

Spring Is In the Air

April 10 2007, By Darryl K. Taft

Spring is in the air ... and up for grabs? Well, uh, no, apparently not.

Just two weeks ago, the word in the enterprise Java world was that Oracle, following on the heels of its acquisition of Tangosol, was closing in on Interface21 to get a hold of the popular Spring Framework, a lightweight alternative to J2EE (Java 2 Platform, Enterprise Edition) - now known simply as Java Platform, Enterprise Edition or JEE (Java EE).

But Rod Johnson, CEO of London-based Interface21 and founder of the Spring Framework, responded to that issue succinctly. "We're not negotiating with anyone," he said. "We plan to remain independent." Interface21 is the company behind the open-source Spring Framework, which is probably the most ubiquitous Java framework you've never heard of.

"I use Spring heavily in many of the projects I work on," said Jeff Genender, chief technology officer and chief architect at Savoir Technologies, in Evergreen, Colo. "Their Spring API is pretty much ubiquitous and a standard staple for many development efforts. It's made my life a lot easier wiring together objects to support an application."

Neelan Choksi, Interface21's senior vice president, Americas, said the rumor seems to change every few weeks about another major player showing interest in Interface21. One week it's Oracle, and another it's BEA Systems or somebody else, he said. And Choksi is familiar with both of those players, having sold his own startup, SolarMetric, to BEA

and having worked with Oracle's folks on what became the Java Persistence API.

But Johnson insists that Interface21 is planning to stay independent. That means he plans either to grow the company organically or entertain funding offers of some sort.

Ironically, while there have been erstwhile dour relations between Interface21 and the open-source enterprise Java trailblazer JBoss, Johnson and company can actually thank JBoss for setting the tone for an entity like Interface21 to be able to generate such serious attention from big players and venture capitalists. Indeed, after Red Hat's \$350 million acquisition of JBoss last year, Interface21 is enjoying what some refer to as the "JBoss Multiplier" effect on its valuation and ability to raise money.

And this is not by coincidence - and certainly not by luck alone. Johnson built a solid team around a great idea at the perfect time. J2EE had gained a reputation as being heavy and complex. Spring offered a lighter-weight solution. And it caught on.

I first met Rod Johnson a few years ago at a TheServerSide Java Symposium in Las Vegas. He had just delivered a night-time keynote, and I approached him for comment. He didn't know me from Adam and was a little suspicious. Not that I blame him for that - I'm suspicious of the press myself! But we agreed to chat later.

The next day I went to a session at the same event where Johnson was slated to challenge the EJB (Enterprise JavaBeans) specification, and the room was packed. Sun Microsystem folks had earlier that day touted the strengths of a then upcoming technology called EJB 3, which itself challenged many of Johnson's claims, and folks wanted to see what he was going to say. Johnson didn't detour. He lit right into Sun, EJB and

J2EE.

Right then I knew this was a guy to keep an eye on. I think it was also at that TSSJS that Rod started to get cozy with Adrian Colyer, an AOP (aspect-oriented programming) expert, then at IBM and now CTO of Interface21. Anyway, Johnson bucked conventional wisdom, stood his ground and grew Interface21 into a Java powerhouse that now supports its own conferences full of loyal followers.

Rod Johnson and Juergen Hoeller developed the Spring Framework. And a group of committers sprang up around it, encompassing a core group of developers.

Hiring Colyer was a coup. Hiring Choksi was similar to getting a sleeper free agent from a rival. Choksi was wasting away at BEA and needed a challenge. Helping Interface21 reach the next level was just the challenge he needed. Choksi is a team building, deal maker kind of guy who is not afraid to take a gamble. He was once part of the famed Massachusetts Institute of Technology Blackjack Team that set out to beat casinos at their own game by using card counting and other techniques to improve their odds at blackjack.

Meanwhile, Interface21 has Spring-related partnerships with companies such as BEA, Oracle, Tangosol (now part of Oracle), Gigaspaces and MuleSource, among others.

In addition to the core Spring Framework, Spring features several related projects, including Spring Security, Spring AOP, Spring Web Flow, Spring Web Services, Spring Rich Client, Spring IDE (integrated development environment), Spring MVC (model-view controller), Spring LDAP, Spring OSGi (Open Services Gateway Initiative) and Spring.Net.

In an interview with eWEEK in December, Colyer said Interface21 is targeting the first half of 2007 for a coordinated release train of Spring and its subprojects.

Last month, Gartner recognized Interface21 as a "cool" vendor, citing the notion that the company not only promotes "easier to use programming models but also advanced programming methodologies including AOP, Inversion of Control and Dependency Injection models." Gartner also cited the Spring's adoption of OSGi for micro-kernel modularity as another "cool" factor.

Although I often tend not to care what Gartner thinks, they're onto something here.

