



John Pugh



Paul White

News from the PP-D Users Conference

We have literally just gotten off the plane from attending the ParcPlace-Digitalk Users Conference in Anaheim, CA. It's deadline time, but we thought we would try to squeeze some thoughts and news from the conference into this issue. In our next issue, Ron Charron will provide us with an in-depth review.

The major news and a surprise, we're sure to many of you, is that there will be new releases of VisualWorks, VisualWave, and Visual Smalltalk Enterprise. Yes, this is not a typo, we said Visual Smalltalk Enterprise. This will be good news to Digitalk customers, but we wonder whether we would have seen far fewer defections by these customers to IBM had this announcement been made at last year's conference, rather than the announcement that support for Visual Smalltalk would end with the first release of "Jigsaw." So what of the merged product? The strategy remains the same—to move to a common image—but it will be a gradual process culminating in a future VisualWorks 4.0 (or Jigsaw 1.0) release. Some features of the "Jigsaw" technology were previewed, such as native widgets (initially for Windows only), a much enhanced ADE known as Cascade, a small base image augmented by SLL technology, and solutions to the "namespace" problem.

PP-D's plans are both Web- and server-centric. It describes itself as a client/server/Web company that would like to occupy the application server space dominated currently by GemStone, but with a heavy emphasis on Web technology. VisualWave and Distributed Smalltalk were dominant in demonstrations of forthcoming technology, and a VisualWorks server product was promised.

So what of Java? PP-D has handed responsibility for its Parts for Java product, and the development of Java components (Java Beans), to ObjectShare Inc. (of WindowBuilder/Pro fame). The guys from OSI have long demonstrated their ability to deliver quality components in the Smalltalk world, and this would appear to be a smart move on the part of PP-D, which should allow it to concentrate on its core Smalltalk business.

So what of merging Smalltalk and Java technologies? This is clearly going to (and needs to) happen—in some form or another. It was a delight to listen to the venerable George Bosworth describe the plusses and minuses of various possibilities, such as Java running in a Smalltalk engine or a Smalltalk plug-in for Netscape. Unfortunately, it appears that we will have to wait awhile before we see any significant happenings from PP-D in this area. There was also an excellent keynote talk from a Mr. Peter Coffee (no kidding!), but we'll leave that to our correspondent Ron Charron.

Smalltalk did meet Java in an interesting third-party product called Route 1 from Applied Reasoning, which allows existing VisualWorks and VisualWave applications to deploy on the web using a Java-based client. An advantage of this approach is that the constraints of HTML are removed. The real application—multiple windows, dialogs, and all—runs inside a Web browser; Java objects on the client side are connected via a lightweight ORB to a VisualWorks server. Performance is enhanced, since there is no longer a need to send an entirely new Web page across the network with each user interaction. Java widgets (clones of the Smalltalk widgets) reside on the client side, which again enhances the speed.

PP-D has plans to beef up its Partners Program, an announcement that is long overdue. But PP-D clients will not move to a new release until third-party products such as Envy and TOPLink also have new releases to match. Working with its partners is essential.

In summary, PP-D is on the way to merging the disparate technologies embedded within the Visual Smalltalk and VisualWorks product lines, using an interesting technology in the pipeline. While it takes shape, the existing product lines will continue to be supported.

Oh, and thanks to PP-D for giving us the run of Disneyland for an evening. No lines! We "big kids" were in Disney Heaven.

Enjoy this issue.