Microsoft Media Player

Cutting Edge

- Industry Talk

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Microsoft's Media Player in Browser mode.

This month Dave Shapton questions Apple's corporate strategy and speculates on the possible implications behind Microsoft's desire to have their Media Player running on as many platforms as possible...

I really like Macs. I haven't got one at the moment because the work I do dictates that I use PCs, and I can't justify the expense of owning yet another computer. That doesn't stop me wanting one though, and I take no pleasure in seeing Apple's shares halve in value on the excessively volatile tech-stock market. So what's going wrong?

Looks Aren't Everything

Part of the problem is that the G4 chips in current Macs, which are undoubtedly very powerful, don't have high clock-speeds. If you know about processors then you know that clock speed isn't a very good indicator of the power of a chip anymore — especially with the G4 series. But not everyone knows that...

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The state of popular technical culture (as typified by Leonard Nimoy in the *Time* adverts and that Nice Lady In The Dress in the AOL commercials) is such that clock speed is perceived to be the absolute determinant of the processing power of a computer. So, on paper, the G4 seems to run at about half the speed of an Intel (dum Dum dum DUM!) Pentium III or AMD Athlon. I've no doubt that Motorola have faster chips in the pipeline (and faster pipelines in the chips!) but I would guess that G4s are a minor part of their business plan compared to their mobile phone products. But the clock-speed issue is just an irritation for Apple. Their biggest problem now is that Wall Street thinks they make desk ornaments.

Apple's G4 Cube — aesthetic appeal, but what about usability?

The G4 Cube is a thing of staggering beauty *and* it's a miracle of miniaturisation. Trouble is, so is every notebook computer as well —and they're a lot more useful. The truth is that the Cube, for all its aesthetic appeal, lacks memory, expansion (other than by means of the surface cracks reported in some Cubes), and indeed any reason to exist other than to look nice on an executive's desk. A typical Mac enthusiast is not going to buy a device that is so restricted. I suspect that the message the financial world is picking up is that Apple felt it necessary to look beyond electronics and computer logic to be unique, and that they, therefore, might as well be designing furniture. Of course, the financial world is wrong about this. But the lesson for Apple is to concentrate on its core competencies: designing computers that people like using first, and looking at second.

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Media Player 7 For The Mac

Microsoft have just announced that they are supporting the Mac platform with their *Media Player* 7. This is good news for Mac users because it looks as if a lot (possibly the majority) of legal music and video for download on the Internet is going to be in Windows Media format. In fact, it seems as if Microsoft intend to support as many platforms as they can. I recently saw a 'technology demonstration' of how video and audio can be sent wirelessly to a handheld computer using Wireless Ethernet. Microsoft had written a special version of its *Media Player* to support wireless playback of a Windows Media video file from a server.

The Philips DVD956 plays back CD audio, audio CD-R and audio CDR-W.

Under The Skin

The *Windows Media Player* has more to it than a selection of pretty 'skins'. In fact, I think there is a good chance that it may actually evolve into what you and I, in future, call, quite simply, Windows... That's quite a big claim, and I want to stress that the only basis I have for making it is my own fevered imagination. I've had a couple of meetings with the two top guys, Amir Majidimehr and Dave Fester, at Microsoft's Digital Media division recently and nothing that they've said at these meetings has suggested that *Media Player* is ever going to be anything but a means to play media. But there's a lot more to it than that. By way of explanation, let's have a closer look at what the *Media Player* actually is.

First of all, the *Player* is a bunch of codecs. A codec is a COder DECoder. It compresses media to fit it into a smaller space, and uncompresses it when you want to listen to it. To make or listen to an MP3 file you need an MP3 codec. The *Windows Media Player* has an MP3 decoder only and, of course, it has a Windows Media Audio codec. It's got various video codecs as well, including MPEG1 and *Windows Media* 7, an unofficial variation of MPEG4.

More Functions

Another function of *Windows Media Player* is to manage these codecs, even to the extent of connecting to the Internet to download any codec that it supports but which you don't currently have. It's also a file manager. It will search your computer for media files and arrange them in useful categories to help you find them or construct playlists. Of course, it's not the same kind of file manager as, say, Windows Explorer; but it's not fundamentally different logically. This is an important point. The way Microsoft *Media Player* organises media files in its

display bears no resemblance to the way files are arranged by windows in Windows Explorer, but neither method of categorising files reflects the way they are organised physically on a hard disk: they are both merely virtual views of data and, as such, are both potentially valid as a way of viewing and categorising files. I'll come back to this, but first we need to look at another obvious (but only when you think about it) ability which the Microsoft *Media Player* has. It's a web browser.

It's A Browser!

