

Microsoft: Silverlight More than a Flash

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Microsoft gives a name to its Flash-killer technology. The technology formerly known as WPF/E is now known as Silverlight.

Microsoft has given a go-to-market name for its cross-platform, cross-browser plug-in for delivering the next generation of user experiences and rich Internet applications for the Web. The technology formerly known as WPF/E is now known as Silverlight.

Microsoft announced Silverlight at the National Association of Broadcasters conference in Las Vegas on April 16. The NAB announcement highlights Silverlight uses for media users. The software company will announce further details about the technology at its own Mix07 conference, which starts at the end of April and runs through May 2 in Las Vegas.

Forest Key, a director of product management in the Microsoft Server and Tools Division, said Silverlight integrates with existing Web technologies and assets to provide higher quality experiences with lower costs for media delivery. In a briefing with eWEEK, Key demonstrated how Silverlight offers consistent experiences to both Mac and Windows users on a variety of browsers, including Internet Explorer, FireFox and Safari.

As for which platform Silverlight will support next, Key said, "Linux is an open question. We're looking at the desktops and browsers by volume. We want to put muscle behind supporting the bulk of the market." And Linux support is still under discussion, he said.

Silverlight uses WMV (Windows Media Video), Microsoft's implementation of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers VC-1 video standard, ensuring compatibility with the millions of hours of content already available on the Web. It also supports interactive video experiences from full-screen high-definition graphics to mobile scenarios.

Support for the VC-1 codec "means quite a number of surfaces support Silverlight, more than Flash," Key said, noting that Adobe's Flash - which is probably Silverlight's primary competition - has limited support for video.

"We have a unified codec that is open to the community," Key said. The VC-1 support means that content that is accessible via Silverlight on the PC is also accessible on the Xbox 360, on the Microsoft Zune, on HD systems, and on other devices or "surfaces" that support the codec, Key said.

Silverlight is based on the .Net Framework and enables developers and designers to use their existing skills to deliver media experiences and RIAs - which Microsoft refers to as "rich interactive applications" as opposed to "rich Internet applications" - for the Web with role-specific tools: Expression Studio for designers and Visual Studio for developers.

In addition to Silverlight, Microsoft announced Microsoft Expression Media Encoder, a feature of Microsoft Expression Media that enables rapid import, compression and Web publishing of digital video imported from a variety of popular formats, including AVI and QuickTime, into WMV. The encoder is capable of running on the desktop or a Windows Server.

Microsoft also announced hardware-accelerated video publishing using a Tarari appliance known as a Tarari Hardware-assisted Encoder

Accelerator. Using the Tarari appliance, Expression Media Encoder speeds up encode times by up to 15 times over software alone, Key said.

And the Silverlight technology will provide even greater scalability with Windows Server, code-named Longhorn, as compared with Windows Server 2003. Indeed, Longhorn is expected to deliver up to twice the scalability, Microsoft said. Moreover, Microsoft announced its IIS7 Media Pack, which adds features such as bit-rate throttling and others designed to further reduce the cost of media distribution. The IIS7 Media Pack will be a free download for Longhorn customers when it ships later this year, the company said.

Several media companies and solution providers have announced support for Silverlight, including Akamai, Brightcove, Eyeblander, Limelight, Major League Baseball, Netflix, Skinkers, Sonic Solutions, SyncCast, Tarari and Telestream. All have said they plan to deploy Silverlight-based experiences for their viewers and customers.

In a statement, Brightcove said: "Silverlight uses Windows Media Video (WMV) and brings the VC-1 video standard to the browser, a standard also used for HD DVD, Blu-ray Disc, Xbox 360 and Windows Vista. Brightcove already supports Flash Video 7 and 8 as well as WMV 9 for downloadable video. By adding Silverlight and VC-1 support, the Brightcove Internet TV service will provide media owners with another powerful Internet video output format - one that comes with robust content protection through a native DRM solution."

At the discretion of content providers, Silverlight will also deliver digital rights management support built on the recently announced Microsoft PlayReady content access technology - with feature parity on Windows and the Mac, Key said.

As for the name "Silverlight," Key said the name for the technology

formerly known as WPF/E "had to have very broad consumer resonance," as the target audience for the technology consists of consumers, media companies, and professional developers and designers.

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