

Caché *and* MultiValue: *Birds of a Feather* – Part 1

BY TONY GRAVAGNO

The goal of this unsolicited multi-part series will be to introduce you to Caché and InterSystems, to explain their offerings for this market, and to give you a deeper understanding of what their MV initiative means to many of us in the MultiValue community.

What is Caché?

Caché is a Database Management System and application development environment, much like many in the MultiValue market. The database is often referenced like a relational data source, making it popular among SQL users, but the internal structure is similar to MultiValue. The standard environment comes with a browser-based administration dashboard, a development “Studio,” and an assortment of tools for browser UI development, web services, Java, .NET, XML, and all of the other buzzwords that one would expect.

Many of you have heard that Caché was originally based on MUMPS. This database has a history remarkably similar to that of Pick and Prime. Our communities have similar passions for the power and simplicity of our chosen models. The markets were similarly fractionalized with competing products. Even today a few versions of MUMPS exist, just as there are many flavors of MultiValue. But InterSystems has largely consolidated that market. At a time when many MultiValue people still feel a little haunted by their heritage (think foot pedals, rap singers, and software that changes ownership every few years) most Caché people I’ve met are proud to acknowledge their roots. It’s

not that their core technology has changed so much, though Caché is a significant improvement over its predecessors, but that InterSystems has fostered the validation of their technology in the eyes of the business and technical world.

Today, the Caché environment is associated with industry buzzwords like Post-Relational and Multi-Dimensional—terms also used to describe the MultiValue model. Caché is best regarded as an Object Oriented DBMS. This is not the same as Object-Relational which, while sounding more tech-savvy, is considered to be a weaker paradigm. The OO-based Caché has native support for data objects and related code within the environment itself. Compare this to API connectivity to a flat relational environment from OO languages. I will explain more about this object-orientation in another article.

However it’s categorized, Caché is fairly well recognized due to ongoing marketing campaigns by InterSystems. The database is featured in many IT and business magazines, articles, and success stories. It’s noted for performance, scalability, reliability, and tight security. In short, Caché is a proven and accepted mainstream platform, and now for our purposes it is also a MultiValue DBMS.

InterSystems

As a company, InterSystems is very strong and perhaps larger than all of the other MultiValue DBMS companies combined—except, of course, for IBM. In recent years this privately-held company, with offices in 22 countries, has skyrocketed to \$200 Million in annual revenue, and they're still growing. This revenue comes from a healthy mix of new licenses and support fees, entirely related to the core products. Their client list includes major players on Wall Street, and all sorts of governmental agencies including the US Department of Defense, the US Veteran's Administration, and various state health agencies. In addition to the large accounts, they support a large base of smaller clients who have been dedicated to them for many years. Such loyalty must be earned and is quite admirable.

The company is not just selling software. They are aware of the industries in which their software is used and they foster the growth of their partners (application developers, solution providers, and end-users) in these markets. As an example, Healthcare is one of the vertical markets where Caché dominates, and InterSystems itself is recognized as a leader in this industry.

What is being offered?

InterSystems is encouraging MV developers and end-users to port their data and applications to Caché. Caché now includes the familiar MV query language; support for Basic, Proc, and Paragraphs; a TCL/ECL command line (yes, you can telnet into a character-based screen); and other features valued in MultiValue environments.

This offering is not called "MV Caché" or "Caché for MV". As of this year the standard Caché DBMS used by all of their users worldwide will incorporate all of the MultiValue functionality.

This initiative alone is almost a dream come true, where the MultiValue DBMS is suddenly an embedded component in systems all over the world.

I believe the real offering from InterSystems is not "just another database," which seems to be a common impression. We have plenty of databases in the MultiValue market. What we need is acceptance in the mainstream world without the stigma of "the P word. We need up-line vendors who we can trust to remain in business and support our software for the foreseeable future. We need vendors who understand business needs, and who provide and eagerly support technology suitable for solving business problems. InterSystems is already helping MultiValue developers and end-users to satisfy these needs in a way that most companies in the MultiValue market do not. If you look at how they're approaching this initiative from a business perspective, it's obvious that they're offering much more than a technical solution.

