

z/Bottom Line



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Mainframe 2.0

Elle is excited. Being a nerd-dog, she loves sea changes in the technological landscape, although she's very discriminating and selective. She's not one to easily fall for the latest acronymic passion sweeping the industry. So, I take notice when Elle's ears perk up.

What's grabbed her attention is the explosion of inertia driving new Web development under the moniker of "Web 2.0." While there's no official spec (e.g., at the W3C for Web 2.0), the loose consensus outlines a Web experience that's vastly different from the early days of mere "information portals." Tim O'Reilly from O'Reilly Media (www.oreilly.com) lays claim to originating the phrase in 2004 during a conference brainstorming session about the future of Web experiences and interactions. Much discussion and threads have followed, but the cognoscenti have developed a working definition of the promise of Web 2.0, outlined in seven principles:

1. The Web as platform
2. Harnessing collective intelligence
3. Data is the next "Intel Inside"
4. End of the software release cycle
5. Lightweight programming models
6. Software above the level of a single device
7. Rich user experiences.

While the exploration of these concepts merits extensive discussion, the mainframe industry in general and IBM zSeries development in particular must focus on at least two of the above. The Web as the platform for accessing information is simply the de facto standard. Using the browser for information has become more the norm for most people than a newspaper or radio—because it's simple, and because of immediacy and currency. But Web 2.0 postulates moving toward a different experience. What most people have decried about the Web is the static nature of the data and lack of additional function they've grown accustomed to in desktop applications. Here's where things change.

Foremost among the new technologies designed to change this experience is something called AJAX, which can help us move toward a new experience: desktop application functionality over the Web. Think drag-and-drop, right-mouse click, context-sensitive menus, and information updates without a screen refresh. In fact, done well, an AJAX interface looks and feels just like a desktop app, but with all the benefits of Web access, including information from anywhere, no software to install, update and maintain, and centralized data. Google was one of the first exploiters of AJAX, as demonstrated in both their Google Maps and Gmail applications. One of the finest examples I've seen is

from a company called Zimbra (www.zimbra.com). Visit their site and try their "Hosted Demo" where you can immediately see the benefits of AJAX technology firsthand in their Web-based e-mail client.

AJAX follows recent conventions by being an open standard, which means exponential adoption and exploitation. Microsoft has jumped into the movement with both feet with the announcement of their "Atlas" development extension for ASP .NET, making it far easier to craft AJAX applications with their toolkit. All development departments should take note of this shift in technology, as the promise of Web 2.0 and AJAX experiences are changing our expectations about interfaces.

For the mainframe, the promise is amazing. IBM has done a magnificent job of keeping the mainframe competitive in all areas except one. It's like that old phrase, "It's the _____, stupid!" Here we fill in the blank with "interface." The one continuing legacy that haunts the mainframe, and in fact keeps it fresh in people's minds as a legacy, is the "green screen." It's overdue for IBM to offer a complete and total alternative to the 3270 interface. Purists and heads-down, data-entry users may still need it in some form. But IBM must help us move into the next generation, or "Mainframe 2.0," where the only "public" view of the mainframe for all functions is through a rich Web-based interface that includes these new technologies.

In Mainframe 2.0, the excitement of all the new technologies will become a reality. It's more than possible to integrate AJAX technology with mainframe applications. AJAX and the mainframe are being demonstrated at the WAVV 2006 industry user conference in Chattanooga in April. This means organizations can leverage all the inherent and continued benefits of zSeries architecture, complemented with Web-based, desktop-application-functional applications. No sacrifices here. Mainframe 2.0 will deliver what all the conversions to new platforms fell short of. It's a simple equation: (desktop application functionality) + (Web-based access) + (mainframe performance, data management, and application strength) = Mainframe 2.0.

Elle was right about this one. Just watch what follows. And that's z/Bottom Line. **Z**

About the Author

Eric L. Vaughan is president and CEO of illustro Systems International, LLC. He has more than 25 years of experience in the IT industry, and is leading illustro Systems in its efforts to help IT management transform their mainframe investments. Comments and suggestions are welcome.
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