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# The Future of Virtualisation?

## VMware, Citrix, Microsoft et al. show the way

By Tony Lock, October 2007

There are few areas of IT that have developed so rapidly over the last couple of years as that of "virtualisation". In fact there is so much going on in the world of virtualisation that it is worthwhile just looking at one small section, namely the Intel / AMD space and the virtualisation of these servers. This sector has seen almost geometric development in the last three years, advances that have continued apace over the last few weeks in terms of technology, company relationships and, perhaps, the beginnings of industry-wide understanding.

Consider first that recently Citrix announced it had reached agreement to acquire XenSource, Inc., the privately held provider of virtual infrastructure solutions. The deal, which will cost Citrix approximately \$500 million in a combination of cash and stock, certainly marks a bold, if not entirely unexpected step, for the company. The potential repercussions of the move are still being assimilated by very many interested "observers" including developers active on the XenSource project, the other virtualisation platform players as well as the potential user community. Quite what form these repercussions will take has yet to be fully established and tested, but the potential exists for the acquisition to move Citrix, with its formidable experience of server centric computing, very firmly into a highly visible role in the rapidly expanding virtualisation platform / solution ecosystem.

Technically the challenge will be for Citrix to take the embryonic XenSource platform and expand its development across multiple operating systems in addition to adding to its core functionality stack. At the same time Citrix needs to make XenSource accessible to far wider markets and channel partners than it has heretofore enjoyed. Perhaps the more intricate trials are to be found in establishing an acceptable commercial revenue stream from the solution and then building the customer base. On the face of things these appear to be pretty standard matters, just business as usual but in the universe of server and desktop virtualisation things are rarely simple and, almost by definition, never transparent. For a start it will be interesting to see just how the very close working relationship that Citrix has built over many years with Microsoft will influence developments of a platform that could compete head on with Microsoft's own fledgling offerings. At the same time Citrix has also established a very good rapport with the undoubted market leader in this virtualisation space, namely VMware.

"Co-opetition" is the accepted name of this particular game and it must be said that Citrix has garnered as much experience of dancing with multiple partners with whom it also competes. The potential prize available in the virtualisation market is vast and growing rapidly, and it is to be hoped that the prospective rapid growth in these income streams will see all the major players work nicely together for the benefit of all customers. In truth it is apparent that working together holds the potential of increasing customer trust and real-world deployment in this still relatively youthful area and consequently speeding the adoption of such solutions. If VMware, Citrix, Microsoft et al do not play nicely they will run the risk of confusing customers whilst possibly damaging and certainly slowing the commercial take up of virtualisation technologies into many areas of mainstream IT operations.

But whilst the Citrix / XenSource acquisition started the month off with a bang, last week witnessed VMware holding its annual customer show in San Francisco. And to keep the momentum going VMware announced at the beginning of the week that it had acquired the privately held Dunes Technologies, a company specialising in areas around the workflow management of virtualised machines and systems. Amongst many technology based announcements by both VMware and its

growing partner community it was release of a new “thin” (just 32 Megabytes) hypervisor that caught the eye. ESX Server 3i will allow server vendors to include the virtualisation platform in system flash allowing very rapid installation, operation and management of hardware to host new virtual systems.

The show also highlighted that Virtualisation is a reality for an increasing range of everyday workloads and that the management tools and specialist services required by potential users to effectively deploy such systems is now solidly in place. Further it is now clear that virtualisation is moving to encompass not just the server environment but that VMware, along with several other interested parties, are now looking to expand into naturally adjacent areas including the Desktop and Storage management. The potential for use in both is evident, though there is an underlying need for the new capabilities and benefits to be explained in non-technical language to the world at large.

Virtualisation is no longer simply Hype sweeping through IT. Virtualisation on the Intel / AMD platform has matured considerably over the last two years and now offers not only clever technologies but useful solutions that allow relatively cheap and previously often poorly administered servers to begin to offer many of the availability, workload flexibility and manageability benefits previously associated with more complex, not to say expensive, platforms such as large Unix platforms. Virtualisation running on Intel / AMD does not today a mainframe make, but it can provide very valuable benefits whilst also enhancing the effective utilisation of these servers and reducing system risk.

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