

Borland® Kylix™

Case Study

Linux® platform gains fans in retail arena

Background: Apropos turns to Linux®

When it comes to information technology purchases, chain retailers can be as savvy as the best shoppers in their stores. Even when they're looking for quality, retailers are also keeping an eye out for bargains that can help them improve their own sales and operations margins.

The retailers' combined demand for value and performance is one reason Apropos Retail Management Systems Inc. is turning more and more to Linux as a platform for its line of turnkey software solutions for small- to medium-size chain retailers. By moving its previously Windows®- only point-of-sale (POS) and e-commerce systems cross-platform to Linux, Apropos will be able to offer retailers a single-server solution that has built-in support for key features such as security and remote management. Plus, Apropos will be able to pass on to its customers the cost savings associated with the license-free operating system.

The first step in the transformation was to select an appropriate development tool that would not only speed up Apropos' internal efforts but also provide a wide range of database support as well as access to a large number of Application Programming Interface (API) sets. The latter attribute was a key factor for supporting the Linux e-commerce module, which would need to interface to a number of external applications, such as credit card processing systems.

Business Challenge: move existing solutions to Linux

Currently, Apropos offers its customers a mix of both Windows-based and Linux-based software. According to Blaine Whittle, director of development at Apropos, a typical retail customer who wants to run an e-commerce site usually purchases a package that includes Windows-based applications and a Linux-based database server.

"Our focus for the future is to make things simpler by converting our entire line to run on Linux," Whittle says. For e-commerce implementations, Whittle says, it's much better if users have just a single Web server that performs all the

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“In the retail industry, Linux is a widely adopted operating environment because of its security and cost-saving benefits. We’ve chosen to standardize on Delphi 6 and Kylix 2 as we continue to address the unique requirements of the ‘All Channel’ retailer.”

—Sten Karlsen, VP, Apropos

necessary functions, as that helps eliminate the administrative and operational tasks associated with dual platforms based on different operating systems. “So one of our goals is to ship a single-server solution, based on Linux,” he says.

When Apropos went searching for a tool that would help it develop the new Linux e-commerce module, the company had two main criteria that had to be satisfied, according to Whittle:

- **Functionality.** The tool needed a rich feature set with plenty of off-the-shelf Web server and HTML functionality built in so that Apropos developers didn’t have to reinvent the wheel when porting the e-commerce module and the following components to Linux.
- **Flexible database connectivity.** Support was necessary for a wide range of databases, since e-commerce systems need to tie into multiple sources of data.

Since Apropos was already a longtime user of the Borland® Delphi™ application development tool family, it didn’t have to look far for a similar product in the Linux world: Borland Kylix.™

The Borland Solution: developing applications with Kylix

With access to more than 165 reusable, “customizable,” and extensible components in the Borland Component Library for Cross-platform development (CLX™), Kylix makes it easy for developers to rapidly build Internet, database, and GUI applications, without the time and learning-curve constraints common with traditional Linux development tools.

And when used in combination with programs written with the Delphi™ 6 development environment for Windows, Kylix offers the ease of producing workable Linux code with a simple recompile, allowing developers to use one set of skills and one code base to develop high-performance, cross-platform Linux and Windows applications.

Whittle, whose staff has historically used Delphi to create its Windows applications, is happy that he doesn’t have to retrain his developers to produce the same kind of applications on Linux.

“Using Delphi has enabled us to create a better application in less time,” he says. “I also believe our Delphi code is cleaner than what our code would look like in products similar to Visual Basic.® Cleaner code equates to shorter code changes and updates.”

With Kylix, Apropos is positioned to open up a whole new market for its retail management and e-commerce software packages, both to existing customers looking to switch to Linux platforms and to new customers interested in embracing the built-in features and cost savings associated with the Linux solutions..

Case Study

"The IT professionals out there with a bit of real-world experience are excited about Linux," Whittle says. "They look at the most important piece (of a software platform), which is, whether it meets their needs, and what are the costs of supporting it. With Linux, the savings on implementation and support are real."

And for Apropos, using Kylix is the way to get to future markets faster.

"Using Kylix greatly improves the productivity of our developers," Whittle says. "That's the main reason we went with it."

Results: Kylix opens the door to the future

By offering a powerful rapid application development tool for Linux, Borland is addressing the wave of the future in retail-management IT, says Whittle, whose company already has thousands of customers using its turnkey systems.

"When it comes to e-commerce platforms, our main goal is to make installs and support easier," he says, adding that one of the unique characteristics about many e-commerce installations is the fact that the machines are usually installed in a co-location facility, and not at the store premises.

The boxes are usually at the customer's ISP, and many times, the users never even see the physical machine. "That creates a problem when the applications are Windows-based," Whittle adds, "since current Windows platforms aren't the most agile software when it comes to supporting remote administration and management tasks."

The next reason to consider a move to Linux is the cost factor, Whittle says. While remote-management software is available for Windows platforms, it often comes at an extra cost. "And those costs can add up when you multiply them by a couple hundred stores," he says. Linux, Whittle notes, has features like remote administration and security built-in for free. Plus, the operating system itself carries no licensing fee, another cost savings.

"Then you have to consider the issue of having the personnel to support two different operating systems," Whittle says. "It all adds up."

Technology

Application	Retail management systems
Tool	Borland Kylix, Delphi
Hardware platform	Linux®
Database server	Informix® 4GL
Number of users	7 retail stores
Development team size	2 developers

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