ANIMAL LOGIC
Award-winning digital animation and VFX studio builds on the success of The LEGO Movie with Dell EMC Isilon

Overview
Business is booming for Animal Logic! Following the huge success of The LEGO® Movie, the Sydney-based design, visual effects and animation studio is already working on two spin-off titles for the same franchise. Three others, including The LEGO® Movie Sequel, are in the pipeline. The company’s film development and production arm, Animal Logic Entertainment, is developing a live action Astro Boy feature, and has partnered with Simon Cowell’s SYCO Entertainment to develop music-based animated and hybrid animation/live action features. The company also recently announced that it is producing a film adaptation of Neil Gaiman's best-selling children's book, 'Fortunately, The Milk', in partnership with Johnny Depp's Infinitum Nihil, through 20th Century Fox.

Earlier this year, Animal Logic expanded its operations into Vancouver opening a new animation studio and effectively doubling its capacity to manage an increasingly busy production schedule and provide room for further expansion. The two locations currently operate as independent studios collaborating as required.

The projects Animal Logic works on require some serious storage volumes and performance. The LEGO® Movie alone needed 345 terabytes of capacity at its peak, even though an aggressive file management system was deleting 50TB of data no longer needed for production every week. Once a file is archived to tape, it's typically pushed offline so the true size of the data being generated to make one of these films is substantially higher.

• Animal Logic has an impressive production pipeline
• It has opened a new animation studio in Vancouver
• Projects require serious storage volumes and performance

Business challenges
Managing storage requirements is the unenviable task facing the studio's Head of IT, Alex Timbs. Although volumes double roughly every three years, he says it's almost impossible to plan beyond 12-24 months because production schedules drive the storage strategy. Where a bank or telco has fairly linear growth, things can change very quickly at Animal Logic.
“Although there’s a lot of common ground, productions will use different techniques and these have an impact on storage requirements. That’s a big part of the reason why we moved to Dell EMC Isilon in the first place and why we’ve stuck with it,” Timbs says.

“We have the ability to buy what we need, when we need it, in small increments rather than having to do a very large storage upgrade like you would with other vendors. It’s been a perfect fit in our industry because it’s more modular and versatile. We’re heavily project driven.”

Animal Logic's primary data centre was starting to feel cramped and was close to maxing out capacity on some of its network switches. In addition, because of the time it took to retrieve such large data files from storage, users tended to keep them on their work stations, creating issues with lost data and limiting the number of people who could work on files.

With the production pipeline promising even greater pressure, and large file requirements driven by ever improving image definition, Timbs pushed for a pre-emptive storage refresh to make sure there was no serious impact on the business. He knew the bandwidth required to migrate from one storage cluster to another without disrupting production could take weeks or even months but wanted to get it finished before the end of the year.

Ready for anything

Animal Logic retained its existing Dell EMC Isilon storage cluster but moved it into another data centre to focus on visual effects work and provide additional capacity as required. To ensure low-latency throughput, it continued its relationship with Brocade, selecting VDX 8770 IP switches to integrate with this storage solution. It also worked with cloud service provider iQ3 on the storage upgrade.

The refreshed primary storage environment boasts improved performance thanks to faster processors, additional memory and a much larger, coherent cache. It has also taken some much needed pressure off the physical limitation of the data centre because it's more condensed and requires less cabling. Backup speeds have increased by about 20 per cent.

Animal Logic now has about 1.5 petabytes of primary storage and close to 2PB at its disaster recovery site, supporting a large farm of high-end servers used specifically to render images. This farm is expected to grow significantly over the next 12 months with The LEGO® Batman Movie due to be completed by the end of 2016 and The LEGO® Ninjago Movie by mid-2017. This will further increase the load being thrown at its storage systems but Timbs will be able to add further capacity in relatively small blocks to avoid overcapitalising.

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Alex Timbs
Head of IT, Animal Logic
A strong partnership

Timbs has been so happy with the Dell EMC vendor relationship that Animal Logic's latest storage upgrade wasn't even put out to competitive tender.

"Dell EMC Isilon has continued to prove it was the right choice and remains aligned to our business," he says. "We need vendors who truly understand our business and find solutions that support those needs."

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- Storage upgrade wasn't put out to competitive tender
- Decision reflected Animal Logic's confidence in Dell EMC partnership
- Wins praise for continuing to meet "incredible" technology demands

Looking to the future

Beyond its core operations, Animal Logic gets involved in leftfield projects because people are aware of its capabilities. These have included a unique collaboration with Vogue Australia to celebrate the magazine's 55th anniversary and an immersive 3D concept reel for state-of-the-art data visualisation research facility at University of Technology Sydney.

"It's a different way for us to express our creativity," Timbs says. "We're keeping a close eye on emerging technologies like virtual reality and, although there have been lots of false starts over the past 20 years, we're excited about the prospect of creating content for all screens. We don't really care what that content is – we'll just stay focused on creating beautiful images and telling great stories."

This project strengthens the partnership between Dell EMC and Animal Logic and secures their commitment to Dell EMC platforms. Dell EMC's dedication to quickly responding to challenges as they arise has been instrumental in securing its involvement in the 2nd stage of this project, the installation of an Isilon cluster for the new Vancouver office. Future projects may involve further development of Animal Logic's cloud environment.