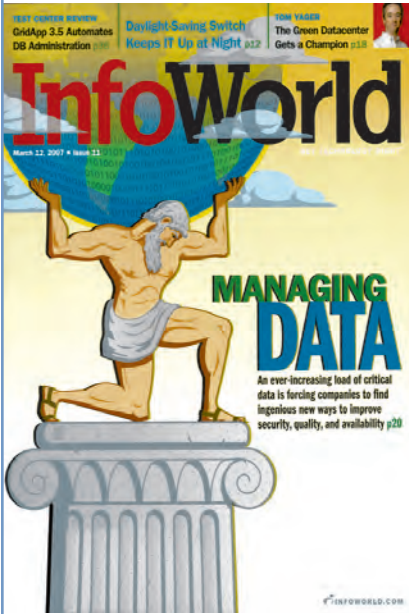


DB administration simplification

Oracle-friendlier solution helps with standardization, patching

By Sean McCown



The following review was originally published in the March 12, 2007, issue of InfoWorld Magazine.

As organizations grow, their application and database scenarios can become more complex, and it becomes increasingly important for IT to standardize the deployments of these environments. Standardization not only reduces mistakes by ensuring that each deployment is done exactly the same way, but it decreases deployment time. Fortunately, solutions are available to assist with the process, such as GridApp's database automation management solution, Clarity 3.5, aimed at companies running Oracle, Oracle RAC (Real Application Clusters), and to a lesser degree, SQL Server.

Installing Clarity is fairly straightforward: Install the Clarity Manager management server and the repository database (if you're going to have one). Of course, you also must upload all of the software you're going to manage, be it Oracle, SQL Server, or RAC, as well as any patches you're going to push out.

The next step is to start adding servers to "grids" (these aren't performance grids, it's just the name GridApp uses for the top-level storage containers). Then install management agents on them by simply pushing them out from the Clarity server. Now you're ready to create your templates.

XML Simplicity

Templates are the basis for everything you'll do in Clarity. Configuring them is easy as they're XML-based, so it's really no problem to create any number with both dynamic and

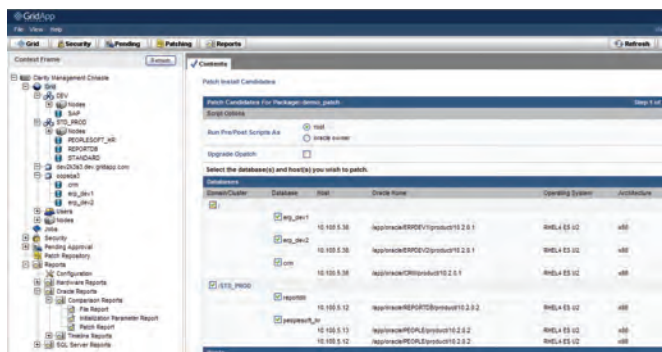
static options. This is a very powerful function, especially for RAC deployments, which are complex and fraught with potential pitfalls. Being able to specify that certain options get implemented with specific values is not only incredibly important, it's a huge time-saver.

Once I had my templates created, I was able to provision a primary instance of a new RAC cluster in just a few minutes via the management server UI. Provisioning the next node was even easier because Clarity is smart enough to know what can and can't be changed when you add a node to an existing cluster. Thus, some options are static no matter how you configured them in the template. As a result, anyone in the datacenter can easily add a node to the cluster: All you have to do is provide the name of the cluster, and everything else is done automatically.

Notably, Clarity can't provision SQL Server clusters, which is indicative of its relatively limited SQL support.

I was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to add nodes. However, I have to criticize the fact that you must go through the wizard each time. You can't schedule deployments, and you can't run them unattended. Don't get me wrong; the time savings are still significant, it'd just be nice to have a one-click solution. Additionally, I don't like that you can't prevent someone from deploying Oracle or SQL Server on a managed box; Clarity will just tell you that it's been done after the fact.

