competing products is something Google is really good at, though.

So will some manufacturer step up and make a gaming-focused Chromebook? Android Police writes that "Liu said we could expect [Chrome OS' lack of powerful hardware] to change: more powerful Chromebooks, especially AMD Chromebooks, are coming. Liu would not explicitly confirm that any of these models would contain discrete Radeon graphics but told us to stay tuned."

Chromebook hardware has gotten really bloated over the years and can seem pretty far from the original idea of a light, fast Web-focused laptop. Today, you can get Chromebooks with 1TB of storage for, I guess, a whole lot of Linux and Android apps. A gaming Chromebook would be a thicker, hotter, heavier, more expensive laptop, and I wonder if anyone wants a Chromebook like that. (If they start outfitting Chromebooks with gamer RGB lights, let the record show that the Chromebook Pixel was a trailblazer with its light bar.)

Valve would probably welcome Chrome OS as an official Steam platform with open arms. Steam is more powerful the more platforms it is on, and Valve has been working to reduce its reliance on Windows for some time, with projects like the Linux distribution SteamOS. The advent of Vulkan as a leading graphics API alternative to the Microsoft-built DirectX is also enabling high-end games on non-Windows platforms.

A push for Steam compatibility would be yet another app store Google is bolting onto the once-simple Chrome OS. It used to be a light and simple Web OS. Then Google added Android and the Play Store in 2017. In 2018, it added support for Linux programs. If Steam gets added, that’s three major platforms, plus Chrome’s extensions and Web apps, that are available on the OS.

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