LG releases open source Connect SDK, wants every TV to behave like Chromecast

LG likes Chromecast's way of casting media to the TV. So instead of copying it for webOS, the company decided to integrate casting into an open SDK capable of playing nice with multiple devices.

Mobile app developers just got a bit of a break when it comes to bringing their content to the TV screen, courtesy of LG: The consumer electronics maker released an open source Connect SDK Thursday that helps developers cast media to a wide variety of connected devices, ranging from LG's own TV sets to Google's Chromecast adapter to Roku's streaming boxes. Think of it as Chromecast, but for a wide variety of devices.

I got to see LG's Connect SDK firsthand during a recent visit to the company's Silicon Valley Innovation Lab, where I was led into a room filled with TVs. One was connected to a Roku box, another to Amazon's new Fire TV. One was running LG's own webOS TV platform, two featured the 2013 and 2012 flavors of LG's smart TV development.

LG's Connect SDK Product Lead Henry Levak proceeded to show off a custom-build demo app that launched a photo as well as a personal video on close to all of the screens, save for the Fire TV, which was added to the SDK at the last minute. He then launched a YouTube video on all devices. Okay, not just any YouTube video — I was rickrolled on six TVs simultaneously. Check out the video below for a similar demonstration:

Levak also demonstrated the ability to launch a web app for the music video service musiXmatch on a variety of screens, complete with the ability to switch to audio-only output on the Roku and other devices not capable of running full-blown web apps. And finally, Levak showed off how the Connect SDK works with Plex to play media on a variety of devices.

Plex already has implementations for Roku, Fire TV and Chromecast, but the app uses the Connect SDK as a way to bring its app to webOS TVs. Levak said that app makers can use the SDK to launch existing apps, or forward users to a connected TV app store and prompt them to download an app onto their Roku or connected TV.

How the Connect SDK works

LG's Connect SDK can do all of this by combining all of the common multiscreen and home media sharing protocols, including Google's Cast SDK, DLNA and DIAL. "It's an abstraction layer," said Levak, explaining that developers now have to include only one set of code in their apps, whereas they previously had to build custom implementations

for each and every device.

The Connect SDK currently supports webOS, Roku, Chromecast, Fire TV and older LG smart TVs. LG wants to add support for Apple TV and Samsung devices soon.

So why would LG build technology that makes it easier for developers to interact with Roku boxes or Amazon's Fire TV? The answer is simple: Because that's what's in our living rooms. "People don't just use devices from one company," Colin Zaho, LG director of product management, said. That's why developers shouldn't target just one device, or think in the framework of ecosystems that they need to target. "For the user, the ecosystem is what they have in their room," added Ohad Ben-Yoseph, LG's director of business development .

An unspoken benefit of these efforts is that developers also automatically target LG's

webOS TVs, something that might otherwise have been further down on their list, behind success stories like Chromecast and Roku. Next up for LG are integrations that will allow developers to target Apple TV and Samsung TVs, which should make the Connect SDK even more attractive.

Going open source to advance the industry

Of course, Apple has been very controlling about AirPlay, and Samsung has started to invest significant resources into its own multiscreen SDK. The question is: Will all of these vendors play ball, or are they going to try to shut out LG's SDK? Levak couldn't rule out the possibility that LG may run into issues with some of the vendors, but he was quick to add that the Connect SDK isn't circumventing anyone else's technologies. For example, it uses Google's Cast SDK to control Chromecast; it just doesn't force developers to implement Google Cast separately.

LG is also trying to ease concerns by open-sourcing the Connect SDK, and Zaho said that the company deliberately didn't stamp its brand all over it. Instead, it wants others to collaborate and work on common standards that help to bridge the gap between individual devices. "We want to drive the whole industry forward," he said.