Parleys

Devoxx 2008: new and improved

After six successful editions of JavaPolis, the premier conference for the European Java community starts a new chapter. Devoxx continues the course that JavaPolis set out over the years whilst at the same time broadening its vision on the software developers’ community.

“Java is a registered trademark owned by Sun Microsystems”, explains Stephan Janssen, organizer and co-founder of Devoxx, the conference formerly known as JavaPolis. “According to trademark law, we are not allowed to use the name JavaPolis any longer.” Janssen and his team changed the name to Devoxx, as they believe the conference acts as a voice for developers around the globe. “Over the years, JavaPolis became the biggest independent Java conference in the world. We prefer to keep our independence, so we dropped the link to Java in our name. But at the same time, we maintain our fine relationship and close collaboration with Sun.” Also this year, Sun is one of the main sponsors of the event.

The good news is that the new name doesn’t seem to have any negative impact on the event’s success. “Visitors were enrolling even faster this year. Early November, we already had twenty percent more people enrolled than around the same time last year. The exhibition floor was sold out faster as well.” Besides that, the new name holds an interesting opportunity for the future of the conference. “Obviously, Devoxx is first and foremost a conference for the Java community. That remains our focus. But since the word Java is not in our name anymore, we aren’t limited by it either. We could easily choose to broaden the scope of the conference in the future.”

Learning from statistics

As with the previous editions of the conference, Devoxx has limited the amount of visitors to 3,200. Still Devoxx will be bigger than last year’s event. “We booked an extra conference room, which allowed us to add some thirty extra talks to the program. As a matter of fact, with all the talks we present this week in Antwerp, we have sufficient input to provide parleys.com with new presentations several times a week, for the next year! Thanks to the extra conference room, we also gain in comfort, since we have more time for the same amount of visitors.”

Devoxx takes the visitors’ fields of interest very seriously. To obtain more information about the visitors’ preferences, Devoxx and IBM developed a solution based on RFID tags. “At the entrance, every visitor receives a badge that includes an RFID tag. The use of the tags will allow us to gather information about the attendance of the talks: how many people show up, how many leave before the end of the talk, and so on.” The project is based on anonymous data only. Devoxx will use the data to produce statistics that will help the organizers improve the quality of the next editions.

Call for proposals

Traditionally, the presenters for Devoxx are hand-picked by the organizers. For the first time this year, Devoxx also launched a call for proposals. “The feedback exceeded all expectations”, says Stephan Janssen. “We received about 300 proposals, which led to us inviting more than 100 presenters for quickies, Birds of a Feather sessions and Tools In Action presentations. It was definitely an interesting experiment, since our call for proposals got us in touch with some very interesting presenters, who might otherwise have remained unnoticed.”

On this year’s edition of Devoxx, quite a bit of attention will go to the use of the JVM (Java Virtual Machine) as a platform for different programming languages. “Today, more than 100 languages can be used on the JVM platform: Jython (Python for the JVM), JRuby, Scala, Groovy, and so on. We invited a broad selection of key speakers from all these different communities to come share their experience with the JVM on Devoxx.” The conference’s second main theme is the rise of RIA (Rich Internet Applications). Devoxx has scheduled detailed presentations on Adobe Flex and AIR, as well as on Microsoft Silverlight and on full blown Java FX.

Finally, Devoxx is excited about the much anticipated key note about Java FX will be presented by Robert Brewin. Last but not least, Devoxx will also anticipate the release of Java SE 7. “The new version will be finalized soon”, concludes Stephan Janssen his preview of this year’s conference. “We are excited that Mark Reinhold from Sun and Joshua Bloch from Google will share their vision on the future of Java with our audience.”

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Hot Talk!

Every day, a steering comity member of Devoxx advises us on what you should not miss at Devoxx. Here’s how Guy Crets kicks off this edition of Devoxx.

Six parallel tracks: what a challenge, what a luxury! The University talks are a unique opportunity to dive deeper. With my interest in integration and SOA, I’m always on the lookout for related talks. I’m very tempted to go to the ‘REST in peace’ talk, but my pick is the talk ‘Declarative programming with Rules, Workflow and Event Processing’. The combination of Complex Event Processing (CEP), Business Processes (Workflow) and Rules is a modern cocktail of advanced integration technologies.

Again a tough choice in the afternoon: encountered already some Ruby when experimenting with the Amazon Web Services. So learning about Ruby on the JVM is pretty relevant. But I also need an update on current Java development tooling and its streamlined use. So I’ll go for the talk ‘Java Power Tools’ on the way modern tools are applied in a Java development ‘factory’.

For the first 1/2 hour ‘Tools in Action’ talk, I go for VisualVM: good tooling to monitor your Java based integration tools is a must have. So I’m quite interested to see how VisualVM can help me there.

