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By: Marius Oiaga, Technology News Editor

IE9 HTML5 Video VP8 Codec Support via Windows

â€œWhen it comes to HTML5, weâ€™re all in,â€• says Dean Hachamovitch

Internet Explorer 9
Microsoft

Microsoft is not about to let itself be outbid at the HTML5 support poker table, especially as the company is already "all in." Yes, Internet Explorer 9 will support the new VP8 codec that was introduced on May 19th, 2010, via the WebM, an open web media project backed by Google, Mozilla, Opera and many others. In this context, users will have an alternative to H.264 when it comes down to HTML5 video playback. But, with WebM and the successor of IE8, there's a small catch, albeit perfectly reasonable, namely the fact that users will need a VP8 codec installed in Windows in order to view content in Internet Explorer 9.

"In its HTML5 support, IE9 will support playback of H.264 video as well as VP8 video when the user has installed a VP8 codec on Windows," Dean Hachamovitch, general manager, Internet Explorer, stated. "As we said at MIX recently, when it comes to HTML5, we're all in. This level of commitment applies to the video codecs that IE9 will support as well."

HTML5 support does imply continuous commitment and adaptability efforts, especially with core aspects of the specification still up in the air, such as the video format. And while all browser vendors have fallen in line and have indicated strong support for HTML5, the fact of the matter is that a consensus has yet to be reached on what format to be associated with the < video > tag. As VP8 might appear to be the holy grail of HTML5 Video, the question you should ask yourselves is whether WebM will be able to deliver on all its promises.

"We are strongly committed to making sure that in IE9 you can safely view all types of content in all widely used formats. At the same time, Windows customers, developers, and site owners also want assurances that they are protected from IP rights issues when using IE9," Hachamovitch added. "We have technical specifics to work through. We want to be clear about our intent to support the same markup in the open and interoperable web, and to do so in a manner consistent with our broad view of safety and security."

Safety and security might sound like forced arguments to dodge integrating VP8 into IE9, but users must remember the fact that Microsoft has a responsibility larger than that of all other browser vendors to its users, simply because Internet Explorer's market share is still dwarfing that of rivals. WebM is an excellent initiative, there's little doubt about this aspect, however, there's still much to do until VP8 is established as a truly open and free video format.

Patent free

One of the most important hurdles that VP8 needs to pass, regardless of the fact that it is advertised as available under a BSD-style, royalty-free license, is related to intellectual property. There's absolutely no guarantee that, in the coming months or years, patent holders won't go after WebM for IP infringement, and demand royalties.And paying royalties is one thing if you're Google and have 5% of the browser market with Chrome, and a whole other thing if you're Microsoft and ship IE with every copy of Windows. There are in fact voices pointing to the similarities between VP8 and H.264, and, of course, the latter requires royalties for its usage.

Microsoft is extremely right to play the waiting game and see whether patent issues arise before fully jumping on the VP8 bandwagon. Of course, Google could indemnify all adopters of VP8 to protect them from patent-violation risks, losses, etc. In fact, if the Mountain View-based company is so sure that VP8 is patent free, why doesn't it go ahead and make it clear that it would assure all adopters it would cover eventual losses due to infringement?

Security, stability and reliability

Whether VP8 indeed offers better performance and quality compared with H.264 and Theora, for example, is yet to be demonstrated as far as I'm concerned. I'm willing to bet that the codec doesn't beat H.264 on an HTM5 hardware accelerated browser, but that's my gamble, I guess. Another problem in addition to potential patent issues is related to security, stability and reliability.

Obviously, despite having been developed by On2 Technologies, a company with a long tradition in building video codecs (acquired by Google in 2010), VP8 is still a young codec. As such, problems are expected to appear. How will the companies backing VP8 and WebM, but especially Google, deal with problems as they are reported, especially in the context of the following statement from the project: "The VP8 and WebM specifications as released on May 19th, 2010 are final."

"We want to be clear about our intent to support the same markup in the open and interoperable web. We are strongly committed to making sure that in IE9 you can safely view all types of content in all widely used formats. When it comes to video and HTML5, we're all in. In its HTML5 support, IE9 will support playback of H.264 video as well as VP8 video when the user has installed a VP8 codec on Windows," Hachamovitch added.

Internet Explorer 9 (IE9) Platform Preview 2 Build 1.9.7766.6000 is available for download here.