



"Xicon is an excellent professional partner who is committed to good project management practices as well as delivering to our requirements and timescales"

Bill Horrocks,
Director of IT Services, Littlewoods Leisure



To help grow its business into these areas, Littlewoods Leisure needed to develop a new gaming platform. Backed by Xicon Limited, Littlewoods Leisure now enjoys in-house control and rapid game development.

Gaming is a huge industry that's adapting fast to the enormous opportunities presented by modern technology. The Internet, interactive digital television and mobile telephones all offer exciting new ways of taking part.

As one of the UK's longest established gaming companies, Littlewoods Leisure provides football pools, sports betting and lotteries. A wholly-owned business of Sportech plc since September 2000, the Liverpool-based company has a regular playing base of 1.5 million households. In 2001, the company's turnover was £183 million and it employed over 600 people.

Information Technology is vital for all operations from the traditional pools



products to new-style Internet and interactive betting & gaming products. The older systems rely on in-house hosted bespoke applications using Oracle as the RDBMS whilst more recently developed products are delivered using best of breed technology provided by outsourced applications development and infrastructure hosting. The latter includes Littlewoods BetDirect, a Sports Betting Service with a telephone call centre, the BetDirect.net and bet247.co.uk web sites.



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For Director of IT Services Bill Horrocks, a total dependency on outsourcing for gaming and betting was discomfoting. Littlewoods Leisure was unable to respond to demands for new games from its customers without engaging in lengthy and expensive developments. Faced by a significant business opportunity from Interactive Digital Television (iDTV), the Internet and mobile telephony, an upgrade was essential.

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New Environment

To launch games as quickly as possible for new media, Littlewoods Leisure needed a common back-end to serve many different delivery protocols. This meant finding a cost-effective in-house development tool. The separation of presentation from the underlying business logic also seemed a good idea.

During Summer 2001, Littlewoods Leisure wrote a comprehensive specification following detailed discussions with

potential suppliers. While cost was not necessarily the overriding issue, Littlewoods Leisure wanted a partner to implement a totally flexible yet robust solution. Suppliers had to face an assessment against weighted criteria as well as a practical test.

"We required a dynamic online gaming system to implement new games quickly. It had to be easy to maintain, resilient and scaleable for predicted volumes. We also wanted to use a world class RDBMS like Oracle," added Horrocks.

A vigorous selection process ruled out several major suppliers offering esoteric development tools and databases. The use of more popular technologies would help avoid any staff training and retention issues for non mainstream products. Xicon not only scored the highest in the evaluation but also successfully demonstrated a prototype lottery game that could be modified in minutes.

Layered Solution

By Autumn 2001, the project was underway to create a solution composed of an Oracle Data Layer, a PLSQL/Java Business Layer and a Java/XMLC Presentation Layer. The idea was to separate business logic from presentation and enable either to be independently changed. Led by their project manager, Xicon's technical staff worked closely with Littlewoods Leisure personnel, designed the database and provided training in the Java framework.

Demonstrating a thorough business understanding, Xicon helped ensure the project was completed on time and to budget despite tight timescales. Using full in-house control over presentation and business logic, Littlewoods Leisure then rolled out a new series of games from January 2002. Key launches included the Jewish Lottery, a Rangers Football Club lottery, www.worldcupgames.com and a major re-branding of www.playlittlewoods.co.uk.

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Plug and Play

The new games environment is known internally as the OnLine Gaming Application (OLGA). Developers re-use program code, business and presentation layers to maximise code usage and minimize any reworking of basic game types. The business layer includes common logic for functions such as logging in, game playing, customer detail handling and payments. A data layer sits underneath the business layer for interaction with the Oracle database. For each platform like iDTV, it's simply a case of developing a relevant presentation layer using WML, HTML or other tools. The layer is then plugged into existing business and data layers so games can be played on the new media.



key features

Business Profile Sportech plc is the UK's leading home gaming company providing a variety of gaming and betting opportunities to customers through its wholly-owned portfolio of Littlewoods gaming and betting brands.

Solution Summary Online gaming application using a Java framework and Oracle database technology to deliver games across multiple media.

Key Benefits

- In-house Control
- Rapid Game Development
- New Revenue Streams

Oracle Software

- Oracle Application Server
- Oracle Development Server
- Oracle Database 8i
- Oracle Jdeveloper
- Oracle 9i RAC

Hardware

- HP Platforms running HP/UX (UNIX)

Number of Users

- 1.2 million



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"Xicon had a very good understanding of our business requirements and I was impressed with their technical people. They demonstrated a novel solution using a Java framework backed by an Oracle database. As the only supplier to show us proof of concept, they met our cost requirements too."

Once a game is developed, stored parameters in the Oracle database support instant changes to logic and presentation. For example, the odds may be altered or the game visually re-branded for an affinity partner. Examples of the latter include modifying Prizebuster, the Internet numbers game, for Rangers and Celtic Football Clubs. Other successful outlets have included television games for cable TV providers Telewest and NTL.

Over ten games have now been developed under the new system and, given the right material, entirely new games can be delivered in around a week. Horrocks says there's also no limits to the sort of games that can be introduced.

"We have an extremely dynamic, scaleable and resilient system that can be quickly changed for new games, outlets and business requirements. It's now the key to all our interactive, Internet and iDTV products."

Backed by skills transfer and continued support from Xicon, Littlewoods Leisure is now embarking on some exciting new developments. The focus is firmly on the huge business potential presented by terrestrial and satellite iDTV. Boosted by the recent deregulation of the UK betting and gaming market, Littlewoods Leisure is at the forefront of iDTV developments. And because the right technology is now available, those new business opportunities are being quickly grasped.



Xicon is an Independent British company specialising in Oracle systems and provides a wide range of skills across all sectors of industry and commerce world-wide covering Products, Consultancy, Training and Support.

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