

An up-to-date overview of free software and its makers

# PROJECTS ON THE MOVE

Finally there's a free alternative to the proprietary Flash on the web. Unfortunately, it implements Microsoft technology whose software patents might render the free Moonlight license useless.

BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER

Microsoft and Novell formed an alliance with the aim of establishing a Flash alternative for Linux. After one year of cooperation between developers from both companies, a beta version of the Silverlight free implementation, Moonlight, is now available. Many members of the Linux community suspect that the Moonlight Linux implementation [1] is being used to establish Microsoft's Silverlight [2] technology on a cross-platform basis, thereby infiltrating the software freedom fighters' fortress. In the eyes of critics, Novell – distributor of SUSE Linux – is entering into a pact with Microsoft to assert itself against its competitors in the Linux world.

The Microsoft developers hope that Microsoft Silverlight will replace the

Flash format as a global standard for complex, interactive web content. The proprietary browser plugin by Adobe is like a red flag to a bull for many Linux users. Because the source code is not available, developers and users of the free operating system have been forced to rely on Adobe providing updates. In the past, Adobe has been reticent with respect to timeliness and completeness.

## Dangers and Benefits

Silverlight and Moonlight currently offer very little more than Flash to users. They interact with the web user, draw vector graphics, access sound and video devices, and support multimedia streaming. Because of the major similarities, Microsoft's marketers have found it difficult to promote their own technology's benefits.

Moonlight, however, does score points on the installation side. In contrast to Adobe's Flash, installing the browser plugin should not pose any serious

problems to newcomers because you can download a prebuilt version of the plugin from the project website and click to install (Figure 1). Thus far, Moonlight supports only Linux systems using Firefox, although the makers claim that it will support OpenSolaris and the Konqueror and Opera browsers in the near future.

For licensing reasons, the binary package leaves out all multimedia codecs, thus seriously limiting its own functionality. However, users can install the codecs free of charge and then update automatically after that. On request, the program will download the resources needed to play most formats directly from the Microsoft server; however, Microsoft only guarantees Novell users the possibility to use Moonlight free of charge. You can instead use the free FFmpeg codecs as an alternative if you build the plugin yourself [3]. The dearth of web pages that rely on Silver-



Ilija Mašić, Fotofila



**Figure 1: The free Silverlight implementation, Moonlight, is available in pre-built and source code versions - this gives users a degree of independence from the manufacturer's Linux policy.**

light is hardly an incentive to use Moonlight. The dominance of Flash technology has forced even critics to deploy Flash plugins if they want to use popular pages such as YouTube, for example.

In contrast to this, web surfers currently aren't likely to run across pages that force them to install Silverlight. Moonlight restricts your options even more as there are some Silverlight pages that it doesn't actually support.

Silverlight's potential is causing quite a stir of debates in the free software community whose members resent Flash's dominance. On the other hand, opposing Microsoft is part of the community's cultural heritage, which leads to what seems to be an insurmountable dilemma. Moonlight's opponents point to the dangers of software patents, just like in the Mono debate [4]. Mono and Moonlight supporters argue that these technologies might be from Microsoft, but they are available under a free license, in contrast to proprietary counterparts such as Flash and, until recently, Java. Novell developer Miguel de Icaza [5] describes Microsoft as a cooperative partner in this "historic cooperation" [6]. Besides consultancy services from Silverlight developers to Moonlight developers, Microsoft offers access to the specifications and to a test suite. The developers of the free Flash variant, Gnash [7], can only dream of such potent support from Adobe.

Silverlight gives open source programmers a new technology for developing web applications without having to rely on proprietary, commercial software as in the case of Flash. This might tilt the

balance in favor of Silverlight rather than Flash and lead to rapid growth of Silverlight deployment on the web while at the same time boosting unpopular multimedia formats such as WMV.

This is where Microsoft critics chime in. They view software patents in particular as a backdoor that allows the owners to break free licenses in a court of law. Microsoft holds patents for Silverlight just like for Dotnet [8] and could use them to demand license fees for Moonlight, which Linux distributors consider to be free software. Additionally, Moonlight integrates proprietary multimedia codecs and there are no guarantees that Microsoft will continue to allow their free use in the future.

## Distrust

Microsoft opponents such as Matt Asay [9] and Chromatic [10] refer to this strategy as one of poisoning or polluting the Linux desktop. Microsoft does not contribute new functionality without embedding components that are patented or licensed. This helps to establish new technologies that users can't or do not want to do without. If Microsoft was then to establish legal obstacles, it would force Moonlight users back to Windows. And this would give Microsoft a tool against its free competitors who refuse to sell out on licensing issues.

Distrust of Microsoft is rooted in the company's aggressive anti-Linux stance in the past. Tirades from the software giant's management and Linux prevention strategies such as "Embrace, Extend and Extinguish" from the Halloween documents [11] are still not forgotten. And more recently, Microsoft attempted to sabotage free standards such as the Open Document Format.

In contrast to this, Adobe has not set itself apart as an opponent of free software. Although the Flash manufacturers are very active when it comes to software patents, Roy Schostewitz from the Boycott Novell [12] blog does not view

them as direct competitors to Linux; this means that Adobe has little motivation to use its patents against Linux. In contrast to Adobe, Schostewitz no longer trusts Novell because Novell signed a cooperation agreement with Microsoft in 2006 to provide support to heterogeneous Linux and Windows environments and assure customers of both companies mutual protection against patent litigation.

## No Complaints

Some free software activist still view Microsoft as the arch enemy and fear any kind of cooperation with Redmond. As a consequence, they view Microsoft's competitors, such as Sun, as natural allies. In doing so, they overlook the fact that Microsoft, Sun, and Novell are all ruled by the same economic principles, that is, whether the company sees Linux as an opportunity or a danger for its own business. Free software with Microsoft technology rather than proprietary software from another vendor sounds reasonable under the circumstances. This said, the other camp is right to warn users about patent traps. The dilemma results from the fact that whether software patents really void free software licenses remains uncertain. Software patents and the lack of legal certainty that they provoke are the problem. ■

## INFO

- [1] Moonlight: <http://www.monoproject.com/Moonlight>
- [2] Silverlight: <http://silverlight.net>
- [3] FFMpeg: <http://ffmpeg.mplayerhq.hu>
- [4] Mono: <http://monoproject.com>
- [5] Miguel de Icaza's blog: <http://tirania.org/blog>
- [6] Microsoft/Novell Collaboration on Silverlight: <http://tirania.org/blog/archive/2007/Sep05.html>
- [7] Gnash: <http://www.gnu.org/software/gnash>
- [8] Dotnet: <http://www.microsoft.com/net>
- [9] Matt Asay's blog: <http://asay.blogspot.com>
- [10] Chromatic's blog: <http://news.cnet.com/openroad>
- [11] Halloween documents: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft\\_Halloween\\_documents\\_leak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft_Halloween_documents_leak)
- [12] Boycott Novell: <http://boycottnovell.com>