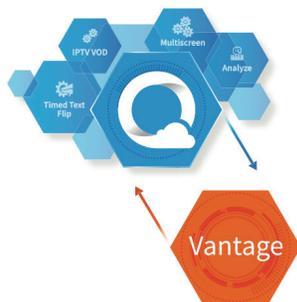




Telestream Vantage Helps Create Virtual Film Festival for SXSW

“Vantage made it possible to build these really complicated workflows that otherwise would have been implausible for any other tool that’s on the market. There’s certainly nothing in the cloud that could do all the things that that we did,”

– **Garrett Sergeant, CTO and co-founder of Simple DCP**



SXSW Southwest (SXSW), aka ‘South By’, is an annual event in Austin, Texas. It features a film festival, music concerts and one of the largest technology conferences in the world. People come from all over the world to learn, network, and discover new ideas and trends from the diverse gathering. While the 2020 SXSW event was cancelled due to the pandemic, the organizers were determined to at least take the event online for 2021 if it couldn’t be held in person.

The Challenge

One of the major hurdles of taking such a large event online was in how to manage the film festival and the vast amount of media required for the festival. Realizing the scope of the challenge, the organizers contacted Garrett Sergeant, CTO and co-founder of Simple DCP, to help create a high-quality virtual film festival. Simple DCP, a digital cinema mastering lab in based in Los Angeles, had provided mastering and a host of other digital cinema services for the SXSW film festival in recent years. “We help filmmakers get prepared to deliver the appropriate materials to spec for festivals while also assisting film festivals in their film trafficking, consolidation and delivery needs,” said Sergeant. “Everything that we help to provision comes into our lab. We check it, we organize it and deliver it to the festival, so they are ready to go.”

A DCP (Digital Cinema Package) file is the predominant format for theatrical deliverables, but that also makes it a somewhat niche format. It’s complicated and has a lot of moving pieces that any workflow must support. Sergeant and the festival organizers needed a way to manage and collaboratively review the media remotely. To accomplish that, they chose a hybrid cloud media management system called iconik. However, it soon became clear that they needed a system that could handle DCP files and a method to create a seamless workflow to process and assemble the large number of media files required for the event. Sergeant reached out to Jason Perr of Workflow Intelligence Nexus, a builder of advanced automated workflows, for assistance in making all the different processes work together.

The Solution

“Jason hooked us up with Telestream Vantage. We were aware of Vantage as an advanced transcoder and delivery mechanism, but we didn’t realize how much of a workflow orchestration engine it was as well,” said Sergeant. “Jason built out our first workflows that allowed us to see the kinds of things you can do with Vantage. We knew that Vantage was a great transcoding tool for using with iconik, but the best thing was that we could start to build out the automated workflows we really needed. We could embed watermarks. We could create assembly packages for different content blocks and then build them within iconic. We were able to create metadata profiles that enabled the festival organizers to build programs out as they wanted to.”

Each video needed an average of five versions with additional intros, ads, and end cards. The team did not have the time to edit each of these versions manually, so they had planned to use their CDN to handle this with playlists. It was only a few months before the event that they learned this wouldn’t be possible with their CDN.

“About a month and a half before the festival started, the organizers came to me and said they had a big problem,” said Sergeant. “They thought we would be able to build out content blocks within a playlist on the CDN, but the CDN said, ‘No, that’s not how it works.’ So, they were faced with a very worrying scenario that they would have to download all the content that had been organized in our system, bring it in for an editor work on and then export it back out to the platform before it was uploaded to the CDN. This represented an enormous amount of unplanned and unscheduled work.”

Sergeant gave the issue some serious thought and within a couple of days, he was able to develop some workflows within Vantage that interfaced with iconik. “We were able to establish a workflow that let us build out the content blocks and dynamically assign the intro reels, ad insertion, outros, and automatically retime the captions,” said Sergeant. “We were able to do all of the things that were necessary to get these things functioning. All I had to do was clarify a couple of metadata points, click a button, and the system spat out the resulting file that needed to be pushed to the CDN for SXSW.” Sergeant says he doesn’t know how it would have been possible for them to deliver the content in the timeframe required without this workflow.

At every step along the way Sergeant had to find different solutions for issues that would crop up. “We soon found that we needed to accelerate our transcoding because they were throwing 100 encoding jobs at us versus a few films at a time as anticipated. They needed to transcode to MP4 with a burn-in and an assemblage of content and it all needed to be done ASAP in parallel. Since we only had a fixed amount of processing power, we found relief by sending jobs to Vantage Cloud Port, a seamless way to offload media processing to the cloud. These flexibilities in Vantage enabled us to figure out new ways to get around various hurdles that otherwise would have made the job impossible,” says Sergeant.

When looking for solutions to specific workflows, there was no time for engineers at iconic, Telestream, or even Workflow Intelligence Nexus to develop all the custom integrations required for the emerging SXSW requirements. Sergeant found that he could use Vantage Actions himself to call up other applications and invoke processes within applications. “The Vantage workflow orchestration really spoke to me because even if Telestream doesn’t have what I need, even if there wasn’t a built-in integration for a process I needed, I could make it work and build it out as required,” said Sergeant. “It was very empowering and gave me the flexibility and the confidence to make these systems talk to one another.”

An Additional Challenge

Another pinch point in the SXSW workflow was that the organizers were not getting their advertising assignments until a week or so before the commencement of the festival. That left a ton of content blocks that were just waiting to be assembled. “Vantage and Vantage Cloud Port truly saved the day because there is no way we could have transcoded all the material with the advertising content coming in so late in the game.”

In one workflow, Sergeant created a metadata view in iconik where someone from SXSW would select the program that a given film belonged to. That would dictate which intro video belonged to that program, whether it was an educational, a filmmaker program, a music video, for example. The SXSW operator would select the advertiser and maybe one or two more pieces of metadata that were applicable depending upon the program type. “We created a workflow in Vantage that as soon as we got an asset in, it would check back against that metadata in iconik and that would send it down a workflow path.

It would automatically assemble the intro and the outro, and advertising locally and then pair those with around an hour's worth of content that was already sitting on the server. This assemblage of assets would then get sent it up to Vantage Cloud Port where it was transcoded and sent back down. Doing that for 100 plus assets in parallel was phenomenal," said Sergeant.

The Outcome

"Vantage made it possible to build these really complicated workflows that otherwise would have been implausible for any other tool that's on the market. There's certainly nothing in the cloud that could do all the things that that we did," says Sergeant. "When I first got started, I had always associated Vantage with pure video workflows. But seeing how we integrated it with different notify actions and different pushes and pulls to the cloud and more, it made me really understand the workflow orchestration engine aspect of the platform. It's something that really does the call outs, the building, the pushing, the pulling, everything that we needed."

To Learn More

To get more information about Vantage and Vantage Cloud Port, see:

- <https://www.telestream.net/vantage/overview.htm>

