

Firefox vs Chromium

As Ubuntu looks all set to dump Firefox, **Mayank Sharma** wonders whether it's time we all made the switch to Chromium?

In brief...

» The two most popular and feature-rich web browsers. See also: *Opera* and *Konqueror*.

Although it still isn't set in stone, it's very likely that Google's open source *Chromium* browser will take over Mozilla's *Firefox* as the default web browser in Ubuntu starting with the 13.10 release.

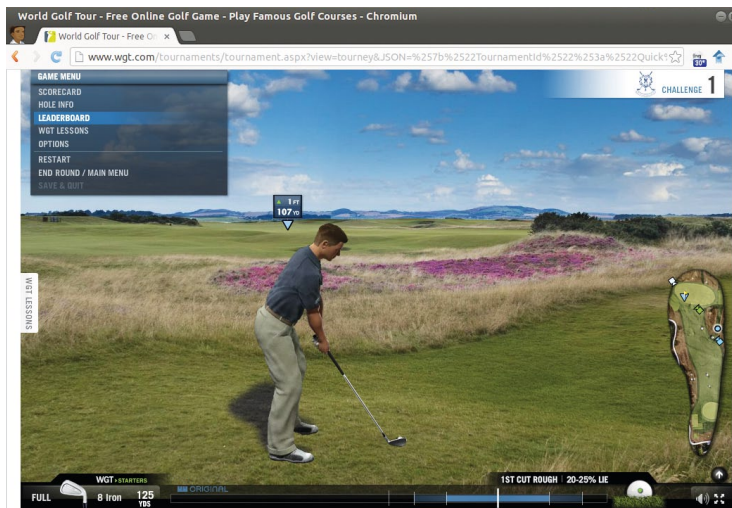
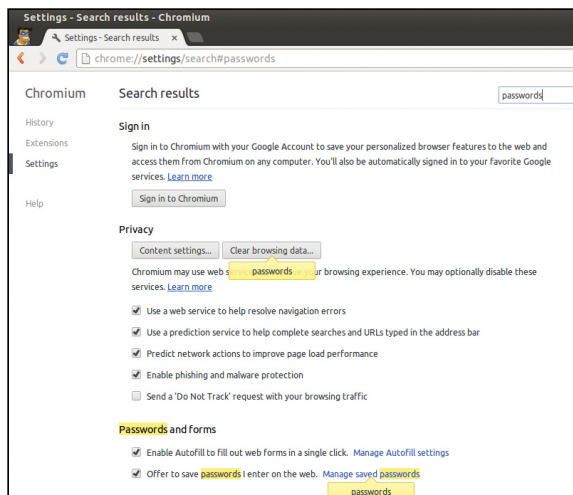
Canonical has explained that the foremost reason for selecting a default browser is the end user experience for a general user. The company doesn't zero in on a browser based on the number of features that it has compared to the competition but rather the quality and stability of its releases.

This makes sense, as both *Firefox* and *Chromium* have almost identical support for open internet standards such as HTML 5, CSS 3, ECMAScript 5 and DOM 3 etc.

One difference between the two is that while both browsers support the NPAPI plugin, only *Chromium* supports the PPAPI plugin. The plugin is developed by Google, and Adobe has announced that it will distribute Linux versions of the Flash player in the future using this plugin only. Mozilla has said that it has no plans to implement the plugin in *Firefox*.

If you look at the numbers, *Firefox* is still leading in terms of usage. But that can be attributed to the fact that it's pre-installed on most Linux distros. The more important trend, however, is that more and more people are going out of their way to replace their default browser with something else, most notably *Chromium*.

» It's easy to find settings in *Chromium*.



» Starting with *Chromium 28*, the browser now uses the Blink engine instead of the popular *WebKit* engine, while *Firefox* continues to use the *Gecko* engine.

Could it be because of *Chromium's* superior performance? Historically, it's been the faster of the two, but of late *Firefox* has been cutting the flab and feels as fast as *Chromium*.

You say potato, I say...

The best way to install the browsers is to rely on your distro's package manager. All major desktop distros include both browsers either in their official repos or ancillary ones. *Firefox* has the added advantage of being the default on the majority of Linux distros.

If you rely on your distro's package manager you might not be running the latest stable browser version. In that case you can download the latest stable release (or bleeding-edge dev builds) from the browser's project page itself. However, if you take this approach, *Firefox*, with the convenience of its self-contained archives, wins hands down over *Chromium's* cumbersome build process.

Chromium thinks of itself as a 'tabbed window manager for the web' and uses a minimal user interface. That's fancy talk for removing the menu toolbar and clubbing the search box and the address toolbar. If you hide the menu toolbar in *Firefox*, it rolls up all its functionality inside the *Firefox* menu and frees up as much screen real-estate as *Chromium*.

Then there's *Chromium's* address bar, which is called 'omnibox' because it also doubles up as a search box that can trawl through the web, as well as your bookmarks and history. The *Firefox* navigation bar, known as the 'awesome bar', can also do the same. In fact, the added advantage of *Firefox's* separate search box is that you can change to a different search engine in one click.

The New Tab page of both browsers is also very similar with subtle differences. Both show thumbnails of the most visited websites. In *Firefox* you can rearrange the order in which they appear and also pin a website. In *Chromium*, in addition to the new tab page, you can switch to Apps, which lists web apps installed from the web store.

Talking of app stores, both browsers have their own, although *Firefox's* Marketplace is young and doesn't have as many web apps compared with *Chromium's*. Also *Firefox* houses plugins, themes and extension in a separate add-ons website, while *Chromium* has a unified store. You'll find the popular extensions and plugins in both stores.

