CFML Forever!

BlueDragon expands your range of choices

Since New Atlanta first announced BlueDragon about a year ago, we've been asked two common questions: "What is BlueDragon?" and "Why did you create it?" I thought a good starting point and introduction for my first column (which, hopefully, will become a regular CFDJ feature) would be to answer these questions, particularly the latter.

By Vince Bonfanti

Briefly, BlueDragon is a CFML scripting engine and runtime module that is implemented as a standard Java servlet. BlueDragon is packaged as a standalone server based on New Atlanta's ServletExec servlet/JSP engine, complete with its own built-in Web server and adapters for the most popular Web servers – Microsoft IIS, Apache, Netscape Enterprise Server, and iPlanet Web Server. BlueDragon is also packaged in a version for J2EE (Java 2 Enterprise Edition) that allows you to deploy CFML applications onto any standard J2EE server – including BEA WebLogic, IBM WebSphere, JBoss, Macromedia JRun, New Atlanta ServletExec, Apache Tomcat, and others.

Is BlueDragon a competitor to Macromedia's ColdFusion MX? Well, some people choose to view it that way, and maybe that's the easiest way to understand BlueDragon. But that's not the way we view it. If BlueDragon was merely a feature-for-feature clone of CFMX, there really wouldn't be much value to it. Instead, BlueDragon offers features, packaging, configuration, and deployment options that aren't supported by CFMX, thereby expanding your range of choices as a CFML developer (to be fair, there are also features, packaging options, etc., offered by CFMX that aren't supported by BlueDragon).

Building Dynamic Web Sites

Our reasons for creating BlueDragon can best be summed up by the phrase: CFML forever! New Atlanta and its founders have long histories building dynamic Web sites, dating back to early 1995 before the creation of Java, CFML, or Web application servers. We've developed Web sites and products using every major server-side scripting technology: CGI, Perl, ISAPI, NSAPI, JSP, ASP, PHP, CFML, etc.

The leading product for publishing FileMaker Pro databases on the Web – Lasso – was created by the founders of New Atlanta; the core technology of Lasso was incorporated into FileMaker Pro itself in 1997, and both Lasso and FileMaker Pro are still widely used today (primarily on Mac OS, but also on Windows and Linux). New Atlanta's ServletExec was the second commercial implementation of the Java Servlet API, shipping a few months after JRun in 1997. New Atlanta has been, and still is, represented on every Expert Group for every version of the Java Servlet and JavaServer Pages (JSP) ever published by Sun Microsystems.

The point is: we know server-side scripting technology, and we like CFML! Every CFML developer who is half awake knows that during the past two years or so the alphabet soup of server-side scripting technologies has been reduced to three market leaders: JSP, ASP, and PHP. These are all good technologies, and all have particular strengths to recommend them, but none offer the same ease-of-use and immediate productivity of CFML, particularly for Web site designers who do not have a strong background in "traditional" programming languages such as C/C++ or Java. CFML is absolutely unique and is a technology that deserves to survive and thrive as a legitimate alternative and complement to the "big three."

New Atlanta, through the BlueDragon product family, is commited to helping ensure that your investment in CFML over the years – in terms of the code modules, custom tags, and solutions frameworks that you've created, and in terms of the education, training, and techniques you've developed through hard experience – does not become marginalized or devalued in the face of the market dominance of JSP, ASP, and PHP.

A Standalone Server

As I mentioned above, BlueDragon is offered as a standalone server, with its own built-in Web server (for development) and adapters for the most popular Web servers (for deployment). We think this is an important product configuration and that there are many, many cases where you'll want to use CFML as a "standalone" technology. However, one of the key advantages that JSP and ASP have over CFML (and PHP) is that they're built on "platform" technologies – J2EE in the case of JSP, and .NET for ASP. These platform technologies provide access to a rich set of functionality, as well as robustness and scalability, which simply can't be matched by a standalone CFML server.

