

Adobe Open-Source Move Sets Showdown with Microsoft

April 27 2007

Adobe's plan to open-source its Flex Web development framework offers at least a partial open-source alternative to Microsoft's Silverlight and Extensible Application Markup Language.

Adobe Systems has announced its plans to open-source its Flex Web development framework.

The San Jose, Calif., company is releasing its Adobe Flex source code to the open-source community to enable developers throughout the world to tap the capabilities of Flex and participate in the ongoing development of the technology.

Flex is a framework for building cross-operating system RIAs (rich Internet applications) for the Web and enabling new Adobe Apollo applications for the desktop, the company said.

"We'll be open-sourcing Flex with the next release of the technology, which is code-named Moxie," said Jeff Whatcott, vice president of product marketing in Adobe's Enterprise and Developer Business Unit.

Whatcott said Adobe will introduce the first public pre-release version of "Moxie" in June, "and we'll be providing public daily builds of the technology starting at that time. We'll also be launching a public bug database, so it'll look, act and feel like an open-source project" even then.

However, the technology will not be open-sourced until "Moxie" is released in the second half of 2007 - most likely in the fall, Whatcott said.

Upon release, the open-source Flex software development kit (SDK) and documentation will be available under the MPL (Mozilla Public License), Whatcott said.

Using the MPL for open-sourcing Flex will allow full and free access to source code, and developers will be able to freely download, extend and contribute to the source code for the Flex compiler, components and application framework.

Adobe will also continue to make the Flex SDK and other Flex products available under their existing commercial licenses, allowing both new and existing partners and customers to choose the license terms that best suit their requirements.

Whatcott said the MPL "strikes a good balance" for developers, particularly those who want to take a staged approach to working with open-source technology.

"This is the culmination of a long path toward opening up Flex," Whatcott said.

Last June, Adobe announced plans to give away the Flex 2 SDK free to developers, but the company did not go so far as to open-source the technology.

And the free Adobe Flex SDK includes the MXML compiler and the ActionScript 3.0 libraries that make up the popular Flex framework. Together, these elements provide the modern, standards-based language and programming model used by leading businesses such as BMC

Software, eBay, Salesforce.com, Scrapblog and Samsung to create RIAs deployed on the ubiquitous Adobe Flash Player, the company said.

This announcement expands on Adobe's commitment to open technology, including the contribution of source code for the ActionScript Virtual Machine to the Mozilla Foundation under the Tamarin project, the use of the open-source WebKit engine in the "Apollo" project, and the release of the full PDF 1.7 specification for ISO standardization, the company said.

"We've been very interested in using the Flex SDK to put a more usable and engaging face on enterprise content management, and this move by Adobe makes that all the more attractive." said John Newton, chief technology officer of Alfresco, an enterprise content management company based in the UK.

Mark Driver, an analyst with Gartner, called the move to open-source Flex a big deal, noting that it helps Adobe competitively against incursion by Microsoft. "I think it will help head off Silverlight and remove concerns of proprietary nature of Flex in the Web world," he said.

"Open-source co-creation is a powerful way to build a strong development community," said James Governor, founder of the RedMonk market analysis firm. "Adobe's decision to open-source the Flex SDK is a radical move which should attract a new class of developer to the platform."

Richard Monson-Haefel, an analyst with Burton Group, agreed that Adobe's plan to open-source Flex is a good idea.

"Flex has been doing well in the market so this is not one of those occasions when a vendor throws their software out to open source as a

last ditch effort to save it," he said. "In this case, Adobe is being really smart because they know that as an open-source project the Flex SDK is going to evolve more quickly and probably in some directions they had not anticipated."

Moreover, Monson-Haefel said Adobe sells an "excellent IDE [integrated development environment]" in Flex Builder 2. And this open-source move "can only help bolster already healthy sales of that product as well as their Enterprise Data Server," he said.

Monson-Haefel said that in addition, this move will help Adobe with their Apollo platform. "The more people using the Flex framework, the more attractive the Apollo platform. I can't see a down side for Adobe or the development community at all."

Whaticott said that the Web development community is talking about how to deliver RIAs. "And now into that environment we're saying it's time to blow the doors wide open," he said. "So we're open-sourcing Flex and that's going to take this fledgling developer community and grow it up."

Meanwhile, Adobe will continue to sell its Flex Builder IDE. That product starts at \$499. Adobe did not say anything about open-sourcing its Flash or Apollo technology.

Jeffrey Hammond, an analyst with Forrester, said he sees the battle unfolding between Adobe with Apollo and Flex versus Microsoft with its Silverlight and XAML (Extensible Application markup Language). Additionally, Hammond said he believes the platform ubiquity of Microsoft's WPF (Windows Presentation Foundation) versus the potential ubiquity of open source should be a real test of classic models versus new business models in software.

Hammond also said that until Adobe announced its open-source plans for Flex, "it was one proprietary technology against another, so there was no reason for the standards-based crowd to join either side. Now, the standards crowd has some interesting reasons to join the Adobe camp."

Microsoft will hold its Mix 07 conference next week (April 29-May 2) in Las Vegas, where the company is slated to discuss various plans regarding its own RIA and Web development strategies.

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