Is Microsoft Stifling Java?

By Khan Klatt
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Sun sued Microsoft and won its case in court. Microsoft was compelled to ship either a compliant & un-poisoned Java implementation or none at all. It chose to ship none.

Recent visitors to Sun's Web site were greeted by a large graphic that said "XPerience This! New Java plug-in for Windows brings your browser back to the leading edge."

If you haven't been following the Sun-Microsoft Java dispute over the past few years, here's a quick refresher to bring you up-to-date on why that plug-in became necessary in the first place.

Where Do You Want To Go Today

Back when Microsoft's slogan was "Where Do You Want To Go Today?" it seemed the software giant was trying to play nice. It licensed Spyglass Mosaic software in order to bring Internet Explorer to the market, and it also licensed Java to extend the benefits of Sun's technology to Windows computers.

What wasn't quite so clear at the time was that Microsoft apparently licensed Java to execute its embrace, extend and extinguish strategy. In other words, the company would license Java, make incompatible modifications to it, then watch it wither on the vine as the software giant promoted its own programming language instead.

That strategy likely would have succeeded in destroying Java. This is because one of the key benefits of Java is that it was designed to be "write once, run anywhere." But you can't usually buy Windows software and run it, for example, on a Macintosh, or vice versa.

Fight Fire with Fire

Java eliminates that situation by implementing a "runtime environment" that allows all Java code to run unmodified, regardless of whether the computer runs Linux, Macintosh or Windows. This is a panacea of sorts for programmers because it means software they write in Java can run on any computer, thereby opening up the marketplace to all computer users, regardless of their operating system.

As applications become available for any operating system, consumers can choose to run any operating system on their computer, whether it be Linux, BeOS, MacOS or Windows.

Poisoning the Well

Fortunately, Sun was careful in its licensing agreements to ensure that Microsoft couldn't poison the well. According to Sun's license, Microsoft could not legally build incompatibilities into its Java software, such as its J++ development environment or the Java runtime environment that shipped with Windows.

In the end, Sun sued Microsoft and won its case in court. Microsoft was compelled to ship either compliant and un-poisoned Java implementations or none at all. Once Microsoft lost the suit, it decided to take its ball and go home. If the software giant couldn't pursue its strategy, there was apparently no chance it would ship its products with Java.

This move left Sun in a difficult, though not impossible, position. Windows has a stranglehold on the consumer operating system market, and the only way Java could succeed would be to ensure that the goal of hardware independence was preserved. To save Java, Sun wrote the necessary software to provide a clean implementation of Java for Windows.

You Can't Go There

With its recent announcement, Sun has come to the rescue of Windows XP users who want to have the richest possible experience on the Internet. Meanwhile, it seems to me that Microsoft would rather give its customers an inferior experience than ship a Java implementation that ensures the long-term success of that platform. That is why Windows users must turn to Sun for third-party software to make them first-class citizens on the Web.

During its antitrust trial, Microsoft's mantra was "freedom to innovate." Apparently, when it comes to Java, Microsoft wants "freedom to stifle" as well.

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