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Microsoft's Mesh mess

Company may not be able to afford a true mesh model

AT THE END OF APRIL, Microsoft made two major online services announcements, both focused on initiatives intended to address data accessibility pain points by knitting together the devices you own with Web-based services that Microsoft provides and promises to maintain.

What should be giving users and developers pause, however, is that only one of these two big bulletins, that of Microsoft's Live Mesh service, was a birth announcement. The other one, concerning the now-defunct MSN Music service, was an obituary.

Microsoft had already closed the virtual doors of the MSN Music service, but the Redmond giant had continued to maintain the servers that keep track of customers' music purchases and handle DRM (digital rights management) reauthorizations as these customers move their tracks between the computers and devices through which they wish to access them.

When the end of summer rolls around, the online service part of the equation will go dark, leaving Microsoft's music customers with a farewell and a list of workarounds that customers had turned to Microsoft's service

to avoid in the first place.

Now Microsoft Live Mesh comes along, promising to enable customers to access their information in multiple places and on multiple devices without having to worry about messy workarounds such as synchronization.

The fact that Live Mesh represents a much larger and more game-changing initiative for Microsoft may appear to portend a more

will fall to other, truly decoupled rival initiatives, because a mesh that's anchored to Windows PCs alone (as the current preview version of Live Mesh is) isn't a mesh at all.

However, it's not clear whether Microsoft can afford for Live Mesh to succeed in this way. The company's financial health, which is wrapped up almost entirely in sales of fat clients running the latest Windows



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auspicious future for the service than the fate that befell MSN Music, but the opposite may prove true.

For Live Mesh to fulfill its stated goals and to live up to its name, particular devices or client platforms must fade into the background in favor of a reality in which one's data is equally accessible on any platform—including those for which Microsoft does not collect a license fee.

If Microsoft fails to deliver a mesh that's truly decoupled from Windows and Office, then the Live Mesh initiative

operating system with the latest version of Microsoft Office, is completely at odds with the mesh model.

If Microsoft does deliver a mesh that works well on all desktops, notebooks and mobile devices, I don't know if Microsoft could absorb the hit to its core moneymakers. As soon as Windows and Office cease to matter, so too will Microsoft cease to matter—at least in its current form. 

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