BlueDragon aims to provide a high level of native integration with the J2EE and .NET platforms, to the extent that you can use CFML as a complete alternative to JSP or ASP for developing native J2EE or .NET Web applications. Of course, you'll also be able to deploy CFML side-by-side with JSP and ASP as fully integrated native components of J2EE or .NET Web applications. Think about this for a moment, because it's a subtle but important point. In the past your CFML could only be deployed on proprietary ColdFusion servers from Allaire or

Macromedia; that is, when you developed using CFML you were a ColdFusion developer, period. With BlueDragon, when you develop using CFML you can be a J2EE developer, or a .NET developer, or a ColdFusion developer, or all three at the same time!

Our goal is this: if you're a CFML consultant or solutions provider and one day a client asks you (or already has): "Can you develop a J2EE application for me?" we want you to be able to answer, "Yes!" If you're an in-house developer and your CIO says one day, "We've decided to standardize on .NET, what are we going to do with all those ColdFusion applications?" we want your answer to be, "No problem." The key point is, and this bears repeating, that our goal is to make your CFML pages work as fully integrated native components of J2EE or .NET Web applications, not as a separate component or add-on extension.

The version of BlueDragon for J2EE Servers that is currently shipping is implemented as a standard Java servlet that allows you to deploy CFML pages within a standard J2EE Web application or Web Archive (.war) file. These Web applications can be deployed to any J2EE server that supports recent versions of the Java Servlet API and JavaServer Pages (JSP) specifications. There are not separate versions for J2EE servers from different vendors; there doesn't need to be because BlueDragon is a standards-based implementation.

A number of lead customers have successfully ported their CFML applications to BlueDragon/J2EE – these applications are being deployed on BEA WebLogic, Borland Enterprise Server, and New Atlanta ServletExec, and have been tested using Apache Tomcat. Two of these applications consist of over 2500 CFML pages each, and one is based on Fusebox. I'll provide details of their experiences and the BlueDragon/J2EE architecture in future columns.

BlueDragon for .NET

BlueDragon for .NET is currently under development with early alpha versions running in our lab. This version of BlueDragon is fully implemented as managed code that executes within the the .NET Common Language Runtime (CLR). We're very excited about BlueDragon for .NET with its promise of high-performance native integration with ADO.NET and COM. Look for a formal announcement of BlueDragon for .NET either before or shortly after this column is published.

Finally, let's not forget about PHP and the open source platform in general. New Atlanta is fully committed to supporting open source technologies such as Linux, the Apache Web server, JBoss, and Tomcat. We've investigated creating a version of BlueDragon that is integrated with the PHP runtime, but at this point we're not sure it really makes sense. PHP is not built on a platform technology such as J2EE or .NET, but instead runs on top of the "bare" operating system and Web server. Therefore, while integrating BlueDragon with the PHP runtime might be an interesting technical exercise, it doesn't seem that it would result in the same benefits as BlueDragon for J2EE or BlueDragon for .NET.

A Free Version

However, we recognize that among the key benefits of PHP, and open source generally, is the fact that it's free (that is, it's available at no cost). This can be a very powerful factor for some people when choosing a technology, overwhelming all other decision-making criteria. In order to remove this "disadvantage" from CFML, New Atlanta will soon announce (or has already announced, depending on the timing of this column's publication) a free version of BlueDragon. This will be a standalone server, with adapters for popular Web servers, which will be completely free for development and deployment. There will be some advanced features not supported by this free version, but it will be much more feature-rich than the old ColdFusion Express that you may remember. Our intention is to make this a truly useful product, not just a "teaser," and we hope you'll give it serious consideration for your CFML deployments.

We at New Atlanta hope that you'll view BlueDragon as a new tool to help you remain a productive, relevant, successful CFML developer for many years to come. CFML forever!

About the Author

Vince Bonfanti is president and co-founder of New Atlanta Communications, developers of Java- and CFML-based server products. A charter member of Sun's JavaT Servlet API and JavaServer PagesT Expert Groups, Vince has been a JavaOne speaker and a contributor to Java trade magazines and online publications. He has also been a featured speaker at Toronto's CFNorth and Washington's CFUN conferences as well as at local ColdFusion User Groups around the country.

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