Once installed, *Firefox* web apps are available from within the Applications menu in the OS as well. However, to launch *Chromium* apps from your host distro you'll have to right-click on the

installed web app in the browser and select the Create Shortcuts options to place them on the desktop and the applications menu of the distro.

Both browsers have well laid-out and organised Settings sections. *Chromium* has a Search Settings box that helps you hunt down embedded settings. For example, if you type 'password', it will bring up options to manage passwords as well as the option to clear browsing data and clear saved passwords.

Security & privacy

One of the most important things you can control from the Settings menu is your privacy. Probably in a bid to impress users paranoid of everything Google, *Chromium* has more controls for managing privacy than *Firefox*.

With *Firefox* you can control how the browser handles the files you download, the data you enter in forms, your browsing history, how the location bar uses this history to suggest matches, and lets you clear individual cookies. You can also select one of the preset tracking options to either prevent websites from tracking you or not.

In addition to these, *Chromium* can block images, JavaScript and pop-ups from all or particular websites. You can also deny websites access to your webcam and microphone and control how they use plugins. Both browsers also let you adjust cookie and permission settings for a particular

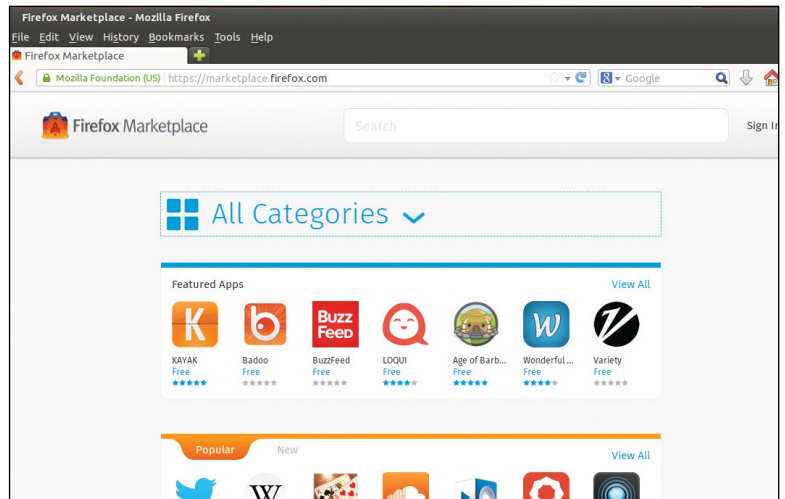
“Firefox runs on more devices and platforms than Chromium.”

website that you are visiting by clicking on the padlock icon in the address bar.

Both browsers have malware and phishing protection. Furthermore, you can also prevent *Chromium* from using other web services to improve your browsing experience, such as by resolving navigation errors and using a prediction service to help complete searches. When it comes to managing passwords, the one major difference between *Firefox* and *Chromium* is that the former lets you lock all your passwords by encrypting them with a master password.

Another feature that both browsers have is browser data synchronisation, but both go about it differently. You can use *Firefox*'s sync option to access open tabs, bookmarks, history, passwords and preferences across

» **Web apps installed via Firefox's Marketplace open in chromeless windows just like in Chromium.**



multiple devices, but it's quite a complicated process to set up. By contrast, setting up sync in *Chromium* involves simply signing into your Google account. The browser will then synchronise your bookmarks, preferences, extensions and other browser data with your Google account. To get these on any other *Chromium* or *Chrome* browser simply sign into the same Google account. Changes on any browser will be replicated on the other as well.

Both *Firefox* sync and *Chromium* will encrypt your data before transmission. By default, *Chromium* will encrypt the data with your Google account credentials but you can optionally specify your own sync passphrase. Both *Firefox* and *Chromium* will keep the encryption keys on your computer. One notable advantage with *Firefox* Sync is that you can setup your own sync server.

If you share your computer with others, you'll appreciate *Chromium*'s ability to create multiple profiles. *Firefox* also has a profile manager but it's not as usable as *Chromium*'s.

In terms of performance, *Chromium* hasn't slowed down as much as *Firefox* has sped up. A couple of years ago, the difference in performance forced the Ubuntu distro, which targets older PCs, to switch to *Chromium*. Ubuntu has now switched back to *Firefox* and, generally, *Chromium*, with its multi-process feature, performs better on newer multi-core PCs with oodles of system resources.

One of the reasons for *Firefox*'s popularity is that it isn't tied to a for-profit corporation like Google. Also *Firefox* runs on more devices and platforms than *Chromium* and the browser has been constantly adding new features, albeit, in some cases, following *Chromium*'s lead. It has also restarted work on project Electrolysis that's designed to separate processes for the browser UI and the web content.

Even if Canonical switches to *Chromium*, our recommendation is that you don't. If *Firefox* works for you, then there's no reason to look elsewhere. But if you're looking for a change, *Chromium* has come of age and is a wonderful option. **LXF**

LINUX Verdict
FORMAT

Firefox 23
Developer: Mozilla Foundation
Web: www.firefox.com
Licence: Mozilla Public Licence

Features	9/10
Performance	8/10
Ease of use	8/10
Documentation	9/10

» Firefox is the more customisable browser of the two and has much improved performance.

Rating 8.5/10

LINUX Verdict
FORMAT

Chromium 28
Developer: The Chromium Project
Web: www.chromium.org
Licence: Various free software licences

Features	9/10
Performance	9/10
Ease of use	9/10
Documentation	9/10

» Chromium feels faster, is better suited to contemporary systems, and is a good option for everyday users.

Rating 9/10