To conclude the first day at Devoxx with ‘10 reasons why Java EE development doesn’t have to be painful’. With a speaker from Sun, this talk will probably focus on Glassfish, but that is fine. Glassfish is a nice container and is relevant to me with OpenESB and JCAPS using it as their underlying engine.

TIME

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<td>REST (in peace) with Java (Steven Noels and Marc Portier)</td>
<td>JavaFX in Practice (Richard Bair, Jasper Potts and Martin Brebovsky)</td>
<td>Scrum in Practice (Chery Sylvain and Yves Hanouille)</td>
<td>A Persistence Journey - From XML to JPA and Back Again (Mike Keith)</td>
<td>The Scala Experience (Bill Venner and Ted Neward)</td>
<td>Declarative programming with Rules, Workflow and Event Processing (Mark Proctor, Kris Verlauwen)</td>
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<td>16.45 - 17.15</td>
<td>JFreeChart - The Essentials (David Gilbert)</td>
<td>Editing xml and html with JBoss Visual Page Editor (Max Rydahl Andersen)</td>
<td>A successful search, a happy user: make it happen! (Emmanuel Bernard)</td>
<td>Squill: Not Another ORM (Ievgeni Kabanov)</td>
<td>VisualVM - new extensible monitoring platform (Jaroslav Bachorik)</td>
<td>JSF on Rails - JDeveloper 11g, ADF 11g and Jheadstart (Lucas Jelleta)</td>
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<td>17.25 - 17.55</td>
<td>Agile Testing of Java Rich Clients, with Fit, FEST and TestNG (Michael Huttermann)</td>
<td>Making full use of Hibernate Tools (Max Rydahl Andersen)</td>
<td>10 reasons why Java EE development doesn’t have to be painful (Alexis Mousline-Pouchkine)</td>
<td>Mockito in action (Szymon Faber)</td>
<td>Building Java Projects With Gradle (Hans Dockter)</td>
<td>A Thirty-Minute Development Cycle for JPA Applications with IntelliJ IDEA and Jalapeno Plugin (Michael Bouzinier and Olivier Caudron)</td>
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Where is Spring going?

Parleys attended a number of sessions during SpringOne last summer in Antwerp. Throughout this week, you’ll read a number of articles in Parleys based on talks at SpringOne. We kick off the series with the talk by Rob Harrop and Adrian Coyler.

Rob Harrop and Adrian Coyler started the day with a whirling session answering questions like Where do we come from?, What problems did the Spring Framework start out solving?, Where does that hit a wall and how can we get forward from there? Rob Harrop is a core developer of the Spring Framework since June 2004 and now leads the JMX and AOP efforts, and the Spring Modules project which will provide Spring integration for a variety of open source tools.

Spring introduced better modularity in the code. Before one used to have the code tangled up with the environment around it and the other components in the system. There was weak modularity and invasion of the module, high unintended coupling. Spring provided better modularity down to the individual component. The profit was: better testing, speedier development. And solving the modularity problem. One also got better ‘visibility’ into what is going on in the Spring ‘blueprints’ that give insight on the components, the structure and how it all fits together. That resulted in cleaner and cleaner code configuration. Things became much simpler. “The last two years we also started to introduce ‘appropriate abstractions’.” It lets you use elements that are closer to the problem domain in describing intentions. Those are all supported by the Spring imbeddable runtime, that is the Spring Framework, the Spring WebFlow, Spring Security. It brings benefits in any host environment. “The question for today is, if we completely nailed it, if we had the perfect imbeddable runtime components, is that it? Is that going to be enough? Are there limitations? How can we address them?”

What about modularity?
“With modularity you can take out one module and change it, knowing that it doesn’t affect the others.” Where do we go into regression tests. Everything ripples back. “With modularity you can take out one module and change it, knowing that it doesn’t affect the others.” Where do we hit the hard stop? Where is embeddable runtime? It has to sit behind a very simple interface. You can’t really get to the level of modularity that services down into deployment. You are going to hit a wall.

Versioning: deploy and pray
The second issue is ‘versioning’. Why is that still a problem? You need versioning to manage the contrasts between different versions of a development. There are three distinct issues. People use hundreds of open source libraries in an application they are building. One has to manage these different versions. Often that is done manually. But most of the time it boils down to deploy and pray. You bring stuff together and hope that it will work. Likewise, if you want to deploy a modular application, you might want to migrate one module. You want to run one version side by side to the other. There is no way to do that. You have no mechanism that tells you what your version depends on. In large scale deployment that doesn’t work. You end up with collisions. You must be able to describe the versions you need and run multiple versions side by side. You need a system that allows you to describe the versions you need. Describe the interactions between different versions. And run them side by side.

