

Microsoft Tool Lets the Masses Create Apps, Web Pages

Microsoft has announced the alpha version of Popfly, its new application creation, mashup enabling tool and social networking software for nonprogrammers.

Popfly consists of two parts: Popfly Creator, which is a set of online visual tools for building Web pages and mashups; and Popfly Space, which is an online community of creators where you can host, share, rate, comment and even remix creations from other Popfly users.

"There's an obvious desire or need for people to want to create online applications, but it's too difficult today. So our goal is to democratize development," said Dan Fernandez, Microsoft's lead project manager for Visual Studio Express, of the Popfly project.

In an interview with eWEEK last month, S. "Soma" Somasegar, Microsoft's corporate vice president for developer tools, said what is now known as Popfly is Microsoft's attempt to tap the "MySpace generation."

Both Visual Studio Express and Popfly are free technologies from Microsoft. While Microsoft's Visual Studio Express tool is for people who want to and, in fact, must learn to code to use the product, Popfly requires no prior knowledge of programming.

Instead, Popfly is based on the concept of "Blocks," akin to Lego blocks, which users can snap together to create applications and build Web sites to share with others, Fernandez said.

For instance, a Baltimore Ravens fan could put together a Ravens fan Web page by taking a SoapBox block and dynamically pulling video from SoapBox, getting pictures from Flickr and adding news feeds from the Baltimore Ravens' own Web site, Fernandez said. "And you'll never have to write a line of code to do it," he added.

Blocks are chunks of code that wrap complex operations, like retrieving data from a Web site or displaying an animated slide show so that others can easily reuse that block, Fernandez said. And Blocks enable Popfly users to do things such as get their photos from Live Spaces or Flickr and visually display them using Silverlight blocks like a slide show or an interactive photo carousel, all without writing code, he said.

"We'll ship with about 40 Blocks at launch, and our goal is to have the community extend them," Fernandez said.

Popfly is Microsoft's first technology based on the company's Silverlight cross-browser, cross-platform technology for building RIAs (rich internet applications).

Formerly known by the code name "Springfield," Popfly enables users to create Silverlight applications, HTML/JavaScript applications and "regular old Web pages, and with Popfly Explorer you can share practically anything, like a Windows app, an Xbox game, anything peer-to-peer," Fernandez said.

Popfly Explorer is a Visual Studio 2005 add-in that enables users to create, modify and share Visual Studio solutions from their Popfly Space. "You'll know which Blocks are from your friends," Fernandez said.

"There's very much a social aspect to this, where users are rating other applications. It's all about self-expression and making the user the star.

"What YouTube did for video is what we want to do for apps," Fernandez said.

Popfly features four basic categories of Blocks: data services, logic blocks, transformation blocks and

presentation blocks, the company said.

The underlying technology that ties the Blocks together is JavaScript, Fernandez said. Popfly is built on Silverlight 1.0, he said. "And for reference purposes, JavaScript is the most popular language among the nonprofessional programmer set."

Indeed, said Fernandez, "we have the ASP.Net AJAX [Asynchronous JavaScript and XML] client library built into the product. And further, you can use any third-party AJAX library" to build Popfly blocks.

For example, Fernandez said the Script.aculo.us library of AJAX controls can run on Popfly. "We have examples that show the Script.aculo.us library running unmodified on Popfly." With that kind of flexibility and support for basic JavaScript, "Popfly becomes the playground for the AJAX developer," Fernandez said.

Although the technology is aimed at nonprogrammers, it also enables professionals or expert programmers to go under its covers and create blocks and run and share applications with others.

"People are already showing that they can go beyond the typical," Fernandez said. "This is our first commercial Silverlight application, and it shows how deep the power is in that platform."

Microsoft on May 18 placed Popfly into a private alpha testing stage that is open only to invitees. However, the company will be demonstrating Popfly at the Maker Faire mega science fair event held May 19-20 at the San Mateo Fairgrounds in San Mateo, Calif. Fernandez said the event organizers expect at least 40,000 people to attend.

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