Open Source at Microsoft

Open in Action: Mozilla and Microsoft

In today's heterogeneous software ecosystem, operating systems and applications must work together as smoothly as possible. To ensure the most opportunities for its partners and customers, Microsoft® has built bridges with other software providers, including those who provide open-source products. A significant example of bridge building occurred recently when Sam Ramji, the director of the Open Source Software Lab (OSSL) at Microsoft, invited several open-source companies to Redmond to discuss interoperability with the Windows Vista™ operating system.

In October 2006, engineers from Mozilla responded to that invitation and visited the OSSL. The Mozilla team spent two days discussing a variety of interoperability issues with a number of Microsoft employees, including Hank Janssen, the group program manager of the OSSL. A contemporary description of the visit can be found at Hank's blog on Port25, the OSSL Web site.

In January, shortly before the roll out of the Windows Vista operating system, Mozilla engineers discovered that Windows Vista did not support Windows Media® Player on the Firefox Web browser. Because of the good relationship fostered by their earlier visit to Redmond, Mozilla engineers immediately contacted Sam and Hank to discuss the problem. Despite that Firefox is one of the most successful competitors to Windows® Internet Explorer®, Hank recognized that all customers would be best served if Windows Vista supported Firefox as fully as possible. He partnered with Eric Anderson and Thobias Jones of the Windows Media Player team to figure out what was wrong.

Because it was the month of the Windows Vista release to the public, the Windows Media Player team and all the engineering teams related to the launch of Windows Vista were extremely busy. Nonetheless, the Windows Media Player team identified the lack of Firefox support as a challenge that needed to be addressed. Hank coordinated their efforts with the Mozilla engineers to deploy a plug-in to resolve the issue. Hank's involvement was essential to avoid the legal and logistical issues that accompany joint efforts between OSSL and commercial software. "Hank and the OSSL were a huge resource for us," Eric recalls.

The diligent efforts of all the participants paid off, and on April 16, 2007, the plug-in was released through the Port25 Web site. Upon release, Mozilla added the link to their Firefox plug-ins page within minutes. Mozilla's ready cooperation and quick adoption of the plug-in was a testament to the good relationship that had developed between Mozilla and Microsoft over the course of the project.

The plug-in was very popular from the beginning. Hank recalls that downloads from Port25 "went off the chart," with over 972,000 downloads in the first three weeks and 1.5 downloads by the end of five weeks. According to Hank, "the project showed another level of interoperability and [Microsoft's] eagerness in working with the community." Sam called the total project a "stunning success" that demonstrated genuine commitment of Microsoft to interoperability and collaboration with the open-source community.

The plug-in, and, more importantly, the cooperation it represented, were well received by bloggers and members of the media. For example, at Yahoo! Tech, blogger Christopher Null wrote, "[t]he plug-in is an encouraging sign that Microsoft may be rethinking its ivory tower past and coming to grips with choice in the

industry." Scott M. Fulton, III, of BetaNews, described the collaboration with a colorful metaphor:

> If it seems cooler to you today in places where it's normally fairly warm, or even burning hot, there may be deeper forces at work than mere global warming changes in the atmosphere. The department of Microsoft's development team delegated to interoperability and open standards have released what might have seemed the least likely product ever to emerge from Redmond: an officially sanctioned Windows Media Player plug-in for Mozilla Firefox.

While the Firefox plug-in itself solved a relatively small problem, the cooperation it represented was a huge win for Microsoft and Mozilla. That cooperation continues. The OSSL is currently working with Mozilla engineers to examine other avenues of collaboration, including actively working with Novell and others to create an extension for Windows Cardspace™ and other identity selectors. Those efforts, and similar efforts between Microsoft and other open-source companies, will create more choices and more opportunity for all software consumers.

The efforts between Mozilla and Microsoft are a prime example of the cooperation that is necessary to ensure interoperability in today's software ecosystem. While Microsoft competes with open-source products, it also recognizes that sometimes it must build bridges with its competitors, whether proprietary or open source, to assure the best outcome for its customers.

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