Clarity's management server delivers some useful auditing capabilities, enabling an admin to see who has done what. I do wish it would let you monitor changes to the templates themselves, however, so you could tell who made a change if, for example, a deployment gets provisioned incorrectly. Unfortunately, templates are edited outside of the management server, so that's not possible currently. The management server UI also could use a makeover; it could benefit not only from some layout enhancements but improved graphics and color scheme as well.



Clarity 3.5 can quickly and automatically detect unpatched and noncompliant database servers, thus reducing the time to patch.

It's easy to create any number of templates with both dynamic and static options, a very powerful function.

GridApp Clarity 3.5

Very Good 8.1

criteria	score	weight
Ease-of-use	8	25%
Manageability	8	25%
Performance	8	10%
Reliability	9	10%
Scalability	8	10%
Setup	8	10%
Value	8	10%

Cost:

Clarity Manager, \$50,000; Clarity Agent for Oracle, \$5,000 per agent; Clarity Agent for SQL Server, \$2,500 per agent

Platforms:

Clarity Manager: RHEL AS Release 4; Clarity Agent: RHEL AS Release 4, Suse Enterprise Linux 9, Windows 2000/2003; Database monitored: SQL Server 2000/2005; Oracle 9i, 10g, and 10gR2

Bottom Line:

Clarity 3.5 is excellent at provisioning Oracle and RAC installations, although it delivers less functionality for SQL Server. The solution handles patch management fairly well — although it doesn't manage patch downloads — plus it offers internal auditing and reporting. Scaling is fairly impressive, too: A single management server will scale about 300 managed agents.

Patch Appeal

Clarity maintains its value after the initial deployment, in that it can easily serve as your main patch deployment and management system. For Oracle, you can approve patches and push them out to servers very easily. I wish the solution could connect to the Oracle site and check for

The screenshot shows a 'Patch Report' window with a table comparing patch statuses. The table has columns for 'Clarity Domain', 'Oracle Home', 'Collection ID', 'Collection Time', and 'Upload Time'. It compares three domains: 'app/oracle/STAND/product10.2.0.2', 'app/oracle/PEOPLE/product10.2.0.2', and 'app/oracle/PEOPLE/product10.2.0.2'. The 'Domains' section below the table shows status icons (checkmarks, X's, and triangles) for various patch IDs like 4715104, 4990390, and 4882829.

Admins can create dynamic, customized reports in formats such as comparison or timeline, useful for troubleshooting or determining standards enforcement.

patches automatically. Currently you have to download the patches manually and upload them to Clarity, but once they're there, you're golden.

The patch management for SQL Server 2005 works the same way. Moreover, it allows you to see the patch levels of all managed servers, which is difficult to do using Microsoft's native tools. Unfortunately, it won't do patch management for SQL Server 2000.

Clarity's basic functionality is great, but the real question is how does it scale? Realistically, a single Clarity management server can scale to about 300 managed agents. The GUI gets a little thick after that, but being browser based, it's really not Clarity's fault. Other than that, you can't provision several boxes at once, so from that standpoint there's no difference between managing one server or 300.

Better in Oracle

As I said, installation is fairly straightforward — but that's only if you know Linux. There isn't a Windows version of the management server. Thus, I'm not sure how well this product will go over in SQL Server shops, in that SQL Server DBAs don't really know much about Linux, nor do they want to.

Expecting them to feel comfortable with a deployment system housed on Linux may be asking too much, not to mention that the patch management works only on SQL Server 2005, and plenty of shops are still mostly SQL Server 2000.

Excluding them from such an important functionality may keep them from adopting Clarity going forward.

Another shortcoming: Not only can't Clarity deploy SQL Server clusters, which would make it really useful, if you want to run reports on your managed environment, you'll have to install Oracle. I know a lot of SQL Server DBAs who will raise an eyebrow at being forced to install Oracle in their shop.

All in all, Clarity 3.5 steps up nicely for Oracle, greatly enhancing Oracle database and RAC deployment scenarios and patch management. The product's SQL Server support, meanwhile, is relatively limited. Thus, my scoring in this review is based primarily on the product's Oracle functionality. Whereas SQL Server shops might look elsewhere for this kind of offering, I really believe that it'll be indispensable for large Oracle shops.



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