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I'm no Microserf, and I can cite in chapter and verse why the guys in Redmond have blown major opportunities in their history. Remember the multiple mis-steps with MSN (and the even more dreadful concept behind MSNBC), or the deeply failed Web TV? I am still confused as to what Windows 98SE was all about, and why you can't easily rotate text in Word. They never made it off the ground with Microsoft Money, and still can't seem to produce a simple graphics program more sophisticated than Paint.

Nor was I very impressed when Microsoft first introduced its first generation streaming video product called Silverlight. With Adobe Flash and Quicktime dominating the web scene, it seemed that there was little that Microsoft had to offer the marketplace that could not be more easily found in products already in widespread use.

I was wrong.

Silverlight is, in fact, somewhat revolutionary in the evolving world of streaming media. And while it may have had a slow start, it is quickly gaining ground in a world where streaming movies and television programs for multiple formats (from big screen TV to desktop PC to 2×2" smartphone screens) are quickly dominating the use of the Internet. Silverlight 4, released to developers in April of this year, expands the number of controls and platforms available. And, more to the point, it allows the rendering of HTML inside a Silverlight package.

I don't want to get goofy technical about this, because we don't need to and because the video experts are much better at this than I am. Just remember this: the present state of the art for streaming video used in IPTV (that is, television over the Internet) was based on a simple little platform called UDP — the User Datagram Platform. UDP was an early method of sending messages, called datagrams, from one computer

to another. Unfortunately, this became widely used despite such major weaknesses

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Silverlight allows for reliable streaming using TCP/IP over the Internet that also encompasses HTML and other core internet technologies. And it is gaining on the market leader Flash, which uses less IP-centric technologies like vector and raster graphic rendering. And Silverlight's ZIP and XML standards-based accessibility contrasts with that of Flash, which uses specialized non-standardized formats for which specifications are only available from Adobe. Finally, it is notable that Microsoft has not bludgeoned the marketplace with this product, but rather produced steady enhancements while wooing customers to it.

If you go online and look up Silverlight, you will find scores of comments to the effect that if Flash is around, you can safely skip Silverlight. I disagree. People who believe that Silverlight is simply another graphics format were not paying attention when Netflix selected this platform for its streaming of movies and television. Or when the Country Music Association last year picked Silverlight as its choice to spiff up its features on some 90 major artists. You see, Silverlight is not the next generation of old-style web graphics.

It is the next generation of Internet based movies and television.

Which is why it matters.

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