

Open source Java tools win over game developer

by Neil Sutton

For bingo application developer Parlay Entertainment Ltd., Java is one gamble that has paid off.

Oakville, Ont.-based Parlay has been using Java as a development environment since 1996. The online gambling industry has practically standardized on Java tools since then, which makes life a lot simpler for Parlay, according to its chief technology officer Perry Malone.

In the 1990s a lot of Internet games were built using languages like PERL, "whereas Java gave us that thing called the applet," said Malone, who was one more than 500 developers to attend the Toronto stop of Sun Microsystems' Code Maneuvers 05, a Java programming road show, on Wednesday.

Major portals like Yahoo! use J2EE (Java 2 Enterprise Edition) as their back end, said Malone, which makes Parlay's Java- and Flash-based bingo games an easier sell. The company has a licensing agreement in place with Yahoo!'s U.K. operation, yahoo.co.uk.

"Because we had the legacy applications written in Java, the whole .Net thing came after, so it would have been a major switch for us," said Malone, referring to Microsoft's development platform, which competes with Sun's Java. "Had we made that switch a couple of years ago, it wouldn't have worked out as well for us."

Parlay has opted to stay on Java tools partly because of Sun's embrace of open source, said Malone. Parlay recently completed a migration of all of its Web applications to Sun tools, making them standard through its 45-person organization. "That's helped us leverage development and minimize overhead," he said. "We've won deals because we're open. Others aren't."

Sang Shin, a Sun Java evangelist who gave the keynote address at the developer confab, said that Java in its current iteration "is probably as close to open source as it could be."

The company has walked the line between open source and proprietary tools in recent years. At the 2004 JavaOne conference in San Francisco, for example, Sun president Jonathan Schwartz committed to opening up the company's Looking Glass interfaces. But he also had some reservations about open source and what would happen to Java if it became "forked" like Linux, which is available in multiple distributions.

"If you talk to enterprise customers, they like the principle of open source yet they have a great concern over who's going to provide the compatibility on all these different versions," said Shin in an interview following his keynote. "That's what we have to be concerned with as well. Compatibility is one of the (biggest) value-adds that Java provides. We're actually trying to balance both sides."

Java's compatibility has helped drive Parlay's software into multiple markets and opened up opportunities

that may not have been available in a purely proprietary environment, said Malone.

"I use the term 'roll your own,' he said. "You can create what you need or you can adopt what's there. A lot of the time it's easier to take the tools that are out there."

Malone said Parlay can take advantages of resources available through Tomcat, Apache and other aspects of open source while still keeping the firm on a Sun infrastructure.

"I'm not saying open source is the way to go, but we benefit from the open source community," he said. "So I'm glad (Sun) is not trying to squash it, like other groups might have done."

Malone said that his firm is in a growth phase, riding the popularity of online casino games. Poker may have kick-started the trend, "but what we're finding is that everyone is looking for the next (big game)." Popular sites like Partypoker.com have already laid claim to the online poker market and "people are now looking for other opportunities."

Parlay has added features like chat windows to its bingo engine, allowing players to talk to one another or even start up side games via a moderator called a chat master. The company has also branched into other casino games like slots, blackjack and craps.

Shin said he's comfortable with the performance of Java but Sun still has some work to do on the usability end. "It has been a bit complex up to this point," he admitted. "Moving forward, we want to make sure developing applications using Java is as easy as possible while at the same time providing all the features."

Last fall Sun rolled the dice on J2SE (Java 2 standard edition) version 5.0, which included built-in diagnostic tools and other enhancements to allow developers to write applications more quickly. Its enterprise counterpart, J2EE 5.0, will be released in the second half of this year.