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Droplets execs explain the benefits of their service in delivering full GUI applications online

By Michael Vizard and Mark Jones

DROPLETS CAME INTO being as a company that facilitates the deployment of thin clients that are integrated with enterprise applications. Now the company is leveraging this expertise to help deploy Web services, recently rolling out a new version of its development platform and forging alliances with companies such as Oracle and Sun. In an interview with InfoWorld Editor in Chief Michael Vizard and West Coast News Editor Mark Jones, company CEO Philip Brittan and CTO Frank Rose talk about why they think Droplets is the missing user interface piece for Web services and service-oriented software architectures.

Philip Brittan, Droplets CEO

InfoWorld: What specifically does Droplets do?

Brittan: What we have is a platform for creating and deploying online applications that feature all the speed and rich GUI interaction of desktop or client/server applications, combined with the accessibility, maintainability, and instant deployment benefits of the Web or the Internet. People need access to very fast, very interactive, very powerful, easy-to-use GUIs in a way that is totally online and has no client-side footprint to the application. We realized that the Web was not the way to do it. People have now spent years trying to make the Web do it. We realized about five years ago the Web was not the way to do this, and that what you needed was a brand-new service layered on top of the Internet. That's what we've done, and we created Droplets.

InfoWorld:; What exactly does Droplet provide to make this happen?

Brittan: There are really two parts of our business. We sell the platform components, which in our case consist of a presentation server and a SDK [software development kit] for people to build their own applications. We also sell our own solutions. We have put together a solid but simple collaboration suite that has e-mail and instant messaging and message boards and some financial tools, etc. We sell prepackaged solutions that any company can take and add to their business without any custom programming.

InfoWorld: What's driven the release of Droplet's new User Interface Server 2.2 and SDK?

Brittan: We believe the world is moving to a Web-based UI. But with the Web interface [as it stands], we lost many features. Then there [are] the risks [associated with] all the different Web standards. Droplets maintains the benefits of a Web interface but overcomes the limitations [by] offering rich interactivity and a fast user experience. It lets you have all the usability of a client server approach.

InfoWorld: Are you more closely aligned to either the Java or .Net platforms?

Brittan: We're taking a very agnostic approach to C++ and Java. We are compatible with Solaris servers and we are a close Sun partner, [but] Droplets is positioned as an added value proposition to any Web server. We make a heterogeneous world more homogeneous for the developer.

InfoWorld: Where does this type of capability take us in terms of the next level of computing?

Brittan: Eventually, we think that people are not going to want to install software on the specific machines that they use it from. Instead, they'll want it to be available over networks in the same way that Web pages [have] suddenly made [companies'] brochures available over the network and made people's product catalogs available over the network. But our feeling is that the Web is a document publication mechanism. What the Web is not is a GUI tool. It's not an application development platform. Attempts to create powerful applications using traditional Web technologies such as HTML, Java Script, Java Applets, and Active-X controls have been fraught with all kinds of problems. What we have found is that a number of the large ISVs have become extremely frustrated with their efforts to Webify their client/server applications, and they have tended to create Web versions of those applications that are less powerful or full-functioned in their client/server apps. They tend to be more reporting kinds of apps and their customers are balking at the usability hit they've taken when moving from the client/server to the Web-based application. We came up with an architecture that allowed our applications to be delivered within Web pages, or they can be dragged from a Web page and dropped on the end-user's desktop and accessed from an icon there. An end-user would access it just like any other piece of software installed on the machine, except that the application is never actually installed on that machine. The application always stays on the server, and the user can access that application from any computer anywhere in the world.

InfoWorld: In your view, the browser will always be a least common denominator interface. Why is this the case?

Brittan: We believe that the browser is limited and it was designed for a specific purpose: to share documents. We invented the Web as an additional service on top of the Internet for sharing documents among large groups of people. Every time there's a new need, the previous technology could be, in some way perhaps, coerced into doing it, but it's not the most efficient way. We approached Droplets as a new service, specifically architected for delivering full GUI applications online.

InfoWorld: What impact will Web services have?

Rose: It finally looks like we have a way to produce distributed applications and services that people can get to easily from anywhere without some of the headaches that we had with other distributed technologies. One of the things about Web services is that they're pretty strictly on the back end. I'm not going to open my browser and point to one and start using it. They are designed for machine-to-machine interactions. So there's a missing piece there, which is the front end. We think that UI's are going to be Droplets, because people are going to want to use applications and access the functionality that's published in Web services through a rich UI that lets them have the kind of experience they want from an application.

Frank Rose,
Droplets CTO

InfoWorld: What's driving all the interest in service-oriented architectures?

Brittan: You've got a bunch of the big shops out there that have traditional client/server applications. They've come under a tremendous pressure from their customer bases to deliver an online version, because those customers don't want to spend thousands of dollars a year maintaining client-side software. The rollouts, the time, the confusion, the errors that arise from different users having different versions of the software -- that all comes out when you have to install a system on every single individual PC. Secondly, those users are increasingly mobile and they want to be able to access their system from wherever they may happen to be. So they build Web versions of their apps and they now have two different versions of their software. One is a client/server version that has all the rich functionality, and secondly they have a Web version that has reduced functionality but has no client-side administration. They're forcing their customers to make a decision and

the customers are screaming. What we say is there's a way you can have the best of both worlds at the same time. The ISV can develop a single version of their product that's Droplets-based, [and] that provides their customers with all the usability and functionality of the client/server [version and] all the administrative benefits of the accessibility of the Web version at the same time.

InfoWorld: Beyond Web services, what else are you looking forward to as a major industry trend?

Brittan: There are other initiatives that are taking place in the industry, like grid computing, that we applaud. In general, I think we need to get away from a dependency on specific individual computers. If you're recovering from a disaster, like the World Trade Center disaster, and people have to vacate their offices, you really need to be able to distribute that application on the front end through something like Droplets and the back end through something like grid computing.