Yes we can
Next is the issue of dynamics or the ability to control the life cycle at a modular level. Once you think of a modular environment, you want to do things like swap out this module at runtime. Simple enough. More complex: I want to swap out this module at runtime but keep the old one around just in case the new one fails. The make up of the modules is constantly changing. The interactions between the modules can be changed in a variety of ways. With a lot of stuff going on behind the scenes, the underlying platform needs to react to an unknown number of asynchronous events. The concurrency we have in JAVA is not perfect for building this extreme interactive dynamic system, especially when servicing a dynamic problem. In practice you might have 20 modules, changing, starting, stopping, ... When something goes wrong, you may have 5 or 10 threads going on, interacting with the state of your system. Then it is very difficult to get an understanding of what is going on. “We are trying to surface the more dynamic aspects of the module system.” The last topic is the question of operations. “We are reaching a limit on what you can do with embeddable components. We want to make things visible in an operational view.”

There is a trend towards distributed development teams, outsourcing development, off-shoring etc. The ability to define a system into modules affects one’s ability to carve the work up for independently working teams. Having strong boundaries between modules determines the ability for smooth interactions between the teams. From a production’s point of view, having strict boundaries between the modules prevents the ‘ripple effect’. When changing one piece of code, everything has to go into regression tests. Everything ripples back. “With modularity you can take out one module and change it, knowing that it doesn’t affect the others.” Where do we hit the hard stop? Where is embeddable runtime? It has to sit behind a very simple interface. You can’t really get to the level of modularity that services down into deployment. You are going to hit a wall.

Rob Harrop: “With modularity you can take out one module and change it, knowing that it doesn’t affect the others.”
“So there are some things we can do with embedded runtime components and some we can’t seem to solve. The question becomes: can we fix it? Rob’s answer? “Yes we can!”

After that, both explained how OSGI offers a strong module foundation, a versioning, a dynamics side, not so much about operations… “The journey was started with Spring dynamic modules and was carried a long way. The embedded OSGI-approach has limitations. That led to the development of the SpringSource application.” They talked about type level dependency describing the dependencies between the bundles. About ‘import library’ that was added to the platform. “We have taken 400 most commonly used enterprise libraries people use in conjunction with Spring and we’ve added the manifesto that people use directly in OSGI.” They demonstrated live updating of versions. “There is more in the vision than we can do right now.”

One can connect to the running platform instance and get information about the bundles installed. “You can stop a specific bundle, replace it with a new version and... the application continues.” The operator has deep insight in the modules and the services they produce. “We hope to continue a great job... and there will be more to do.” What is the roadmap, the remaining challenges on the deployment and the operational side? “It is still a little harder than it needs to be on modularity and versioning. It can be hard to diagnose a problem. It needs some active error analysis features. We do have some of that already. But there is more we can do.”

In versioning there is ‘pinning’. It has no notion of a dependency profile. You might get type clashes if one application has version x and another version y. “We’ve toyed, toyed and there is no good solution to that. But we are providing a good diagnosis when the problem occurs. In the meantime we are looking for a solution so you could choose on what you depend and we will deal with the OSGI mechanics under the hood.”

There is also this notion of ‘personalities’. “We don’t see applications as distinct silos. Applications can be made up of modules with these different stereotypes of personalities doing different things. The idea is to provide web service personalities, batch personalities, ... but Spring will bootstrap that for you, it will understand the personalities. There is a lot more to come... This is just the beginning. We are very excited about the journey.”

Everyone wants to be Agile


An absolute majority, around 60%, said that agile is about iterations (springs to use the Scrum terminology). It is a bit disappointing to hear that people think that RUP is not iterative, but based on the waterfall model. In fact, if you wanted to use RUP for waterfall development you would have to make a real effort to restructure RUP. We clearly said that everyone should move to iterations for the same reasons that people now like about agile: rapid, working software, change, flexible, risks, etc. Given that around 60% think that agile is about iterations, and RUP was designed to support iterations, is RUP agile? My answer is that RUP can be applied in an agile way but RUP itself is not agile. Thus there need to be something more.

20% of the answers were about technical ideas such as feature-driven, test-driven, user stories, etc. However, none of these ideas would have created a revolution on their own. 10% of the answers were about light process – light to understand, light to use and light on documentation. Now we start to come to the core of agile. I truly believe that in the past we have been too ambitious in describing process, in adopting too much process and in documentation. The reality is that even if people write a lot very few people will ever read it. Thus the trend towards light will sustain. However, it is easy to be light. The trick is to be as light as possible but not lighter. I believe you will find our work on EssUP and EssWork new and fresh. The last 10% were about how to work together daily, weekly, monthly, etc. It is about communication, people and teams, about how to organize teams, how to take decisions, how to protect the team from the outside. This is what we call social engineering. Agile has put the finger on the fact that we need highly motivated and competent people to be successful with software development. No process has ever developed software. It has always been done by people. We have of course always known this, but we have not pushed it as much. The focus on people is really what makes agile unique, and this is why agile originally broke through.

