

OpenID still relevant as Microsoft aims for dominance with Windows Live ID

OpenID is here to stay, and more and more sites are adopting it as time goes on. It matters to most of the world to have an online identity when on the internet, but using an ID called "Windows Live ID" is like wearing an "I love Microsoft" sticker everywhere you go.

By Troy Unrau | Last updated August 21, 2007 12:33 AM CT

Microsoft had previously announced the Windows Live ID, but has now gone one step further by attempting to make it a truly open system which allows third party websites to use it for authentication. While I'm sure that a few websites will bite on this offer, simply because it's Microsoft, it should be known that there is an open source inter-website identification system already in place for many parts of the Internet. OpenID is here to stay, and more and more sites are adopting it as time goes on. It matters to most of the world to have an online identity when on the internet, but using an ID called "Windows Live ID" is like wearing an "I love Microsoft" sticker everywhere you go.

OpenID is primarily used for authentication, which means that you can use an OpenID account to log onto one of over 4500 websites already using the system. It is estimated that over 120 million Internet users have OpenID accounts, but the truth is that most users are not even aware of it. OpenID is a decentralized system, meaning that the authentication is not stored in one single place, so in order to get an OpenID, you need to sign up for an account at some website that supports it.

The mechanism is very difficult to illustrate without an example, so I'll use LiveJournal and WordPress since they are two of the bigger websites that support OpenID. Suppose a user has a LiveJournal account, but not a WordPress account. They visit their friend's blog, which happens to live on WordPress, and they'd like to post a comment. They can use their LiveJournal OpenID to log in to WordPress by simply providing the address of their LiveJournal website. (For example: I would enter *troy-at-kde.livejournal.com* would be my OpenID since troy-at-kde is my LiveJournal username.) Once you enter your OpenID URL, a new window pops up from the LiveJournal website asking you if you will permit WordPress to use your ID, as well as asking for your LiveJournal password (assuming you are not already signed in).

This mechanism allows you to take your identity from one website and use it on another, which is a huge advantage in the so-called Web 2.0 world. Many companies are already on board, including some bigger names like AOL — most AOL users are simply not aware that they can sign onto websites using an ID that looks like *openid.aol.com/screenname* where ever OpenID is accepted. Microsoft even announced earlier this year that they would be working on OpenID (version 2) support within Windows Vista — whether that still happens or if they squash it in favour of promoting their Windows Live ID instead is yet to be seen. If they manage to go through with the announced OpenID support, they should be applauded for adopting an open standard for once. Maybe they can make a habit of it.

Serving the technologist for 1.0756×10^{-1} centuries