Hitachi NAS Platform continues to evolve with us, which is huge because work demand is higher, timelines diminish, and we’re asked to do more in less time. Things are constantly changing and this technology platform is able to handle it every time.

Allan Magled
Founder and Partner
Soho VFX, Toronto, Ontario

Hitachi NAS Platform Makes the “A List” for Highly Successful Visual Effects Studio Requiring Rapid, Secure Data Movement

Soho VFX is responsible for bringing stellar-quality, photorealistic visual effects to the big screen for some of the most popular superheroes and storybook characters. Behind the scenes is a cadre of talented artists and industry-leading technology. A clustered Hitachi NAS Platform 3090 supports this talent and technology. It supplies 102TB of Tier 1 serial-attached SCSI (SAS) and 37TB nearline storage to ensure swift and reliable data movement and storage.

Founded in 2002 by Allan Magled, Berj Bannayan and Mike Mombourquette, Soho VFX was quietly handling animation assignments for the Sci-Fi Channel television programs. The company soon landed the Dr. Seuss full-length animated film, “The Cat in the Hat,” and subsequently a leading visual effects assignment on Marvel’s “The Fantastic Four.” Then, everything changed.

As its film credits and the number of artists on staff increased, Soho VFX grew from fledgling startup into a well-known visual effects house. The company became known for delivering world-class quality, innovation and professionalism. Today, Soho VFX is a full-service media house for 3-D animation and compositing, and employs approximately 100 full-time staff to manage its project workloads. The list of credits for its visual effects is long and impressive. Among the many standouts are: “X-Men Origins: Wolverine”; “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe”; “The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 1 and Part 2”; and “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” for 20th Century Fox. The Studio’s current projects slated for theatrical release in 2013 and 2014 include “47 Ronin”, “Robocop”, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”, and “Jack the Giant Slayer” for Warner Brothers, which is a modern-day fairytale complete with the hero, a giant and a princess.

A NAS Hero for Modern-Day Data Movement

Outstanding business success led Soho VFX to revisit its existing data storage infrastructure. “When you start a company, there are things you know and so many things you realize you don’t know until you are juggling multiple project deadlines. We got really, really busy after

Soho VFX

INDUSTRY Communications: Media and Entertainment (Visual Effects)

SOLUTION File and Content

HARDWARE Hitachi NAS Platform 3090
the Narnia project. Our storage setup was no longer ideal for how we needed to render, process and store data. We did research, and had some trial and error, before finding a great solution with BlueArc,” says Magled.

To support its busy media workflow requirements, Soho VFX chose a single clustered 2-node BlueArc Mercury 110, now called Hitachi NAS Platform 3090. Many companies in the communications, media and entertainment industry have turned to network attached storage (NAS) to support the heavy bandwidth requirements of production data and modernize media workflows over networks. Capable of instant connectivity using Ethernet over IP, NAS systems can allow for faster file transfers, retrievals and downloads.

The system was originally configured for 18TB of storage, which has been expanded over time to handle the growth needs. At present, the NAS system has 102TB of SAS drives on Tier 1 to manage the main production projects, and 37TB of SATA drives for nearline storage for offloading secondary elements of production.

Innovation at the Highest Levels With Hitachi NAS Platform

Today, BlueArc systems and technologies are part of the Hitachi NAS Platform (HNAS) family of products. The HNAS family provides scalable, tiered network storage with FPGA-based hardware-accelerated architecture to meet highest performance and reliability requirements. With very high data throughput and IOPS, simplified network storage management, and built-in intelligence, HNAS helps firms achieve lower total cost of ownership with improved productivity and efficiency.

“From the very beginning, BlueArc was really good to us. We were a small company and the folks there genuinely seemed to care about meeting our needs. We transitioned to Hitachi Data Systems with the same quality of support and reliability,” Magled says.

Soho VFX is also managing server virtualization via a 3-server VMware vSphere implementation and several VMware ESX Servers, approximately 25 server instances in total. Currently, the majority of these server instances are run off the NFS back end provided by the HNAS cluster. Hitachi NAS Platform 3090 delivers best-in-class performance and scalability, a centrally managed storage pool, and increased utilization and productivity. Using NFS in a vSphere environment can simplify management, especially as the number of virtual machines distributed across multiple ESX hosts grows.

From an IT perspective, Hitachi has given us rock-solid, high-end NAS performance that is managed and monitored through an easy-to-use Web interface and backed by what I consider the best support in the industry.

Todd Smith
Head of Information Technology
Soho VFX, Toronto, Ontario

These images were created by Soho VFX for the movie, "Jack the Giant Slayer", released by Warner Brothers, 2013.
“From an IT perspective, BlueArc has given us rock-solid, high-end NAS performance that is managed and monitored through an easy-to-use Web interface. It has transformed what was once a dedicated position in the company into a manageable task for an IT employee, even at scale,” adds Todd Smith, head of information technology at Soho VFX.

**Fast, Reliable Data Movement**

From a data management concern, Soho VFX no longer worries about taking on too many projects. “It’s not about how many projects we’re doing, it’s more about how much work we do on each film project, and the complexity of that work. For example, with ‘Jack the Giant Slayer,’ we are doing a massive amount of visual effects work. To be successful at this level, we have to be able to move the data around. Data must be readily available constantly, throughout the making of the film. We need to have it stored in a central location where everyone can securely and instantly access it. As we take on more work, we’re always storing more, adding more. As movies become bigger, the layers get larger. We have more frames, more elements, and it truly comes down to effectively moving and storing the data assets,” explains Magled.

Soho VFX is considering another HNAS in the near future for a collocation site to handle backups. Smith mentions that he expects to take advantage of BlueArc JetMirror software for high-speed replication of production data and fast failover in the event of disaster. Because the BlueArc file system is object based, all file system structures, metadata and user data are stored as related objects. BlueArc JetMirror uses native replication of these object blocks to efficiently speed the replication process, rather than having to gather the separate objects associated with a file before transfer.

“Hitachi NAS Platform continues to evolve with us, which is huge because work demand is higher, timelines diminish, and we’re asked to do more in less time. Things are constantly changing and this technology platform is able to handle it every time,” Magled finishes.

**A Look Ahead**

Looking to keep innovating at the highest levels in the industry, Soho VFX is considering how to also evolve internally. Magled anticipates that industry expectations and competition will continue to climb. He and the rest of the Soho VFX team are confident that HNAS will meet new challenges, too.

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