

## Andreessen: PHP succeeding where Java isn't

By Stephen Shankland

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**BURLINGAME, Calif.--The simplicity of scripting language PHP means it will be more popular than Java for building Web-based applications, Internet browser pioneer Marc Andreessen predicted Wednesday in a speech here at the Zend/PHP Conference.**

Java enjoyed great success when its inventor, Sun Microsystems, released it in 1995, largely because it was optimized better for programmers than for machines, making software development significantly easier, Andreessen said. Unfortunately, Java has acquired many of the unfavorable characteristics of its predecessors, he added.



"Java is much more programmer-friendly than C or C++, or was for a few years there until they made just as complicated. It's become arguably even harder to learn than C++," Andreessen said. And the mantle of simplicity is being passed on: "PHP is such is an easier environment to develop in than Java."

That opinion might not sit well with Java loyalists--and there are plenty of them among the millions of Java programmers and hundreds of companies involved in the Java Community Process that controls the software's destiny.

But even some influential executives at IBM, which was instrumental in bringing Java to the server and whose WebSphere server software has Java at its core, see the benefits of PHP over Java.

"Simplicity is a huge part of it," said Rod Smith, vice president of IBM's Emerging Internet Technologies Group, describing PHP's appeal to IBM in a meeting with reporters at the conference. "They weren't interested in adding language features to compete with other languages," choosing instead "the simple way, and not the way

we've done it in Java, unfortunately."

[PHP is an open-source project](#) including an engine to simple programs called PHP scripts and a large library of pre-built scripts. Much of its development is in the hands of a company called Zend, which sells packaged PHP products, programming tools and support.

Wooing programmers is nothing new in the computing industry, where players constantly jockey to establish their products as an essential foundation. Indeed, many credit Microsoft's success to its highly regarded programming tools, which make it easier for developers to write software that run on Windows.

PHP has caught on widely. About 22 million Web sites employ it, and [usage is steadily increasing](#). About 450 programmers have privileges to approve changes to the software. Major companies that employ PHP include Yahoo, Lufthansa and Deutsche Telekom's T-Online.

PHP is more limited in scope than Java, which runs not just on Web servers but also on PCs, mobile phones, chip-enabled debit cards and many other devices. Some parts of the Java technology, though, such as Java Server Pages, handle much the same function.

"Java and PHP compete at some level. Get over it," Mike Milinkovich, executive director of Eclipse, said in a meeting with reporters. Eclipse is an open-source programming-tool project that long supported Java and now also supports PHP. "I'm looking forward to PHP kicking butt in the marketplace," Milinkovich said.

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--Mike Milinkovich,  
executive director,  
Eclipse

Java and PHP are drawing nearer to one another, though. Oracle, which also sells Java server software and whose database software can be used as a foundation for either Java or PHP, is among those working on an addition to Java to help the two software projects work together. Specifically, [Java Specification Request 223](#) will "help build that bridge between the Java community and the PHP community," said Ken Jacobs, vice president of product strategy at Oracle, in a speech at the conference.

And even Andreessen, who just helped launch a [start-up called Ning for sharing photos, reviews or other content online](#), acknowledges that Java has its place.

"My new company is running a combination of Java and PHP. This is something I get no end of crap about," he said of the technical decision. "We have a core to our system that is built in Java. It is more like an operating system, like a system programming project. Then we have the entire application level--practically everything you see is in PHP."

PHP, like open-source projects including Linux and Apache, now has received the blessing of major powers in the computing industry. IBM and Oracle are working on software that let PHP-powered applications pull information from their databases, and that endorsement has been important, said Zend CEO Doron Gerstel.

"The fact that IBM and Oracle are behind it--this is for a lot of IT (customers) a quality stamp. The big guys endorse it, so it must be good," Gerstel said in a meeting with reporters.

The new version 5.1 of PHP, scheduled to arrive in early November, will include a faster engine to process PHP scripts, said [Zeev Suraski](#), a Zend co-founder and PHP creator. It also will include a low-level "data abstraction layer" that makes it easier for PHP to communicate with different databases and a higher-level layer to interface with XML information produced and consumed by Web services.

**"They got mad. Then I told them we wanted to name it JavaScript, and that made them even madder."**

--Marc Andreessen,  
founder, Netscape

Version 6, which is expected to arrive in 2006, will support Unicode character encoding, which supports a wide range of alphabets, simplifying creation of software that works in multiple international regions.

Andreessen said he believes the Web is where most new applications will reside--in part because Web applications are available as soon as they're launched, sidestepping the distribution challenge of desktop software.

Microsoft talks a lot about Avalon (display technology in the upcoming Vista version of Windows) and fat clients. But they still have a problem. You have to get the program out onto everybody's desktop. With the Web model, you don't," Andreessen said. "I think there's no question the Web model is going to dominate over the next 10, 20, 30 years."

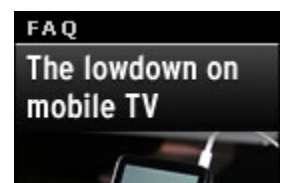
Some interesting work is being done on the PCs, however, but he pointed only to applications that run in a Web browser and that rely on data and services supplied over the Internet. Here, again, Java is losing to an unrelated scripting technology called JavaScript and a [JavaScript offshoot called AJAX](#) that permits a fancier user interface.

"JavaScript was, and now with AJAX is, the standard way to do client-side development in a browser, as opposed to Java," Andreessen said. "Java applets in the browser never took to the extent some of us thought they would."

Not everyone sees things the same way. Google uses some cutting-edge browser-based software such as AJAX, but CEO Eric Schmidt took the stage earlier this week with Sun CEO Scott McNealy to announce that the Google Toolbar will be piggybacking on distributions of the desktop version of Java.

"I was amazed to find out how much the Java Runtime Environment is inside companies, either because a CIO standardized on it or there are enough applications that the CIO wants the JRE to be a standard" part of the company's computing infrastructure, Schmidt said at the [Sun-Google event](#). As part of that partnership, [Google will help develop Java](#).

Netscape pushed JavaScript as a way to build fancier Web pages than the fundamental HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) standard permitted, but without the more difficult programming Java required, Andreessen said. "We did JavaScript to try to be an intermediate bridge between HTML and Java. I got in huge fights with Sun over this," Andreessen said. "They got mad. Then I told them we wanted to name it JavaScript, and



that made them even madder."

Java isn't the only client software that didn't live up to its promise, Andreessen said. Macromedia's Flash format, which enables animation, sound, motion and other splashy features within browsers, also is on the list.



"I think Flash is one of the most exciting technologies out there that's almost on the verge of great success and never quite achieving it," Andreessen said.

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