

What on Earth is a Mainframe?

An Introduction to IBM zSeries Mainframes and z/OS Operating System for Total Beginners

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Cover image of IBM z990 Processor courtesy of IBM Archives.

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Chapter 1: But Aren't Mainframes Dead? An Introduction to the Mainframe

So what exactly are these Mainframes that everyone's talking about? Let's find out...

What is a Mainframe?

It's a big computer. In the 1970s and 1980s when almost all computers were big, the term *Mainframe* was used to refer to a number of different computer systems. Today most of these are gone, and *Mainframe* almost always refers to IBM's zSeries computers. And that's what this book is all about. From now on when we talk about Mainframes, we're talking about the zSeries.

The zSeries computers are amongst the largest computers sold today, and they're used for *commercial data processing*. By commercial data processing we're really talking about database based applications; putting a piece of data into a database, looking at it, and taking it out. Now this sounds ridiculously simple, but it's not. When you're running big database applications, you need to think about:

- **Data integrity:** My data HAS to be right – all the time.
- **Throughput:** I need to run lots and lots of work – now.
- **Response:** I want the answers NOW – not in one minute's time

- **Disaster Recovery:** If a disaster strikes, I want to be back up and running. Fast.
- **Usability:** It has to do what I want, when I want – oh yeah, and make it easy to use.
- **Reliability:** Don't tell me there's a computer problem – I want it available when I need it.
- **Audit:** I need to be able to find out who's done what in the past.
- **Security:** Only those who should, can.

So now commercial data processing is starting to sound a bit more complicated isn't it?

Today every business wanting to use computers commercially faces these issues. The individual needs, size, and business complexity will be different; but these basic issues will be there. And there are lots of computing systems and software around that can help with all this. So why do people move to a Mainframe?

Simple: they don't. There aren't many organizations that will install a Mainframe from scratch (unless they're installing Linux™ on the zSeries – this is a growing market) – and we'll discuss why soon. But the fact is that almost all Mainframe users have been using Mainframes for years (well, decades actually). People often call them *legacy* systems.

Now, the bottom line is that Mainframes do commercial data processing well. But there are things they're not good at. Things like:

- **Number crunching.** You won't find many scientific applications for the zSeries. There are cheaper, easier options out there.
- **Graphics and Geographical Information Systems.** No games like Half-Life® running on Mainframes.
- **Look good.** Let's talk about this for a second. You're familiar with Microsoft® Windows®; the mouse and the nice, fancy screens right? Well Mainframes have none of that. To talk to a Mainframe you need a 3270 terminal (a *dumb* terminal – no

processing is done here), or a PC running software that *pretends* to be a dumb terminal (3270 *emulation software*).

These dumb terminals are *character based* - have a look at Figure 1. No windows, no graphics (well, you can – but almost no-one does) - just text. People often call them *green screens*, because in the old days they had green writing on a black background. There are certainly applications connecting to the Mainframe that look good – but you’ll find that all the nice, pretty stuff is done on a different computing platform.

```
Menu Utilities Compilers Options Status Help
-----
ISPF Primary Option Menu

0 Settings      Terminal and user parameters      User ID . . : DEMO2
1 View          Display source data or listings  Time. . . . : 18:15
2 Edit          Create or change source data     Terminal. . : 3278
3 Utilities     Perform utility functions        Screen. . . . : 1
4 Foreground   Interactive language processing  Language. . : ENGLISH
5 Batch         Submit job for language processing Appl ID . . : ISR
6 Command       Enter TSO or Workstation commands TSO logon . : IKJTTEST
7 Dialog Test   Perform dialog testing           TSO prefix: DEMO2
8 LM Facility   Library administrator functions System ID . . : OS390
9 IBM Products IBM program development products MVS acct. . : ACCT#
                                           release . . : ISPF 4.4

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Option ==> -
F1=Help      F3=Exit      F10=Actions  F12=Cancel
```

Figure 1: A 3270 Mainframe Screen (courtesy Jolly Giant Software)

So congratulations! You are now the owner of a huge company (complete with private jet and corporate limousine) that for the past 20 years or so has been developing programs that run on the Mainframe. You’ve spent huge – no, *enormous* amounts of money, time and effort to get them working for you. So after 20 years of debugging, tweaking, changing and modifying, your Mainframe programs are working fine. But more importantly, your business for the past 20 years has been evolving around these programs. So the Mainframe has slowly become the core of your entire business. No Mainframe, no business. Welcome to the Mainframe world!

That's what most Mainframe users are facing. They've got these core systems running on Mainframes (like your bank account details), and they desperately, desperately need them.

So If Mainframes Are So Good, Why Does Everyone Want to Get Rid of Them?

There must be hundreds of computing journalists today that see the zSeries Mainframe as a computing Rasputin. Shoot him, poison him, drown him – and somehow he still keeps breathing! For many years computer magazines have delighted in writing about the death of zSeries Mainframes - and many people believed them (and still do). But why don't people like them? And why aren't there many new Mainframe users? Simple: money, people, internet.

