LoadRunner tunes young apps

To help developers find and stamp out first-version bugs and other surprises, Mercury Interactive Corp. (Santa Clara, CA) has released LoadRunner, an automated testing product specifically for client-server software. LoadRunner is the latest in Mercury's family of "Automated Software Quality" products.

The name of the game here is quality control. With LoadRunner, a software house can put its latest product through tests rigorous enough to catch flaws. For instance, LoadRunner will spot bugs that cause the system to lock up when more than one user tries to access the same piece of data at the same time.

LoadRunner's three main features include load testing, performance testing, and system tuning. LoadRunner allows the developer to create a web of numerous virtual users from one station, then it monitors and controls them. This is called load testing because it tests the server under a heavy load.
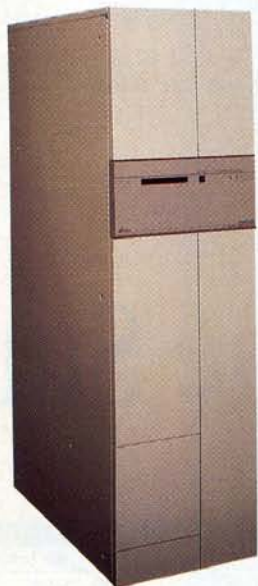
LoadRunner then compiles statistics based on the results of the tests. LoadRunner measures the load generated for the server by the virtual users. Performance testing also measures transaction response time for the application's clients and generates reports and graphs based on that information. Now the developer has enough data to analyze certain details of system performance so he or she can get to work on fine-tuning the product.

With virtual users, human user substitutes, a company can test its software for hidden glitches without actually having to find 100 or more users running test scripts. Virtual users can run tests overnight and over the weekend, saving the company considerable amounts of pizza and beer, according to Jayaram M. Bhat, vice president of marketing.

"If you just have real users, it is almost impossible to do synchronization tests [when several users try to access the same piece of data or to log in at the same time]. With real users, it is also very difficult to collect and analyze performance data. [With] virtual users you can emulate many users per machine — therefore needing fewer machines," Bhat said.

While multiple virtual users can work together on one machine at the same time, any other machine can be used as a host for still more users. All current virtual user sessions are displayed on LoadRunner's Scenario Control panel. The virtual user runs in "background mode," not appearing on

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screen. However, it is possible to select and view one or more of the virtual users in action, Mercury said.

LoadRunner and XRunner, another Mercury product, run the same test scripts. Developers can test programs in a single-user mode with XRunner and take the same tests scripts to do multi-user testing with LoadRunner. Consequently, many XRunner customers are purchasing LoadRunner, Mercury said.

By emulating users and machines, LoadRunner can save a company some money, but that isn't the biggest benefit, according to Bhat. He said the real clincher is the ability to detect bugs early in the product cycle — before it ships to customers.

"Can you imagine the cost of a major bug on a bank teller system or a stock-trading system?" Bhat said.

Pricing for the base package starts at $70,000 for one controller and 25 virtual users. LoadRunner has been shipping since November.

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