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Web services: finally the interface gets attention
New players are addressing the specific requirements of browser applications that will be based on back-end Web services

By Tom Sullivan and Michael Vizard

WITH ALL THE attention being paid to Web services primarily focused on back-end infrastructure, very little attention has been paid thus far to the user interfaces that will be required to support next-generation applications based on these services. With that issue in mind, two companies, ComplementSoft and Droplets, are seeking to provide more robust browser-like user interfaces than today's Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator.

A Chicago-based startup company called ComplementSoft will launch on Tuesday a beta release of an offering that makes it possible for multiple applications to share a common user interface.
"In effect, this turns the entire enterprise into a virtual file system," said Fen Hiew, CTO of ComplementSoft.

Based on a Java Virtual Machine implementation and XML technologies, the ComplementSoft technology initially is designed to support applications from SAS Institute, followed later in this year by support for IBM DB2 and Oracle. General release of the toolkit is scheduled for July 1.

According to Hiew, the ComplementSoft toolset gives developers the ability to develop a rich common user interface for multiple applications without having to compromise functionality by relying on browsers as the least common denominator user interface for any given set of applications.

Droplets, a New York-based software company that manufactures a platform for server-based Web applications, also is offering a user interface it says is better tuned to a Web services architecture than current Web browsers.

"The most ubiquitous way of publishing to the Web, the browser, cannot offer nearly the same functionality as powerful applications," said Bill Power, Droplets' director of marketing communications. Power added that although browsers can be "dressed up" to provide more functionality, that requires more code which, in turn, slows down the applications, requires more network bandwidth, and makes the applications more complex, which ultimately makes managing, updating, and administering the application more difficult.

Furthermore, industry analysts said that Web services will present a challenge for user interface development because multiple applications will need to be integrated on the fly.

"A lot of the infrastructure players are beginning to find that [by] stringing together components or applications, they can offer better Web services," said Rikki Kirzner, an analyst at market research firm IDC, in Framingham, Mass.

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