Agile has become more of a philosophy. It appears that everything good is now agile. Thus it is not really easy to tell what agile is. Whatever happens we will one day get a new fashion. I can’t tell you what it will be but be sure of one thing: it will be smart, very smart.
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**Experienced Java professionals are hard to get**

Just saying there is a shortage on Java personnel does not do justice to the different opinions among Java employers. They all try to keep and engage personnel and avoid capacity problems. Due to the open source character of Java, the development of Java itself is not affected by personnel affairs.

"From the year 2000 onwards there was a relapse of the number of students starting higher education in Informatics, which now results in less graduates at the labour market", starts Ellen Maes, HR consultant at Data Flow technologies. "This and the net growth of ICT vacancies also contribute to the shortage of Java personnel, among others. This is confirmed by figures from the official sector federation for technology, Agoria. They calculated more than 14,000 vacancies mid 2008 in Belgium alone.”

Stijn van den Enden, CTO at ACA IT-Solutions differentiates: "Finding Java personnel as such is not really that big of a problem. It depends on how high you set your standards. But when you want to make a difference in the quality of your services as a company, you need to reach out and find those candidates who combine excellent technical know-how with necessary non-technical or soft skills.” Karel Hendrickx, director at Inter Access adds: "We daily receive applications. The problem is that there are only a few with a lot of experience. It is not only technical experience that counts but a customer focused attitude as well.” Mieke Broeders, recruitment manager at Cegeka, informs us about the difficulty to find senior profiles. "Most experience profiles are highly wanted at the market and can choose from many job offerings. They are critical and demanding in their job search. As a company you have to differentiate.”

Apart from the lack of seniors, in the so called main-stream technologies such as Java EE 5, Spring and Seam, ACA IT-Solutions indicates the gaps in new fields.

Van den Enden: "The largest gaps exist in areas that have emerged and revolutionized the market over the last years such as Service Oriented Architecture, Identity and Access Management. There are relatively few people who have had the opportunity to work with these emerging concepts and related technologies. It is also very hard for academic institutes to keep up with the evolution in these domains.”

**Solutions**

All companies are looking constantly for new personnel. Broeders: "Every year we make a media plan. Monster, Stepstone, print campaigns and self organized events to find new personnel are included.” Other companies do that as well. The websites from companies also have vacancies. At Data Flow the referral policy is very successful. Maes: “Candidates that we see through this mouth-to-mouth publicity are in general well informed about the way Data Flow works and have a good cultural fit with the organisation. Through these testimonials we recruit approximately 30% of our new personnel.” At ACA IT-Solutions most new hires have come through personal contacts.

Several companies maintain a relationship with universities and student organisations. Once the employees are hired, companies have a retention plan. Data Flow for example holds a formal survey twice a year to check the satisfaction about several job related aspects such as job content, reward, training and social atmosphere. Maes: “On the basis of this result our HR policy is constantly evaluated and adjusted.” For some the fact that the company only does Java is a prerequisite. For others the broad disciplines are valued. Hendrickx: “Inter Access chooses to use new developments and the training of people. Otherwise you do not have a part to play in the future. ACA IT-Solutions and Cegeka praise their agile methodology. Van den Enden: "It enables us to stay in perfect control of project budgets and deadlines. This results in highly motivated, self-regulating and self-improving project teams where hard work is combined with great fun. Broeders: “At the Cegeka University we keep up to date with the newest technologies.” Each company has its culture. Nowadays many companies have flexible hours. Broeders: “We have our eye on a balance between work and private life.” And finally, the numerical rewards must be ok. Broeders: "We as well as other companies have business aligned salary and other advantages such as laptop, company car and insurances. We do not buy people, there must be an intrinsic motivation.”

- **Holdback on technology**

Many technological evolutions in Java are driven by communities who invest a great deal of their spare time. These open source development projects exist for virtually every flavour of technology and they are typical examples of how geographically scattered knowledge can be gathered to create new and improve existing products or technologies. Companies do not think that the shortage of personnel will not have its impact on the development of Java. Karel Hendrickx: "It does not stop the development; on the contrary that goes faster and faster. Only the adoption by companies might slow down a bit.” Projects can go through. Broeders: "We hire freelancers if we do not have enough permanent staff. They are more expensive and you never know when they leave again, but it prevents a shortage on capacity.”
This was JavaPolis 2007

Here’s a selection of pictures we published in Parleys last year. See how much fun JavaPolis was then! Be on the lookout for our photographer every morning, you may be in tomorrow’s edition of Parleys.