November 27, 2001

Droplets, NIC partner for richer thin-client computing

By Dan Neel

REKINDLING THE DEBATE over the thin versus fat clients, software platform company Droplets on Tuesday announced a partnership with New Internet Computer (NIC) to deliver advanced thin-client interface technology that rivals PC interfaces.

The deal will bring to market a customized version of Droplets' UI (user interface) Server, a thin-client application player, for NIC's thin-client computing terminals. Droplet's UI Server delivers a richer, more PC-like computing experience to the user by providing faster response times between the client and server, according to Philip Brittan, the president and CEO of Droplets, based in New York.

"The big idea is we allow server-based applications to have the full, rich GUI capabilities usually associated with desktop or fat client software," Brittan said. "Companies have been moving over the last couple of years to Web-based applications. The problem is we all took a giant step backwards in terms of usability and speed."

With a small, 1MB software footprint, Droplets' current UI Server player installs on the hard drive of a client device such as Compaq's iPaq or thin clients from Wyse. There, the UI Server assists in accelerating application performance between the client and the server, which is also loaded with server-based software from Droplets.

For NIC devices that use a CD-ROM for local memory instead of a hard drive, Droplets will develop a data CD to accelerate application performance, Brittan said. NIC is the brainchild of Oracle chieftain Larry Ellison, a long-time proponent of thin-client computing.

"NIC wants to go into enterprises and show big companies they don't have to spend thousands of dollars a years on an employee's desktop PC. Instead, they can spend hundreds of dollars on a server-based terminal and drastically lower costs, speed up deployments of applications and application updates, and increase IT flexibility," Brittan said.

Applications do have to be recompiled to run Droplets software, but the process is no different than writing to Java or C++, Brittan said.

"You need to recompile your applications using our toolkit," Brittan said. "For Droplets, you develop to the Droplets toolset instead of the GUI you're using, but you continue to write in Java or C++."

The Droplets toolkit is free, and the Droplets server-based software is licensed on a per-CPU basis. Droplets also sells its technology directly to developers interested in writing applications on the Droplets platform.

But the task of porting applications over to Droplets represents the main caveat of the technology, according to Chris Dial, an analyst at Forrester Research, in Cambridge,

Mass.

"Talking about porting enterprise application to some other platform is absurd. The cost of that is incredibly prohibitive," Dial said. "[Droplets] could capture a small part of the market for new applications, but porting old applications is tough. Some companies have tried to port their mainframe applications over to Java, but they have run into scenarios where it has taken years to rewrite."

Dial said a preferable move for a companies considering offering better access to server- or Web-based applications would be to "expose the old application with new Web-based applications," such as Web sites that create airline reservations atop existing, mainframe-based reservation applications.

For its part, NIC will offer application porting support and other technical support to customers wanting to deploy Droplets-enabled NIC clients, a NIC representative said. Although it's too early to determine actual application porting times for NIC client/server networks, even complex applications like those used in airline reservations should take no more than a few months, the representative said.

Droplets' Brittan said the benefits of Droplets far outweigh any potential downside due to application porting.

"I would challenge you to produce Microsoft Word or Excel as a browser-based application," Brittan said. "The Web-based versions of those applications are generally limited in functionality, scaled down, mini-apps. We use only about a tenth of the bandwidth that a Web-based application uses, so you can cut down your bandwidth requirements."

Other aspects such as printing are also improved by Droplets, as the printer command comes direct from the client instead of from possibly outside the firewall from a remote server.

Droplet software is available for Windows XP, Windows NT, Windows 2000, Windows CE, Sun Solaris, Linux, and will soon be available for Palm and Macintosh Oses, according to Brittan.

NIC clients suited with Droplets technology will be available in the first quarter of 2002. Pricing has not yet been determined.

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