

Microsoft Plays to All Developers

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Microsoft's developer division wants you. Long known for its aggressive courting of professional developers, the software company is now viewing all its systems as development platforms and is trying to empower developers at every level to write applications for the various platforms.

"We have to think about the whole spectrum of software development," said S. "Soma" Somasegar, corporate vice president of Microsoft's developer division. "That definitely is our focus."

Somasegar said that although the professional developer is still the core target for Microsoft's developer division, "there is 'n' number of people that are involved with software development of some sort."

With Microsoft's broad and varied platform focus, "Windows is a platform, SQL Server is a platform, Office is a platform, Live Services is a platform, Xbox is a platform," he said.

With that in mind, Microsoft is now calling out not only to professionals, but to budding developers, newcomers, hobbyists, students and others who have to do any kind of development. And Microsoft is going after the young as well as the more mature.

For instance, at Microsoft's TechFest held here in early March, Microsoft Research officials demonstrated a project known as Boku: Lightweight Programming for Kids.

Boku uses a high-level programming paradigm within a three-dimensional gaming world on the Xbox 360 to introduce children to creative uses of the computer.

It does not use a textual language - the programming environment is integrated in an attractive gaming world and controlled entirely via an Xbox 360 game controller.

In February, Microsoft unveiled a Web site for beginner programmers, the Beginner Developer Learning Center. It also offers a Kid's Corner to help kids learn to program.

Dan Fernandez, Microsoft's lead product manager for Visual Studio Express, said there is a "huge number of people out there doing all sorts of things" with the low-end tools, but that number only scratches the surface of how many people would benefit from a tool for beginners based on the need or desire to build simple applications.

"Microsoft's willingness to create high-quality teaching and learning resources and to make them broadly available is a terrific idea," said Chris Stephenson, executive director of New York-based Computer Science Teachers Association.

"I think Microsoft's strategy is ambitious, but it makes sense." Moreover, several major technology players are aware that there is "a crisis in computer science," Stephenson said.

"While demand for highly skilled workers in this area continues to increase and drive our economy, the number of students entering the pipeline has dropped precipitously."

For the professional developer, Microsoft is working on "Orcas," the next major release of the Visual Studio tool set, due out later in 2007.

Somasegar said it will be the best tool set for Windows Vista and Office 2007. Highlights will include a new Windows Presentation Foundation Designer, greater support for database tools, support for LINQ (Language Integrated Query) and enhanced support for AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) development.

Somasegar also touted new hires Microsoft has brought into the developer division to help court the full spectrum of development.

Among them is Andrew Kass, general manager of VSTS (Visual Studio Team System), Microsoft's team development platform that targets the overall ALM (application lifecycle management) phenomenon and has Microsoft competing with the likes of IBM's formidable Rational business unit.

Though Rational has a huge head start, don't count Microsoft out, Kass said.

"We want to focus on how software development might change over the next 10 years," Kass said. "And as corny as this sounds, I think - VSTS - is a way for us to change the world. I bought into it, and I really believe this is the one company that can do it."

"As a platform for integrating practitioner's tools, Team System is very strong," said Carey Schwaber, an analyst with Forrester Research.

"Its main limitations are platform support, of course, though Microsoft partners have extended its reach in this area."

In terms of the support that Team System itself offers for roles such as tester or business analyst, "it's still lacking," Schwaber said. "This is pretty well understood - by Microsoft, by its customers and prospects, and by its competitors. I think it's clear that Microsoft will resolve this in

the long term."

"Testing is so ad hoc today," Kass said. "The tools out there are difficult to use and fairly unsophisticated. They're not super accessible, and the end result is that ... testing and quality is generally an afterthought."

Testing and requirements management are two areas of focus for Microsoft in the Team System tool set, and ALM will continue to be a focus of many companies and partners.

However, he said, it's a big market. "There's room for multiple players. I hope to continue to partner with people who do pieces that we don't do."

Microsoft is working on an Orcas release of Visual Studio Team System that Somasegar referred to as a "dot release," in which Microsoft takes the next step forward with the product. But it will be the post-Orcas releases that begin to advance VSTS in ways that make it more competitive with tools such as those in IBM's Rational line.

Although Kass would not recognize the existence of a code name for the first post-Orcas release, other Microsoft officials have said it's being called "Rosario."

It will be a bigger release than Orcas and will feature advanced integration into project management, project planning and portfolio management, among other things.

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