

Sun Plans Version of Java for Web-Linked Cellphones

John Markoff

Sun Microsystems plans to revamp its Java software in an effort to compete more effectively in the fast-growing market for Internet-connected mobile phones.

Although Sun was an early leader in developing Internet-oriented software, the wireless Internet market has increasingly become a race between the European software developer Symbian, Microsoft, Palm, Research in Motion and a variety of smaller Linux-oriented efforts.



Sun Microsystems

A prototype of a phone that will use the new JavaFX software.

The new Sun software will blend the company's existing mobile-handset version of Java with technology that Sun acquired this year from SavaJe Technologies, a Massachusetts-based software developer. SavaJe had developed an operating system aimed at so-called smartphones — Internet-connected multifunction devices — based on the Java language.

Sun is hoping to attract handset makers and cellular carriers by offering a new version of Java, to be dubbed JavaFX, in tandem with a so-called scripting language that will enable designers of interactive Web sites to create content that can be easily distributed by a variety of devices — like personal computers, cellphones and set-top boxes — without having to customize for each environment.

The announcement will be made Tuesday on the first day of JavaOne, the company's annual conference for software developers, to be held here.

Sun's new strategy indicates the growing importance of the Web as a crucial portal for distributing interactive content of all types, from games to video and audio.

"There is an epic battle under way to reach the broadest audience possible," Jonathan Schwartz, Sun's chief executive, said in an interview last week.

Although it has not publicly announced that it will be a competitor in the market for cellular phone software, Google is widely expected to introduce its own version of the "software stack" for cellular handset makers early next year.

Sun is facing a particularly daunting battle for a share of the interactive Web, now served largely by Adobe's Flash software and increasingly by a set of open-source alternative tools referred to collectively as AJAX. Moreover, Microsoft recently joined the competition with its own interactive development and distribution system, Silverlight.

Sun has long argued that the company has benefited indirectly from the Java language, which has not yet become a major revenue source despite early market gains and a large base of developers. Widespread use of the Java language has increased the sale of Sun computers, the company's executives have said.

Now, however, Sun is moving to become a more direct software competitor.

"The cellphone is really the next frontier in terms of what will be the next big win in software," said Richard Monson Haefel, a senior analyst at the Burton Group, an industry research group based in Midvale, Utah. "Sun is trying to get that position."

The JavaFX software will be offered under an open-source license, meaning developers can use and modify it free of charge. But the company is clearly hoping that it will persuade handset makers and carriers to take commercial licenses on the handset version of the software, JavaFX Mobile.

The company said it would not announce any licensing deals this week. But one potential client is NTT DoCoMo, the Japanese cellphone operator, which has been a traditional Sun partner.

Despite the challenges, Mr. Schwartz said he believed that Sun could be competitive both because of the large existing base of Sun software in current cellphones as well as the attractiveness of a single target for interactive Web site content development.

In addition to mobile phones, the company said that it would also market the JavaFX system to makers of television set-top boxes, navigation devices and automobile dashboards.

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