Mainframe as Mild-Mannered Superhero?

Analyst: Mike Kahn

> ***More powerful than a locomotive!***
> ***Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!***
> ***Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!***

If these words instantly bring you back to fuzzy black-and-white images of George Reeves as *Superman*, then you are not alone. While many younger will recall Christopher Reeve, or someone else, as Superman, to me these words signaled the call to that grainy tube of the 1950s. Old images die hard. What makes Superman so attractive that the franchise has lasted more than 75 years? First, he was *different*; he was an alien among mortal men. In other words, he *wasn't ordinary*. Second, he was *modest*. He wasn't Superman because he wanted to be a superhero; he fell into this role. He preferred to be the mild-mannered Clark Kent and, only reluctantly, exhibited his superpowers as Superman. Third, he was *stronger, faster, and smarter than everyone else*. Fourth, he was the *good guy*, out to protect us mere mortals from the evils of the world. I could go on, as I quickly slip into my days of yesteryear. However, there are good IT reasons for my journey into the past.

Too often, we see what we are conditioned to see and recall the most powerfully-engrained images from deep within our memories. Advertising and repetition reinforce and manipulate this, of course. If you hear something a thousands times, do you begin to accept it as true? Maybe not, but the recall still is almost instantaneous, whether true or not. *Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is.*[1]

Today, I am again writing about *the Mainframe*. What just popped into your mind? Was it the room-filled, raised-floor data center of yesteryear, surrounded by glass walls that elevated it, as if onto a pulpit, for all to see but few to use? Or, was it some reference point of science fiction, either past and present? Was it Clark Kent of the 1950s? Or was it the modern-day superhero of today's over-challenged enterprise? Unfortunately, from my perspective, the Mainframe evokes far, far too many images of yesteryear. This is a visceral reaction, driven more from fiction than fact. Yesterday's Mainframes, as innovative as they were, are like my grainy recollections of the round TV tube. It's the wrong image for a modern-day superhero.

Mainframe as superhero? Come on, you might be thinking. Have I gone off the deep end? Well, maybe, but just to make my point. The Mainframe is a lot like Clark Kent. Mild-mannered in appearance but certainly not ordinary, it is stronger, faster and smarter than all of the surrounding mere mortals. The Mainframe is the good guy protecting us from the many evils of the world around us. Ever vigilant, it is the benchmark to which all other commercial servers must be compared. Does it have a weakness, its *Kryptonite*, so to speak? Yes, it has an image problem – more of a fading, black-and-white caricature of Clark Kent than a three-dimensional, enterprise-enhancing superhero. What good is having a superhero in your back pocket if no one knows that Superman is your best friend?

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[1] From an *Alka Seltzer* commercial. If you had heard this repeatedly, no doubt that your recall was instantaneous.

Without expectation for or knowledge of the contemporary superhero, we all turn to other means to meet our goals. We believe the immodest superlatives that are tossed glibly about to describe the mere-mortal scale-out solutions that are positioned, year after year, as the latest salvation to save the enterprise from gloom and doom. What the Mainframe needs is a *cape*, so that all know its superhero status.

Recently, IBM announced a new Mainframe[2], the *z10 BC*, which might be considered by some to be the *little brother* to the enterprise-class *z10 EC*. While, to the observer, *Superman* might also be called *Clark Kent*, it communicates a different message. While the z10 BC is smaller than the z10 EC, it is by no means bounded by a restricted image of smallness. Like its big brother, the z10 BC has all of the same superpowers, from the highest availability and security to the lowest consumption of power and cooling; it just is packaged as the economy version. With up-to-10 cores running at 3.5 GHz[3], it too is able to leap tall buildings (i.e., knock down insurmountable problems) in a single bound. If the z10 BC were presented solely as a high-performing enterprise-class Linux solution, it proudly would stand tall against most competitors. But IBM, whether intentionally or not, presents it as the *smaller Mainframe*, which unfortunately for many, conjures up the wrong image.

