IBM Systems
M A G A Z I N E

Making the HTML Jungle a Friendlier Place

BY DON RIMA

I like RPG. I like other languages too, and I occasionally hoist the Programming Language 1 flag and wave it about, but I like RPG. I remember the first class I took in RPG. It was on a lark as a night class at Tri-County Technical College in northwest South Carolina. They used batch remote job entry to some mainframe downstate, but it was RPG.

This was long before I played with data definition specs (DDS) in any form, even before internal screens back in IBM* S/3* and S/34 days. As a traditional midranger, you primarily wrote to a file, green screen or printer. Things are changing.

To survive in this jungle sometimes referred to as the World "Wild" Web, you'll need to augment your DDS ways to think and program in terms of HTML or higher mutations of HTML. What if there were a way to protect a lot of your RPG back-end investment, have direct RPG access to the internal DB2*/400 database with minimal interference issues, and go right from DB2 via RPG to HTML and a browser that you can control in your RPG program? I bet just the thought of it has you plotting how you could streamline, and perhaps eliminate some bulky, pricey software. This month I look at iSafari from AdventureTech Group Inc. (www.atgi.org).

Installation

I must admit, I just received the first-release beta code of the fully IBM System i* version of iSafari. It used to run only on a mixed-platform environment, but it can now be contained on the System i platform.

Installation was a fairly painless download, unzip, FTP and restore before calling the installation-configuration routine. I did this with tech support in an online meeting. This option is available to

Spotlight Profile

Product: *iSafari*
Company: *AdventureTech Group Inc.*
Version: *3*
URL: *www.atgi.org*
Overall Rating: *3.760*

anyone considering or buying the product, so take advantage of it. At least let tech support configure your server and samples so they're to a known working state. Then you can experiment and play.

Ease of Use

This product isn't overly complex in its delivery or methods. After a walkthrough, you should pick things up fairly quickly. It's the same old RPG you've used forever, except you're writing browser screens in HTML and you need to populate the screen-interface data queue via a vendor-supplied API.

The learning curve varies, but if you've done any browser/Web-based development, you're 90 percent there.

Documentation

The manuals do a good job telling you how to complete the configurations and other setup processes. But when it comes to actually showing you how the RPG interfaces with the HTML, it's just not there. I understand it's coming, and it really needs to.

In the meantime, you'll learn more quickly from the walkthrough and studying the examples. And once the examples are explained to you, your biggest challenge will be learning and playing with HTML if you don't know it already.

The Rima Report

Category	Points	Weighting	Overall Score
Certifiability	4.000	.100	0.400
Installation	3.700	.150	0.555
Ease of Use	3.900	.150	0.585
Documentation	3.300	.150	0.495
Functionality	3.800	.150	0.570
Usefulness	3.900	.150	0.585
Support	3.800	.150	0.570
Total	26.400		3.760

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iSafari
2007 HONOR ROLL

KICK THE TIRES: You'll absolutely want to try the product, and you're going to wonder why someone didn't do this a long time ago.

(Points given are on a scale of 0 to 4, with 4 being the highest. Each category is assigned its own weighting from the total of 100 percent.)

ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD CLARK

Certifiability

Everything I tried worked as I expected it to.

Functionality/Usefulness

Here's what's happening with this product. You take a screen design and code it in HTML, with keywords for field names. Marry to it your regular RPG that you would normally write and how you would normally write it—with one addition. Instead of just populating screen fields, you add a few lines to put each field to a data queue. Then the iSafari server handles the interface field mapping, page serving and retrieving. This is all transparent to you or your RPG program. The additional coding is minimal and non-obtrusive. You won't have too much data prep in RPG, and you can just copy and paste from the examples you're given. Now you're ready to be productive.

Write your RPG and HTML using whatever editors you want. Then add the entries into the server definitions and you're ready to go. It's about that simple—and really nothing changes from what you've been doing all along.

I'm no HTML guru, but being productive in a short time isn't a stretch of the imagination. Until you get fluid, I recommend cutting and pasting what you need from the examples provided. It'll save a lot of time and help with the learning curve.

There are a few other minor issues, such as converting from command keys to buttons. It's just a little more cut and paste, so it's not a big deal. Most of your major conversion learning-curve issues may be covered already in the examples and source code. Use them.

If you're using some keywords in subfile processing, like "read next change," etc., you'll have some redesign, but I think that's being looked at as well for suggested workarounds.

I wish a utility were available to handle DDS-to-HTML conversions with this product. That would help make it easier to give management nice dog-and-pony shows and keep the bean counters satiated, but that's not there yet.

Support

I found tech support knowledgeable on the product and run environments. I also liked the online-meeting option.

What I'd Like to See in the Next Release

• Additional documentation to cover programming examples and interfaces
• A utility to convert DDS to HTML with field tags

Summary

If you're looking for a nice way to keep your existing RPG investment with minimal conversion and to go from green screen to browser-based, this is very much worth your time to review. Frankly, I was wondering why things hadn't been this simple before. What really struck me while I played with iSafari was how easy it was to go from DB2* and RPG right to the browser. Conceptually, it was as simple as replacing my DDS specs with HTML—not exactly cut and replace, but if you're using a decent HTML editor it shouldn't be that much of a pain. Now, my more-than-ample gut tells me that there are some complex routines with multiple screens (we've all written them) that may need some redesign and coding, but for the most part this product was blazingly simple to use. ❶

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