

The Battle for the Connected Desktop

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The battle of the desktop ended in 90s. Stalwarts like IBM, Lotus, Wordperfect and Microsoft were in the fray. Microsoft won, almost killing all its competitors and emerged as the lone survivor.

Circa 2005. Another battle for the desktop has begun – this time for the Connected Desktop. About the technology that connects up the desktop with back-end data sources, and the millions of desktop users with back-end information sources. As in the previous battle, Microsoft is there. Flanked by the powerful across-the-shores ally SAP. On the other side is another stalwart, Oracle, a common foe of Microsoft and SAP, and battle weary one at that.

In April 2005, SAP joined hands with Microsoft, and created Mendocino, now called Duet, adding SAP connectivity to the Microsoft desktop, thereby deftly adding all desktop users to its potential user base, with a single stroke. Considering the fact that only 15% enterprise desktop users are SAP users, this move expands and redefines the enterprise market as never before.

The first bugle of the battle has been sounded. The battle lines are drawn.

The results of this battle could be as devastating or as rewarding, depends on which side you are on, like the previous one. The winner in this battle will rule not only the Connected Desktop, but also its back-end stack, the server, the application server, perhaps even the database and several smaller pieces of the technology stack. Why would this be a battle to watch out for? Because the ones who own the desktop interface and deliver to it, will, in the future, own the largest number of users and the largest amount of middleware technology stack.

Here is why. Though the connected desktop will be created simple to use for the average Joe, the business user, it is by no means simple. Under the desktop hood, there are many pieces of complex middleware that would work to create the seamless desktop as an information interface. Middleware that would create information bridges between the desktop and the back-end sources, manage the user identity, authentication and authorizations across the back-end data source and the desktop, publish what is available from the back-end to the desktop and finally, a set of development tools that would enable customization of the end-user experience. The technology vendor who connects the desktop of a business user with the enterprise application, would, in the bargain, also be able to sell a lot of associated middleware component.

Duet (Formerly Mendocino), the first entrant in the “Connected Desktop” market, has a five-component thick technology stack consisting of Microsoft .net server, Microsoft SQL server, Microsoft Exchange Server, SAP Netweaver server and SAP’s composite framework, not to speak of a .net client on the users desktop.

As we speak, Duet (Formerly Mendocino), the joint offering from SAP and Microsoft that connects select SAP transactions with Microsoft Outlook is out with Beta customers, and is scheduled for general availability in July 2006. Duet has, at last reported count, 50 beta customers, and several hundreds wait in the lines. If one looks at Duet, and what it delivers on the ground, one is surprised by its thin delivery. **Only** 5 SAP transactions, **only** on Outlook, **only** works on Windows Professional 2003+, **only** works on mySAP ERP 2004+ - and requires a **WHOLE** bunch of middleware. Duet, as many analysts have also pointed out, is severely limited on what it does today and has raised concerns about the way it locks up the technology options for the customers. But then, just why are the customers lining up? Clearly, it is the seductive dream of seamless desktop connectivity that is alluring customers and users alike. Customers are responding to this dream, and lining up for Duet, not for what it is today, but what it will be, can be, in the future.

Meanwhile, Oracle, the arch-enemy and foe of SAP and Microsoft, probably isn't aware that its market is getting redefined. Or is too busy to care. Oracle chose to fight the battle on scale, and on being a single-stop solution provider, and gobbled up Peoplesoft and Siebel in quick succession. While Oracle is "fusing" things together, the market has quietly changed and changed avatars. No longer is the market constituted by specialist Mr. Supply Chain Manager and Ms. Customer Relationship Executive. The market has evolved and added to include the average, everyday Joe desktop user, the ones who works on spreadsheets, the ones who communicates on Outlook, and the ones who creates Powerpoint presentations.

It is not that Oracle does not have technology for its Average Joe Desktop User – Oracle has its own Office Add-ins, VB enabled spreadsheets and Outlook plug-ins, and these software components might be actually delivering more than Duet on the ground, but without a cohesive usage model, and a technology stack behind it, the Average Joe would not know or even care. Further, Oracle, as a technology leader, needs to provide a encompassing Desktop Connectivity technology alternative for the Average Joe by giving him technology options that do not cause him to be tied to Microsoft and SAP.

Losing Joe can be potentially devastating for Oracle. For, Joe would dictate that his CIO buys him technology that brings him information as he works on his desktop interface of choice, in a cohesive manner. The technology behind the connected desktop will romp in the enterprise stack with the desktop and soon, there would be stacks and stacks of middleware servers delivering information to the desktops of hundreds and thousands of Joes. Not only would Oracle lose the desktop, it would also lose the middleware stack that goes with it.

The first round of the battle apparently belongs to Microsoft and SAP. Now, to see if Oracle heeds to the call of the bugle and fights back.

Else, we may have another conclusive win for Microsoft and its Allies, just like the previous desktop wars. This time around, it may, again leave only one sole survivor.