A browser! Isn't that what Internet Explorer is for? If you don't think it's a browser, just try clicking on the 'Media Guide' tab on the *Player*. It takes you to a Microsoft portal which points to Windows Media content on the Web. And, yes, it's a web page. So Microsoft *Media Player* is a browser. Why is this a big deal? Because browsers are the user interfaces for web-connected devices. They are rapidly becoming equivalent to what we think of as operating systems. You only have to look at the way Windows 98 is integrated with Internet Explorer to see the beginnings of this trend.

Now, you may be wondering how a browser could possibly pass for an operating system. And the answer is that, in the strict sense, it can't because the functions of the two are quite distinct. On the other hand, ever since the early PC-based Graphical User Interfaces, we've been forgetting what an operating system, as opposed to a GUI, actually does.

Now, I could be completely wrong here. But if I'm not, it makes for a fascinating scenario. Think about it: Microsoft is planning to have *Media Player* running on dozens of computing platforms. And when I say computing platform I don't just mean Macs and PCs or even Palm PCs and things we normally think of as computers. No, I mean everything that's going to have any sort of processing in it at all. That includes every type of radio, TV, music player and even domestic 'white products' like fridges and cookers. It's not that I find multimedia 'white goods' particularly fascinating: it's that all of these things will have wireless connections to the Internet — or whatever the Internet turns into — and the organisation that will be able to monitor the way we use all of them will, via the *Media Player*, be Microsoft. Think of the commercial value for them in that.

The Key Player?

I find all of this an interesting possibility. There are other possible outcomes, though, and here are just a couple of them. It may be that the Windows Media format becomes the dominant way to exchange computer audio. That doesn't necessarily mean that you need the full version of Microsoft *Media Player* to reproduce it. Most of the MP3 players that also play Windows Media Audio simply have the WMA codec in firmware or Compact Flash memory. But as the processing power and display capability of these devices grows I can see that they will need better user interfaces with the capability of the Microsoft *Media Player*.

It's also possible that other codecs might become dominant. There are some good ones out there: Sony's ATRAC (most familiar in Minidisc guise) and MPEG4's AAC. And then there's the outcome that *I'd* like to see, which is that every device can handle every codec, to the extent that we don't actually have to think about codecs at all when we play music — on any device. But even if any of the above possibilities actually happen, *Windows Media Player* is capable of handling multiple codecs — so it could still end up as the application orchestrating all of this...

The Future's DVD...

Here's a thought. Soon, you'll be able to buy DVD players in supermarkets for £99. That's the same price as audio CD players. And, of course, all DVD players can play audio CDs (some can play CD-ROMs with MP3 files as well!). I went to a DVD industry conference recently and, reading between the lines, it seems as if consumer-electronics manufacturers are simply going to abandon production of audio CD players as soon as DVD players reach price parity with them. Even mini hi-fi systems are appearing with multi-channel audio. Of course, there will still be some dedicated audio CD players: CD Walkmans, for example; and Sony's Super Audio CD format may get a toehold in the market. But for the rest of us, we'll be buying DVD players from now on because it makes no sense at all to buy one thing that plays video and audio and then get another that can only play audio. Especially when (eventually) DVD audio material is commonplace. Well, that's the hardware side of it.

Now, isn't this a fantastic opportunity for record companies to do something about the MP3 debacle? Over the last 15 years or so, the amount of money spent by record companies on supporting and promoting new bands has steadily diminished. One significant factor in this has been, ironically, the rise of the CD format. Tony Blair is fond of saying that you can't spend the same pound twice; but if you're a record company you can make money twice from the same master tapes by re-releasing them on CD. When you've run out of whole albums to re-release in the digital domain you can make up compilations. This is nice business for the record companies and would probably continue to be so (given their seemingly endless imagination for concocting pointless compilation themes) were it not for the fact that we can all make our own compilations now, direct from the Internet, or by using domestic CD copiers and CD-R drives.

It seems to me that the record companies should seize the opportunity presented to them by the imminent ubiquity of DVD players, and release video versions of their new and old material — and (better sit down if you're a record company executive) charge the same as for audio CDs. Why would they want to do this: passing over an opportunity to charge more for the video version? Because if they can create a marketplace where an audio-only track is regarded as an inferior product, which nevertheless costs as much as the audio-and-video version, then the audio and video version will become the *de-facto* choice for most people — and it takes ages to download video over the Internet (for the benefit of the record companies, I'll explain it slowly: if it takes too long to download a product from the Internet, it might encourage people to go out and *buy* it). By the way, if you think I'm being a bit harsh on the music industry, it's because they seem to understand as much about the way people use the Internet as a hedgehog crossing the road does about cars.

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