Eric Newcomer, CTO at Iona Technologies, in Waltham, Mass., said, "I was in a group discussion of IT executives a couple of weeks ago, and the topic of JEE came up, specifically around its future and the trend toward lighter weight containers. The clear consensus was the lightweight containers are here to stay, and someone even went so far as to say that Spring is the death knell for JEE."

However, Newcomer said that's actually a kind of funny statement, "since Spring-based deployments work on JEE containers, but I guess it's because most of Spring adoption has been around POJOs - Plain Old Java Objects - and lighter weight containers such as Tomcat."

Cameron Purdy, CEO of Tangosol, in Somerville, Mass., said: "Over the past few years, Spring has emerged as the most dominant application programming framework since J2EE, and, in most cases, it has done an excellent job fitting with, extending, enhancing and otherwise playing nicely with J2EE. As J2EE has evolved, it's picked up some of the ideas from Spring as well, which keeps pushing Spring forward to forge new territory. Spring now covers web applications, server applications and

even rich clients. We now see Spring being used in the majority of the banking and Telco systems being deployed on our Coherence Data Grid software."

Newcomer said he sees good growth potential for Spring.

"I'm seeing a good potential alignment right now between SCA (Service Component Architecture), OSGi and Spring that I think has a lot of potential," he said. "But I don't mean all of SCA or all of Spring, just the parts that support what I'd call the OSGi model of providing lots of ways of doing lots of things, all dynamically configurable. SCA assembly and Spring configuration both have significant roles to play, but a big difference with OSGi is that you don't have to settle on a single programming model for everything."

Indeed, one of the biggest issues with JEE that Spring has helped highlight is that "the container has become a big box of rocks," Newcomer said. "If you use JEE, you just get the whole box with everything inside it. Sometimes, especially for some applications, you just want one or two of the rocks in the box. Spring is great for that."

Spring configuration is used in the Apache CXF project, and in Iona's Celtix open source ESB (enterprise service bus) distribution.

"I see a big future role for Spring in OSGi as well, with the result being a truly significant and important lightweight alternative container to JEE," Newcomer said.

Blake Connell, director of product marketing for WebLogic Server at BEA, in San Jose, Calif., said BEA is a "strong advocate" of Spring, which is very popular with many of BEA's customers.

"BEA has worked well with Interface21 ensuring solid integration

between BEA WebLogic Server and Spring as part of BEA's blended development model," Connell said. "BEA and Interface21 collaborated on an open-source project called Pitchfork, which enables developers to mix Spring with the new Java EE 5 programming model."

Pitchfork is a component in BEA's WebLogic Server 10 application server. BEA also supports and leverages Spring in its BEA WebLogic Real Time product. And the company's services organization supports Spring, Connell said.

Meanwhile, in a blog post last week, Marc Fleury, founder of JBoss who sold the company to Red Hat and subsequently retired, highlighted some of the differences between his company and its culture and Interface21 and the Springers. I've actually been trying to find the right term for Spring devotees. JBoss committers are JBossians, and don't you forget it. But what's a Spring committer? I'm torn between Springer, Springster and Springhead. But I digress.

In his post, which pokes fun at Johnson and Choksi for saying they were fans of his, Fleury writes: "The English (and people from Anglo-Saxon cultures) tend to find the French 'rude' because our ethics and Cartesian bias value 'telling it like it is' and encourage argumentative conflict. The counterpoint is that the French tend to find the Brits to be insufferable hypocrites and phonies, probably because their 'ethics' usually involve pretending to be being nice to people and not wanting to offend them."

What can you say? Fleury's French, Johnson is British. I've dealt with both guys, though I have to admit I am more familiar with Fleury. It's sort of like the old Prince versus Michael Jackson rivalry (before Jacko got the wacko label). They played to similar audiences, had grudging respect for one another, but little love - though they'd sneak into each other's concerts to keep an eye on the competition.

They have different styles, but essentially they want the same things. JBoss has been in-your-face aggressive at times. Being a ground breaker means sometimes you have to get a little dirty.

It's like saying you like Bill Walsh's 49ers over Joe Gibbs' Redskins or Bill Parcells' Giants - or better yet, the Al Davis-led Raiders. Just win, baby! Walsh ran a finesse operation, with his fancy West Coast Offense (which has now permeated the National Football League). But Gibbs and Parcells won championships around defense and running the ball. They had different philosophies but similar results.

JBoss led the way in the open-source enterprise Java space. Now, Spring is in the air. Spring is hot and gaining new supporters every day.

Will Oracle buy Interface21? My sense is they've already tried. And I'd bet BEA has, too. But I don't know that for a fact. All I know is Rod Johnson said they plan to remain independent.

And I plan to continue to keep an eye on these guys.

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