Some enterprises need a lesser Mainframe to run *legacy workloads*, where legacy has a pejorative ring to it, as if referring to old applications that work perfectly fine but no one wants to touch. Again, the z10 BC is much more than a legacy box, just as these applications are much more important than the legacy label connotes. However, for those enterprises that do not see these heritage applications as the primary motivation for having a Mainframe, the z10 BC is more of a *supercomputer*, probably far bigger and far faster than they can ever imagine needing. So the *smaller Mainframe* moniker does not fit here, either.[4] With many *sub-capacity* performance and pricing options, the z10 BC is an extreme example of *right sizing*. Once again, the Mainframe's vocabulary does them in. *Sub-capacity* sounds like something inferior, which this is not. It is the superior, scalable solution for many circumstances, even at lesser capacities.

While important for some enterprises, the z10 BC needs to be considered for more than its ability to run heritage code. It also is a modern-day superhero of somewhat modest proportions[5], able to consolidate and optimize Linux, Java, and database applications (as well as legacy applications) and to do so dynamically and with many options for scaling as your real-time markets or enterprise growth might require.

This *Captain's Log* is not intended to answer all of your questions about Mainframes[6], but to stimulate you into asking yourself whether you know enough not to consider a modest superhero for your data center. These days, we all need a little extra help, especially when things get tough. Consider looking for a super server with a cape, the z10 BC.

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[2] This *Captain's Log* is not intended to be a full description of the new z10 BC. For that, see:
- **The Clipper Group Navigator** dated October 21, 2008, entitled ***Having Your Cake and Eating It, Too — Doing More with Less with IBM z10 BC***, which is available at http://www.clipper.com/research/TCG2008057.pdf.

[3] Not counting an additional two cores that are used as *I/O accelerators*, an important source of its superior throughput capabilities, which IBM describes, mild-manneredly, as *service processors*.

[4] *Mighty Mouse* might be a better image.

[5] At least in comparison to the z10 BC.

[6] For more background reading on the Mainframe, see the following.
- ***Perceiving the Dark Side of the Moon - Knowing When Scale-up Computing Makes Sense***, in the issue of Clipper Notes dated September 23, 2008, and available at http://www.clipper.com/research/TCG2008050.pdf.
- ***Mainframe Mythologies Live On — Setting the Record Straight***, in the May 23, 2006, *Captain's Log*, which is available at http://www.clipper.com/research/TCG2006038.pdf.
- ***The Beginning of I.T. Civilization - IBM's System/360 Mainframe***, in the March 23, 2004, *Captain's Log*, which is available at http://www.clipper.com/research/TCG2004028.pdf.

For information on the z10 Enterprise Class (the big brother superhero), see:
- ***IBM's System z10 EC Meets the 21st Century Infrastructure Challenge***, in **The Clipper Group Navigator** dated February 26, 2008, which is available at http://www.clipper.com/research/TCG2008014.pdf.

For background reading on scale-up computing, see:
- ***Roddenberry, Einstein and the Dinosaur — Considering the Unfathomable in IT Optimization***, in the issue of Clipper Notes dated October 8, 2007, which is available at http://www.clipper.com/research/TCG2007091.pdf.

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Mike Kahn is Managing Director and a cofounder of The Clipper Group. Mr. Kahn is a veteran of the computer industry, having spent more nearly four decades working on information technology, spending the last 15 years at Clipper. For the vendor community, Mr. Kahn specializes on strategic marketing issues, especially for new and costly technologies and services, competitive analysis, and sales support. For the end-user community, he focuses on mission-critical information management decisions. Prior positions held by Mr. Kahn include: at International Data Corporation - Director of the Competitive Resource Center, Director of Consulting for the Software Research Group, and Director of the Systems Integration Program; President of Power Factor Corporation, a Boston-based electronics firm; at Honeywell Bull - Director of International Marketing and Support; at Honeywell Information Systems - Director of Marketing and Director of Strategy, Technology and Research; with Arthur D. Little, Inc. - a consultant specializing in database management systems and information resource management; and, for Intel Corporation, Mr. Kahn served in a variety of field and home office marketing management positions. Earlier, he founded and managed PRISM Associates of Ann Arbor, Michigan, a systems consulting firm specializing in data management products and applications. Mr. Kahn also managed a relational DBMS development group at The University of Michigan where he earned B.S.E. and M.S.E. degrees in industrial engineering.

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