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## Herewith, Key Updates on Middleware

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By **LESLIE ELLIS** -- *Multichannel News*, 6/28/2004

This week, thousands of software developers pile into San Francisco for JavaOne, the big annual rendezvous hosted by Sun Microsystems Inc. to impart the latest in code-stuffs.

To cable, JavaOne tends to occur in an outer orbit, mostly because the junction between cable people and Java coders is still young.

This year, though, there's a milestone-ish cable angle: A contest, to be announced today (June 28), that will reward four Java innovators (with \$1,000, plus an HDTV for the big winner) for cool stuff written for OCAP. OCAP stands for OpenCable Applications Platform, and lives under the roof of Cable Television Laboratories Inc. In short, it's the software layer that allows applications to be portable across MSO boundaries and devices.

### HEAVY BACKING

A potent handful of MSOs are supporting the Java-OCAP match: Advance/Newhouse Communications, Cablevision Systems Corp., Comcast Corp., Cox Communications Inc. and Time Warner Cable. Contestants in four categories have until Oct. 1 to turn in applications, built with tools provided by Vidiom Systems Inc.

JavaOne will also highlight Cox's recent "OnRamp to OCAP" effort, which steers a pared-down version of Java at the gap between the "now" (deployed digital boxes that can't do OCAP) and the "next" (OCAP-based devices, made by the traditional set-top suppliership, and by CE manufacturers.)

The Java developments make it a timely occasion to look again into "middleware," last translated within these pages in October of 2000.

Back then, middleware was a shapeless buzzword. An entire supplier community spun around it. Each had a slightly different interpretation of its applicability. Confusion reigned.

What makes middleware confusing today is less the mixed meanings, and more the mixed implementations. Everybody seems to be taking a different path. If OCAP is the next, "my cap" is the now.

Plus, conversational curveballs often slide into middleware discussions.

It happens like this: You're talking to someone about their migration strategy from today's fielded boxes, to tomorrow's OCAP boxes. Suddenly, you realize that he's talking about the guide. It's not always an easy string of dots to connect. Ultimately, it comes down to priorities, and resource allocation. People who segue from middleware talk to guide talk identify the navigational systems, used by consumers, as job one. Way more viewing options are coming, they figure. Better make it easy for people to discover and use them.

After all, while remixing existing applications on the "now" boxes to run on the "next" boxes alleviates lots of headaches, it's not all that sexy. It means recoding stuff that already works — which today consists mostly of the guide and the video-on-demand client.

### SCORECARD OF PLAYERS

Here's a quick snapshot of who's doing what, among some of the majors, as a sort of "interpretive translation" of today's middleware scene.

There's Cox, with its "OnRamp to OCAP." Most of the major MSOs signed on to support it. They talk about it in that polite way that tacitly says "give it a go, we won't interfere, hope it works, best of luck."

Cox's work hews directly to its installed base of digital set-tops, a 50-50 mix of versions made by Motorola Inc. and Scientific-Atlanta Inc. By expunging the OCAP parts they can't use on legacy boxes — support for CableCARDS, the monitor app, built-in cable modems, or DVRs — they get a product that does the job, across both suppliers and all boxes.

The big bonus: Applications running on OnRamp will run on OCAP, which yields a consistent "look and feel" to all Cox customers.

Then there's Time Warner Cable, with its ongoing Vidiom relationship for OCAP software.

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Part of the plan, parsed out in various public briefings over the last few months, is to ready a licensable OCAP implementation, just to get things moving.

The licenses come from Time Warner or Vidiom.

Another part of the plan shifts all fielded boxes off existing software — “SARA,” for “Scientific Atlanta Resident App,” and “Passport,” the guide made by Pioneer — toward a new, OCAP-based “digital navigator.”

Most of Time Warner’s work is happening in the Denver area, with the MistroTV brain trust. Handily, a Vidiom outpost is a few miles up the Boulder highway.

And there’s Comcast, with fresh ink on a licensing deal for 5 million copies of Microsoft’s TV Foundation.

Conversations continue with Vidiom (and others) for an OCAP stack. (“Stack” is software speak for how instructions are prioritized within a program.)

But wait, aren’t Microsoft and Sun enemies?

Yes, but, from a “do what the (MSO) customer wants” perspective, there’s hope. Microsoft and Sun recently settled their legal differences.

That makes it ... less unthinkable ... to envision Microsoft doing a Java implementation.

Note: Under the same chain of Comcast command, there’s the cauldron of activities inside “GuideWorks,” the joint venture Comcast created with TVGuide last year. The staff-up there is sizeable, and, as such, GuideWorks can’t be ignored as a major software initiative.

### THREE DIFFERENT PATHS

Three big companies, three different “now” paths. (And “now” includes every box installed until “next,” which is OCAP boxes. Translation: Add at least a year’s worth of “more now.”)

Increasingly, though, unanimity prevails on the “next.” Cox is adamant that OnRamp is only for pre-OCAP devices, and is equally committed to OCAP on future devices. Comcast and Time Warner are also more and more allied around OCAP.

A finger to the wind indicates heavy action for OCAP, starting at this year’s JavaOne. As the year progresses, watch for an adherence to OCAP devices that mirrors the early cable modem purchasing days, when operators stood in unity to not buy proprietary gear.

This brings us back to why such a seemingly trifling thing, like a contest, could look like a notable milestone. Five years ago, only the technology community hung out at the Consumer Electronics Show. Now, hordes of cable people go.

What they see is mostly hardware gadgetry.

The next wave is software and applications, to run on that hardware. Java is the anchor of OnRamp and OCAP; JavaOne is the place where that creative talent gathers. If nothing else, it looks like it’ll be a place to view new interactive stuff — that runs on everything of the “next.”

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