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Review

Digital Rapids StreamZ-2500



The StreamZ can serve as your core system for both transcoding and encoding, as it handles manual and watched folder modes for the former and meets exacting specifications for multiple formats and bit rates for the latter. And if your workflow requires both a transcoding and an encoding solution, and speed is paramount, strongly consider putting a StreamZ system on your short list.

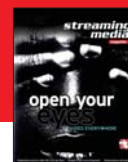
StreamZ-2500
Digital Rapids
www.digital-rapids.com

Price (turnkey system): varies internationally and depending on model and options.

SYSTEM SPECS (AS REVIEWED):

■ Dual 3.0GHz Intel Xeon processors
■ 1GB RAM dedicated IDE system/software HDD
■ S84GB RAID array for capturing HD footage
■ Windows XP Professional
■ NVIDIA GeForce 6200 PCIe x16 dual-VGA graphics card
■ Digital Rapids DRC-5500 HD/SD hardware (standard with StreamZHD; custom for this configuration)
■ Digital Rapids DRC-2500 SD-SDI/DV/analog board (standard with StreamZ2500)

A few years ago, pundits were claiming that the move to digital acquisition and distribution would end the format wars. Turns out they were partly right: what was considered a war between VHS, Beta, S-VHS, 8 mm, HI-8,



By Tim Siglin

BetaSR etc. ended less than two years after affordable digital acquisition formats like DV and DVCAM hit the scene. Problem was, that format war was just a practice exercise for the more complex conflict that's upon us today. On last count, we're up to about 50 viable codecs and variations of codecs, and the number is still growing.

Last issue, I reviewed Autodesk's Cleaner, a software-only product that does an adequate job of transcoding content. This month we kick it up a notch to a hardware-software combination that provides real-time encoding, remarkably fast transcoding, and a host of other features.

The Digital Rapids StreamZ series of network video encoding solutions consists of a Digital Rapids single- or dual-channel encoding card, a 3RU chassis with eight hot-swappable bays, dual 3.0GHz Xeon processors, and either a breakout cable or an optional breakout box. For this review, we decided to forego the analog encoding cards and review a dual-channel digital and analog card, the StreamZ-2500. We also took a sneak peek at the StreamZHD, in the same configuration as the StreamZ-2500 but with SD-SDI and HD-SDI inputs. Even though it's not a "standard" configuration (see the product information at the beginning of this article), it gave us a chance to experiment with the best of both worlds, so to speak.

Codecs and Formats

The StreamZ solution, which includes Digital Rapids' Stream Enterprise software, is capable of handling many different codecs and formats, thanks to the company's agreements with major codec vendors. The system works in real time with Windows Media, QuickTime, Helix-based codecs, MainConcept MPEG-2, Sorenson, DivX, and Flash. Digital Rapids has also shown a willingness to integrate new codecs as they reach maturity; future plans also call for real-time H.264 encoding and transcoding.

Form Factor

The StreamZ box we tested was designed for rack mounting in a standard server rack, but Digital Rapids also makes an expansion chassis version as well, known as StreamZ-P (the P is for portable), that plugs into a laptop's PCMCIA slot. While it's only available for standard defini-

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