

FOMS encourages W3C to undertake patent search around Ogg Theora

FOMS stands for “Foundations of Open Media Software” and is a workshop facilitating the future of open media technology. FOMS is a meeting place for core developers of open media systems aiming to identify key issues in open media, and to design and create solutions.

FOMS 2008, held in January 2008 in Melbourne, Australia, had a particular focus on two topics: free codecs for the future World Wide Web around HTML5, and a simple cross-platform PCM audio API for applications.

The cross-platform PCM audio API was started at FOMS 2007 and is now known as libsydney. Its design progressed at FOMS 2008 and it will be used as the native PCM audio API within PulseAudio – a next generation sound server that is shipping as the audio architecture of Fedora 8. Ubuntu, OpenSUSE and Mandriva are also including PulseAudio with their next releases so we expect PulseAudio and through it libsydney to become part of “best practices” of Linux audio.

A substantial part of the list of attendees of FOMS reads like a who’s-who of Xiph.Org, a non-profit corporation dedicated to open media codecs and applications. So it should come as no surprise that much of the Web video discussion centred on the Xiph-recommended codecs, the container format, metadata standards, and in particular the discussion around the usability of Ogg Theora/Vorbis for HTML5 web video.

While the Xiph.Org community believes that Theora and its predecessor On2 Technology’s VP3 have undergone sufficient analysis to be judged patent unencumbered, this view does not seem to be shared by some of the browser vendors that are involved in the specification of HTML5. They made it very clear that they would not support Ogg Theora as a baseline video codec for HTML5 mostly out of fear of submarine patents. As a consequence, Ogg Theora was removed from the HTML5 draft specification late last year, leaving the HTML5 video tag without an interoperable video format.

This unacceptable situation was one of the issues under discussion at the recent W3C video workshop held in San Jose in December. It became clear that there is not enough documentation available with information about the patent situation around Theora.

In light of this, the FOMS participants are encouraging the W3C as an independent body to undertake an analysis of the patent situation around Theora – a report that Xiph.Org would not be able to fund or execute without being taken as prejudiced.

Christopher ‘Monty’ Montgomery, key developer of Vorbis and Xiph.Org director, stated that “We would rather know about patents that Theora is infringing on than continuing to have to deal with FUD arguments. As it stands,

we firmly believe that Theora is not infringing on any patents. But we are open to accommodate the risk perception of the larger browser vendors.”

Timothy B. Terriberry, key developer of Theora, added: “Should the W3C find out about patents that Theora infringes on, we will do our best to work around them or reach accommodation with the involved parties.”

Another open codec that was represented at FOMS and is a potential alternative to Theora as a baseline video codec for HTML5 is the BBC’s Dirac codec. It is based on the newer Wavelet transform and has undergone rigorous patent analysis by the BBC. The SMPTE standards body is currently in the process of standardising a subset of Dirac as their new VC-2 video codec.

The FOMS attendees have set themselves a large collection of community goals to be achieved within the year – see the Website for these:

<http://www.annodex.org/events/foms2008/>. An impressive number of goals from the 2007 workshop have been met, ranging from a BSD–licensed sample–rate conversion library to a simple javascript library that enables Content Management Systems to support Ogg Theora inside browsers with different capabilities.



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