The Vision Pro’s first killer app is the web, whether Apple likes it or not

In the days ahead of the Vision Pro’s launch, Apple has heavily promoted some of the apps destined for its spatial computing headset. Download Disney Plus and watch movies from Tatooine! Slack and Fantastical and Microsoft Office on your face! FaceTime with your friends as a floating hologram! But it’s increasingly clear that the early success of the Vision Pro, and much of the answer to the question of what this headset is actually for, will come from a single app: Safari.

That’s right, friends. Web browsers are back. And Apple needs them more than ever if it wants this $3,500 face computer to be a hit. Embracing the web will mean threatening the very things that have made Apple so powerful and so rich in the mobile era, but at least at first, the open web is Apple’s best chance to make its headset a winner. Because at least so far, it seems developers are not exactly jumping to build new apps for Apple’s new platform.

Historically, Apple is unmatched in its ability to get app makers to keep up with its newest stuff. When it releases features for iPhones and iPads, a huge chunk of the App Store supports those features within a few weeks. But so far, developers appear to be taking their Vision Pro development slowly. Exactly why varies across the App Store, but there are a bunch of good reasons to choose from. One is just that it’s a new platform with new UI ideas and usability concerns on a really expensive device few people will have access to for a while. Sure, you can more or less tick a box and port your

iPad app to the Vision Pro, but that may not be up to everyone's standards.

The bigger-picture reason is that Apple and its developers are increasingly at odds. Some of the high-profile companies that have announced they're not yet building apps for the Vision Pro and its visionOS platform — Netflix, Spotify, YouTube, and others — are the very same ones that have loudly taken issue with how Apple runs the App Store. Spotify has been railing against Apple's 30 percent cut of in-app purchases for years. Netflix got a sweetheart deal from Apple years ago to share only 15 percent of revenue but has recently been refusing to participate in the Apple TV app's discovery feature and has long since stopped allowing you to subscribe to Netflix from your iOS device. YouTube stopped allowing in-app purchases a few years ago and even canceled subscriptions people purchased in the App Store in order to get away from Apple's commission.

You'd think the recent end to the Apple / Epic dispute would have made things better since Apple was required to allow developers to link out to other places users can pay for apps. But Apple changed its terms to say that, actually, even if someone clicks the link and subscribes through the web, developers still owe Apple a commission. Sure, it's 27 percent instead of 30, but that's not likely to change anyone's mind. The message was clear: if you sell a product through the App Store, Apple will get its cut one way or another.

All this corporate infighting has the potential to completely change the way we use our devices

But what if you don't need the App Store to reach Apple users anymore? All this corporate infighting has the potential to completely change the way we use our devices, starting with the Vision Pro. It's not like you *can't* use Spotify on the headset; it's just that instead of tapping a Spotify app icon, you'll have to go to Spotify.com. Same for YouTube, Netflix, and every other web app that opts not to build something

native for the Vision Pro. And for gamers, whether you want to use Xbox Game Pass or just play *Fortnite*, you'll also need a browser. Over the last decade or so, we've all stopped opening websites and started tapping app icons, but the age of the URL might be coming back.

If you believe the open web is a good thing, and that developers should spend more time on their web apps and less on their native ones, this is a big win for the future of the internet. (Disclosure: I believe all these things.) The problem is, it's happening after nearly two decades of mobile platforms systematically downgrading and ignoring their browsing experience. You can create homescreen bookmarks, which are just shortcuts to web apps, but those web apps don't have the same access to offline modes, cross-app collaboration, or some of your phone's other built-in features. After all this time, you still can't easily run browser extensions on mobile Safari or mobile Chrome. Apple also makes it maddeningly complicated just to stay logged in to the services you use on the web across different apps. Mobile platforms treat browsers like webpage viewers, not app platforms, and it shows.

There are some reasons for hope, though: Apple recently added multiple profiles, external webcam support on the iPad, and a few other features to Safari, which at least shows Apple is aware Safari exists and is willing to give it access to some native features. It felt for years like Apple would happily ditch Safari altogether if given the choice; after all, it tightly controls everything about its platforms, and the web is an utterly uncontrollable place. But the company appears to be still invested in making Safari work. (All the Safari-focused antitrust pressure is probably helping move things along, too.)

Safari for visionOS will also come with some platform-specific features: you'll be able to open multiple windows at the same time and move them all around in virtual space. A leaked video

recently showed a user manipulating a 3D object inside of a webpage. Apple engineers said at WWDC last year that they've completely redesigned the tab overview for visionOS, and they've also made some changes so the browser works both with touch and the eye-tracking and double-pinching mechanics that are core to visionOS. Apple has been warning developers to prepare their apps for all kinds of new screen sizes and layouts, as users do wacky stuff with their headsets. The company also confirmed that it will support WebXR, a protocol for browser-based VR that can be used for some impressively immersive stuff.

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Rumors have also been flying for a couple of years that Apple is going to drop its WebKit requirement for developers, which would mean other browsers could be built on other rendering engines. If and when that happens, you might be able to run full-fledged Chrome or Firefox on your Apple devices, potentially including the Vision Pro. That change, along with the increased attention on progressive web apps (PWAs) — the cross-platform, web-based apps that Android, Windows, and even Apple are starting to support more aggressively — could make your headset's browser wildly more powerful practically overnight. With a good browser and powerful PWAs, many users might mostly not notice the difference between opening the Spotify app and going to Spotify.com. That's a win for the whole web.

A powerful, deeply integrated desktop-class browser will make the Vision Pro useful and powerful from day one. Apple should embrace Safari, allow other desktop-class browsers, and treat the Vision Pro like the power user platform it is. No one has yet seen enough of Safari for visionOS to know if it is all of those things, though — and I'm not sure whether Apple wants it to be. Because here's the real question for Apple: which is more important, getting the Vision Pro off to a good start or

protecting the sanctity of its App Store control at all costs? As Apple tries to create a platform shift to face computers, I’m not sure it can have it both ways.