

WARNER BROS. GLOBAL PUBLISHING: SPEEDY WEB PORTAL

Case Study on an International Entertainment Company's Web Publication Management Database System

Background

Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. is one of the definitive leaders in global pop culture—the powerhouse behind the recent Batman movie revivals as well as the much-anticipated Watchmen movie release, and one of the world's largest producers of film, animation, and entertainment. In addition to a reputation as the purveyor of classic franchises like Looney Tunes and Hanna Barbera, however, the Warner Bros. brand is also at the head of a vast publishing empire.

Warner Bros. Global Publishing (WBGP), the publication arm of Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., is a top entertainment licensing company representing more than thirty seven hundred licensees—including internationally beloved characters such as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Tom and Jerry, Batman, and Harry Potter.

To manage this expansive enterprise, WBGP built a proprietary online submissions and approvals portal called Speedy. Speedy enables the company to monitor the status and publication progress of novels, books, comic books, and magazines based on licenses owned by Warner Brothers from anywhere in the world through a single internet gateway. Publishers from around the globe can access Speedy daily for publishing plan approvals and proposal updates. But in 2007, the existing web-based system was markedly dated: its design and functionality hadn't kept pace with the changes in WBGP's process and business operations, and much of the work was still manual and time-consuming. Speedy was in serious need of an upgrade.



Warner Bros. Consumer Products, a Time Warner Entertainment Company, L.P., is one of the leading and most diversified licensing and retail merchandising organizations which includes a vast library of intellectual properties and the Warner Bros. Studio Stores, including wbstore.com, our e-commerce website. With over 3,700 licensees, Warner Bros. Consumer Products licenses the rights to names, likenesses and logos for a variety of entertainment properties, categories, and Warner Bros. name icons that include Looney Tunes, Batman, Superman, Scooby-Doo, The Wizard of Oz, and its many films and television series. Warner Bros. Consumer Products includes Warner Bros. Studio Stores, Warner Bros. Worldwide Licensing, Worldwide Publishing, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, Kids' WB! Music and WB Toys.

Challenges

Speedy's legacy system was built on old ASP technology which long since been left behind in the Web 2.0 technology leap. As a world-class leader of entertainment properties, WBGH held high standards and expectations for their system, and wished to re-align the Speedy's existing workflow to meet the company's complex schedule. In the years since Speedy was first implemented, new technologies had developed which were not compatible with Speedy's original programming. The application had fallen behind industry standards. In order to take advantage of the powerful new functionalities available on the marketplace, Speedy needed to become more robust.

Solutions

The Speedy system is key to managing the gamut of the Warner Bros. Global Publishing spectrum—from 8 page activity books to full novelizations—a tall order for any system to fill. Before beginning the project, Lambodar Inc. first spent extensive time interviewing the WBGH executives, both to understand the workflow and design behind their legacy application, and to determine what functionalities were expected in a state-of-the-art upgrade. However, the initial requirements of the work plan remained sketchy, and so in consideration of the need to refine the project plans as the architecture developed, the companies agreed on an Agile development methodology with very short development to Q/A approval cycles to best serve WBGH's needs.

Setting Up a Proper Database

Lambodar quickly discovered that the old WBGH system had extensive archival data for their various publications, but that this information was scattered across multiple databases. The first generation of Speedy involved time-consuming manual editing of multiple database fields. Moreover, the original Speedy's databases had not been properly structured, which resulted in poor performance that could lead to data loss. For best performance, information in the separate databases needed to be assimilated into just one database. Lambodar imported all the scattered records and normalized the data into a database with good structure. The new database system not only met industry standards, but also allowed administrators to access and adjust fields through the application itself, creating a self-sustaining, self-service vehicle for the WBGH.

Administration & Hierarchical Structure

After years on the legacy Speedy system, WBGH knew that they needed different access privileges for their different users. Lambodar suggested creating multi-level roles with three tiers of users, including child users for publishers who have company associates that needed to access the system. In a new system, it was beneficial to WBGH to have a fully-automated, state-of-the-art workflow creation system with manual overrides at each step. The new access hierarchy allowed for complex interactions without involving Speedy administrators in low-level management issues. Publishers could manage their own profiles, view contracts, access permitted logos, and set up their own child-users. In turn, Speedy's administrators were able to focus on the workflow and management of their own key products: permissions for the licenses.

Impersonation—with Authority

To further streamline workflow, links to multiple levels of management were made available from each screen. A Speedy administrator could easily monitor the progress of all available projects as a whole from the opening dashboard, or zoom in to view a specific project and manage it individually. A windfall new feature was the new ability for the administrator to impersonate different user. The impersonation is used in one of two cases: 1) If a user is filling in for another person, or 2) if a customer is experiencing difficulty and the admin has to impersonate him to figure out what is going on. The doppelganger ability resulted in very rapid problem determination and solution cycles.

Publisher Communication

The new system was also conceived with the ability to generate notifications based on custom thresholds, such as sending e-mails to publishers after their submissions had been approved. Speedy administrators were given the power to create global messaging templates, and to set what the automatic trigger(s) would be for each. Through a publisher roster, Speedy administrators could also manage accounts directly through the application; such as review and change the status of contracts for properties, and upload property logos for approved publisher usage.

Order & Fulfillment

A simple order tracking and fulfillment system was also implemented at WBGPs request. As a courtesy to publishers, WBGPs provides archival/library items for reference, which the publishers could check for the availability of in Speedy and then order from the WBGPs system to use as reference.

Dynamic Searching & Reporting

An advanced search program was built in the newest iteration of Speedy to make finding data easy and simple to use. As an added feature, the search also auto-fills fields as it narrows down the requirements. As the user chooses each categorical search attribute—e.g. search by Country—the next drop down field auto-fills with items from that category –e.g. USA, UK, Canada—quickly narrowing down search terms for each user. The new system also supports multiple search items, such as simultaneously searching by publication type→novelizations in a specific country→Mexico.

Very specific reports for statistics on the usage, demographics, and categories of Speedy were an absolute “must-have” on WBGPs desired, priority features. WBGPs provided a list of the kinds of reports they required, as well as the user interface design. Lambodar crafted detailed reports for each, utilizing information generated from many different inputs—including the multi-field, dynamic search displays.

Construction & Design

As WBGW deals with users and vendors on an international level, Speedy's complex back end ultimately had to be condensed into a simple, easy-to-use new user interface that made sense to a global audience of publishers and sales managers. The executives at WBGW provided the user interface design, as well as the rules for how certain actions and commands would behave. Because everything within Speedy was proprietary, the new system was created from scratch according to WBGW's specifications. No external modules were used.

The latest Microsoft Windows .NET Framework 2.0 and ASP.NET technology stacks were applied to the final solution, and programmers used languages such as C#, JavaScript, and AJAX to create the final effect. The repository utilized SQLServer 2005 technology, and the project plan was created utilizing Agile project execution. Only the latest Microsoft Windows .NET Framework 2.0 and ASP.NET technology stacks were applied to the final solution.

About Lambodar Inc.

Lambodar Inc. is a world-wide provider of dynamic software consulting solutions. Founded in 2004, Lambodar offers premium custom software for businesses at cost-reducing prices. Armed with a wide arsenal of open-source and proprietary programs at its disposal, Lambodar project managers work intensively to understand the goals and needs of each client to create the perfect software solution. With successful projects in industries such as: Finance, Retail, Healthcare, Insurance, Travel, Telecom, and Government, Lambodar has a proven record of the skills and experience for delivering world-class, quality services. Lambodar Inc. is headquartered in Cupertino, California. For more information, please visit <http://www.lambodar.com>.