Meeting the challenges of the global
media industry in the 21st century

DELIVERING CONTENT ON DEMAND

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The merger between AOL and Time Warner announced in January made history as one of the biggest mergers ever. Worth around $340 billion, the combined 'clicks and mortar' giant also signifies massive change in the media business. It is the strongest indicator ever that entertainment and the media – like every other business sector – is about to be revolutionised by the Internet.

By Rob Morrison

The last decade of the 20th century saw a wave of uncertainty in the media business. The key question was who would own the two main stages of digital entertainment: production and distribution.

As a result of that turmoil, a number of different companies have converged on the media industry. Broadcast and content providers such as Sky and onDigital began competing for digital TV subscribers. Telecommunication companies such as BT and Cable & Wireless promised to deliver video on demand. Services such as pay per view and on-line shopping added a new dimension to digital broadcasting.

But those services also created new complexities for media companies. The bar is quickly being raised for companies that want to succeed in the world of media commerce. Consumers have been shown a glimpse of a more flexible future and their expectations in terms of choice, convenience and quality are higher today than ever before.

For all of those reasons, it's clear that there are plenty of organisational and technological challenges ahead. The first hurdle is the very real imperative to create digital content and to ensure that existing material is digitised for broadcasting over the Internet and by digital service broadcasters across the world. Whatever delivery mechanism is involved, the broadcast media are increasingly content hungry.

Reducing the cost

Companies also need to consider the fact that the digitisation of media reduces the cost of entry to media production. A piece of film that took days of work and hundreds of dollars to produce ten years ago can now be shot digitally, stored and broadcast for a fraction of the cost – and within much shorter time-scales.

The net effect is that smaller players are able to move much more quickly into the digital media production space just as the desktop publishing (DTP) revolution of the 1980s moved the production of camera ready text and pictures out of the sole preserve of typesetters and designers.

The pressures that these trends create are not trivial. Organisations need to move quickly to meet new competitors head on and to ensure that the assets that they own in the form of film and TV programmes are available in a digital format. They need to reduce the complexity of managing that material so that they can provide a cost-effective, reliable service to customers and partners.

Technology clearly plays a vital role. Once content is in a digital format, it can be stored, managed and distributed as just another infor-

mation resource. The challenge is that it is a resource that places massive demands on technology platforms.

To meet the expectations of consumers, broadcasters need to provide services of the highest possible quality and availability. They also need platforms that can be re-sized and extended to meet future requirements as well as current needs. A third imperative is that systems can be installed and used quickly by new start-ups moving into the digital broadcasting industry: they must not take organisations into a technological backwater.

Enter Linux

The overall requirement is for a hardware/software platform that is based around open IT standards and flexible technology. Out in front is Linux, an operating environment that has been developed not by an individual software company but by a community of open-source developers. Many major IT companies are engaged in aspects of introducing Linux. For example SGI is supporting Linux as a mainstream operating system on its Intel-based platforms.

The main benefit of Linux is that it is a truly open system. Unlike Unix, which was developed and extended by individual companies to the extent that scores of different flavours were introduced to the marketplace, Linux can only be changed with the full agreement of the open-source community.

The ability of Linux to handle large volumes of complex website and server traffic has already made it an obvious choice for organizations that are running e-commerce organizations via web sites. It is estimated that Linux servers are at the heart of more than half of the world's websites and that a growing number of e-businesses are choosing Linux as the way forward.

Media companies face similar challenges to e-businesses. Both need to handle an unpredictable number of enquiries and requests for information and digital products/services over the internet. Both need to manage on-line payments and have access to multiple databases. Both are running

their businesses on IT, and require zero interruptions to service.

Internet Server

To meet the needs of the growing Internet market SGI developed the SGI Internet Server, designed specifically for ISPs, application service providers (ASPs) and colocation facilities. Based upon the SGI 1200, the Internet Server includes Internet-specific management, monitoring and security tools with integrated basic services for Web serving and messaging.

SGI will also introduce mainstream support for cluster based systems via the Advanced Cluster environment (ACE) product. Clustering brings together a number of standard computer processors that perform as a single, fast, highly powerful, highly reliable resource. Clusters can handle multiple jobs or applications simultaneously and can be scaled up quickly when the requirements of the business change.

Working with the Linux community, SGI has developed and tested best of breed clustering software and management tools. It has also introduced a range of managed services that help companies to get highly reliable, ready to run Linux clusters up to speed in a matter of hours. Overall, SGI Linux Advanced Cluster Environment and its Internet server environment bring together SGI"s heritage in scalable computing, its knowledge of the global media industry and its requirements from technology, plus the latest developments from the open-source Linux community.

Conclusion

Pressures on the global media industry are set to grow more quickly in the next decade than ever before. As content, infrastructure and communications companies jostle to find their place in the new media world, the importance of implementing reliable technology that supports digital content production, management and delivery cannot be overstated. ∎