Microsoft Tools Group Set to Tap 'MySpace Generation'

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The company's Developer Division is preparing to launch an effort to empower nonprogrammers to manipulate code and create mashups.

Microsoft is prepping a new service from its Developer Division to attract the MySpace.com generation.

In a little more than a month, Microsoft is slated to unveil a new effort from the company's Non-Professional Tools Group. John Montgomery, a program manager on the team, has been tasked with coming up with new ways to empower nonprogrammers to be able to customize their experiences on Microsoft's platform technologies.

That effort is coming to a head, officials of Microsoft, based in Redmond, Wash., told eWEEK.

"For people who don't necessarily know programming - you might call them the 'MySpace generation' of people…There are a lot of people who spend a lot of time online and they're not just consuming information," said S. "Soma" Somasegar, corporate vice president of Microsoft's Developer Division, in an interview with eWEEK.

For instance, Somasegar said, five years ago we lived in a world where some people would publish information and the vast majority of people said they wanted to consume information. "Today people are saying they want to consume information, but at the same time they want to create experiences that make sense to them and that they can share with friends

and family," he said. "MySpace page customization is all about that. People want to be able to express their individuality or their thoughts or their feelings online."

Indeed, Somasegar said he believes people want to be able to take a couple of different Web services and do mashups in a simple way. "People want to be able to take a game that they like, but maybe they don't like the sound effects and they want to tweak that," Somasegar said. "So people want to create things that are unique to them and they want to share them. But these people don't know programming. They may not want to know programming. We don't know how much they want to know about programming, but we do know they want to create these experiences. So we want to provide a tool or an environment" that would easily allow that, he said.

The goal of this latest effort is to enable everyday users to customize their experiences on the Microsoft platform, and to help them to easily go forward and learn more about programming if they so choose. The project will be another in Microsoft's growing list of initiatives designed to empower nonprogrammers to learn more about how to make software work the way they want it to. Microsoft also offers an Express entry-level line of its Visual Studio development tools, and recently announced a Beginner Developer Learning Center site that aims to teach nonprogrammers how to build applications.

"Our original vision behind this issue, and behind Express and the whole nonprofessional developer market, was there is this MySpace generation that exists and as they grow older and they enter the work force, they're going to demand the same level of customization out of their operating system and their applications that they currently see on MySpace and Facebook and all of the other tools they use," said Prashant Sridharan, product manager for Visual Studio at Microsoft. "They're not necessarily going to become programmers or computer scientists, but they're going

to expect that their operating system and their applications will be malleable to some extent."

So the genesis of Microsoft's Express tools is in line with the philosophy of empowering nonprofessionals, "but Express is really about programming. It's about learning the fundamentals of programming - even though some of those fundamentals are hidden from you; you still have to know those fundamentals of programming," Sridharan said.

That's really what the Beginner Developer Learning Center is all about - introducing people to those fundamentals of writing code that they may not be able to find elsewhere, Sridharan said. "And we've just published some 'For Dummies' books on the Beginner Developer Learning Center and we're bringing more content there. But there is a conceptual leap that you're going to - need to make in order to - get in and write VB - Visual Basic - or C# code. There are a lot of people that aren't going to make that conceptual leap."

Somasegar said if people know for a fact that they want to learn programming and they want to start coding, then Express is their best bet. And the Beginner Developer Learning Center provides information that gets you started with Express, he said.

However, it remains to be seen whether this is a continuum, Sridharan said. "Whether folks who start out building mashups will eventually graduate - to - becoming programmers remains to be seen," he said. "I think some subset of them will. But the vast majority of them will still be customizing their OS and their applications. And that's totally fine. Putting people in charge of the information that they get, and how they synthesize that information, I think is important."

Some of Microsoft's Nonprofessional Tools staff members will be at the upcoming Maker Faire event put on by O'Reilly Media's Make

Magazine. The event will take place May 19-29 San Mateo, Calif. Last year at the 2006 event, Microsoft put on a display about how companies were using Visual Studio Express in innovative ways. It is unclear whether this year Microsoft will show off anything related to this current project, but it seems unlikely, as Somasegar said the company would not be ready to talk about the project officially for another month or so.

The project, which Montgomery first blogged about in January of 2006 under the now-defunct code name of Tuscany, has big potential for Microsoft and possibly for the industry if it can help bring more people to the programmer ranks.

"It's huge in that there are more people that want to do this kind of thing," Somasegar said. "MySpace will tell you there are millions of people who do something or other with MySpace every day. To me, everybody who does that is a potential user of this - Microsoft project - . So from just a numbers perspective it's a huge deal. But a very small percentage of those people will graduate to the next level and say they want to learn programming. But for those people who do want to move into programming, we want to make the transition as easy as possible."

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