Consider for example that at DEVCON 2007 (their annual developer conference), InterSystems management introduced the MultiValue enhancements as part of their keynote presentation. Also, without knowing whether or not MultiValue users were present, some InterSystems employees doing technical presentations emphasized that MV Basic could be used just like any other Caché language. And in printed marketing material which allows people to request more information about products, "MultiValue" is listed along with Oracle, SQL Server, and Sybase. We've never seen these sorts of open, inclusive gestures from any company that has acquired MultiValue technology. (The phrase "unwanted stepchild" enters into too many discussions about MultiValue DBMS vendors.) This isn't some marketing plan to make MultiValue people

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feel good enough to migrate. These references were directed at Caché audiences. It's apparent that InterSystems has truly embraced MultiValue at a corporate level, and that message is getting passed through their channels.

Business Benefits

Providers of business applications/solutions should consider the value of the major marketing efforts by InterSystems, which includes the immediate recognition and credibility you have when you open with a Caché-based solution. You now have an opportunity to sell software to new audiences, perhaps without asking them to change their platform of choice. Your existing sites might even be more inclined to remain with you if your software runs over the same environment used at all of these other mission-critical installations.

For new sales and existing site upgrades, the licensing model for Caché might even be more attractive than your current DBMS vendors' models, providing yet more incentive for you to support Caché in addition to other platforms. Many MultiValue resellers port their applications to alternative platforms to take advantage of better costs, while others port to align themselves with recognized names. Rarely do efforts result in getting both benefits, and many have found that the actual benefits weren't quite what they had originally hoped.

For application and tool developers supporting a product over Caché in addition to MultiValue platforms, your clients and prospects in the MultiValue market may appreciate that your software is more "future proof" than that of your competitors. This intangible sense of comfort could help your customer retention and new sales over MultiValue platforms, whether or not these companies ever migrate to Caché.

Individual developers also now have a larger prospect base for employment, and in fact your skills may be in higher demand as more Caché sites adopt MultiValue solutions. Consider how many sites already have a MultiValue solution, that box in the corner that they might like to integrate more closely into their other systems. If there was any doubt before, Caché users will soon be learning that MultiValue developers are in fact available to assist with such efforts, and if they want to re-host their MultiValue app into a Caché environment, you can help with that too.

Individual developers and consultants, consider this: MultiValue application vendors that port to Caché (we hope and expect) will get more clients and more sales. That means more work, and that means they will be hiring or contracting with more developers to satisfy demand. As the owner of a business that provides development services, this is all very important to me, and part of what motivated me to write these articles.

Here's another angle: Some Caché users might still have the sort of "isn't Pick dead?" impression that some of us have about MUMPS. Over time, they may come to understand that there is still a lively MultiValue market out here, and that there are solutions available in this market which may not be available to them (yet) on Caché. That MultiValue box they have in the corner can be enhanced to integrate with their other systems through use of modern tools like Java, .NET, and the Service Oriented Architectures that are coming in vogue. By embracing this education of Caché users, MultiValue solution providers may reap many benefits with no porting effort whatsoever.

Summary

Considering the unique benefits described here, I'd advise vendors and

end-users alike to monitor the progress of this Caché and MultiValue initiative. Sure, I'm enthusiastic about something new and positive in this market, but I wouldn't encourage anyone to embark on a porting effort without a wealth of information about all facets. So that's what I'm doing, providing information. I hope you find it helpful.

In my next articles I will provide more technical detail about Caché to explain why these products are "birds of a feather." This will include information about data structures, Basic, TCL, platform emulations, and other topics which are important to anyone considering a migration. I will also give you a little more insight into why I think InterSystems is worthy of our consideration as a supplemental or alternative DBMS provider. is

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