Money

Mainframes are expensive - very expensive. And we're not just talking about buying the Mainframe hardware and software. You're also up for:

- Hardware support costs – if they break, you need someone to come and fix them.
- Software licensing costs – the right to run the software, and support in case there's a problem with it.
- People to look after and maintain the Mainframe.
- A computer room - you can't put a Mainframe under your desk. They need an air-conditioned, climate controlled computer room.

IBM has worked hard in recent years to reduce the costs of Mainframes and they've been quite successful. But the fact remains that Mainframes still aren't cheap.

People

Mainframes are far harder to look after than other computing options. Let's look at this for a second:

- You need more people to look after a Mainframe.
- Mainframes are harder to use, so these people need to have more training. A typical University graduate can administer a UNIX® server without a great deal of training. The same graduate needs a couple of years training to become a competent Mainframe administrator.
- You can't find people who are Mainframe-savvy. Quality people with Mainframe skills or skills in programming older languages like COBOL are becoming harder to find. Few University graduates become skilled on the Mainframe, and existing Mainframe experts are slowly retiring. We talk more about this later.

Internet

Picture this: you've got all this data and lots of programs that access, process and change it. But Mainframes aren't pretty, and you want pretty applications. Applications that let people get to your data from the internet and intranets. Applications that can make it look nice: drop down boxes, fancy graphics - the works.

Now Mainframes in the past haven't played well with other systems. In past years if you wanted to connect your Mainframe system to the internet it was hard, if not impossible.

IBM has made a lot of changes to the Mainframe to fix this. For example, z/OS includes UNIX. That's right - a full, complete UNIX operating system is inside z/OS. This certainly means that you can run UNIX applications under z/OS. But perhaps more importantly this gives you a path between your older Mainframe applications and UNIX oriented programs and equipment, including the internet. Nonetheless, connecting your Mainframe applications with newer systems and technology still isn't a straightforward task.

So, that sounds pretty convincing doesn't it? Bring over that dump truck – we're getting rid of all our Mainframes! But before we start looking for extra large garbage bags, let's have a look at the other side.

IBM as Snow White? The Mainframe Market Today

If you were in the market for a computer in the 1950s and 1960s, you were looking at Mainframes - there was really nothing else. And the dominant player was IBM.

The Mainframe market in those days was sometimes called 'IBM and the Seven Dwarfs' - the 'dwarfs' being the other major Mainframe manufacturers: Burroughs, Control Data, General Electric, Honeywell, NCR, RCA, and UNIVAC.

In many ways the Mainframe market today hasn't changed much - a dominant IBM together with manufacturers such as:

- Fujitsu Siemens® BS2000 running OSD.
- Fujitsu® Trimetra NOVA running Open/VME (originally ICL VME).
- HP NonStop server (originally Tandem NonStop).
- Unisys ClearPath running MCP (originally Burroughs) and OS220 (originally Univac-Sperry).
- Bull NovaScale 9000 Series running GCOS 8.

All of these systems are still in use today, and are being fully supported by their vendors. Like the zSeries they are legacy systems (meaning they're old technology but still needed), and most have been developed so they can also run UNIX, and in some cases even Microsoft® Windows®.

Users of these Mainframes are faced with many of the same issues as zSeries Mainframe users – high costs, web-enablement, future development, future support, and finding skilled technical people.

Why Keep Mainframes?

Here's an interesting fact - the amount of work Mainframes are doing around the world is *increasing*. That's right, though the number of Mainframes being used has dropped over the past years, if you add up all the processing they do – it's increasing. In fact, you will find that most major banks, insurance companies, and larger government departments in more industrialized countries have a Mainframe or two

hidden in the computer room closet. So why haven't they moved on? Two reasons: it's hard to move, and Mainframes do some things better.

It's Hard to Move Away From Mainframes

Remember? You're the owner of that organization that first invested in Mainframes 20 years ago? All the Mainframe programs and systems have been evolving to suit your business. And what's more, your business has been evolving around the Mainframe. You're joined at the hip. The Mainframe and its applications are the core of your business – holding the critical information. You simply cannot do without the functionality or the data.

The Y2K 'Bug' – A Mainframe Disease

In the 1990s, the Y2K 'bug' made worldwide headlines. Many were predicting catastrophic problems on January 1, 2000 for older applications – especially those running on Mainframes.

This was caused by many older applications using just two digits to store the year. For example, 1999 was stored as '99'. So in 2000, some applications would think that it was 1900.

Many organizations were facing the huge cost of changing their older mainframe applications – and decided not to. Instead, they spent their money on moving their applications away from the mainframe.

So to move away from the Mainframe you have to:

- Buy new hardware – and this hardware needs to be as reliable as the Mainframe hardware.
- Buy new systems software – and this needs to be reliable too.
- Find people who can administer your new systems.
- Create new procedures to administer your new systems. For example: backups, database maintenance, security, audit, and Disaster Recovery.

- Either rewrite all your programs (that you've spent 20 years developing and modifying) on another platform and in another language, or modify an 'off the shelf package' - software already written. And it had all better work.
- Train all your users to use the new system.
- Migrate all your data from the Mainframe to the newer system.
- Find something to do with all the Mainframe people that are now out of a job.

Also remember that you need to cutover from your old system to a new one. So you're going to have to shutdown the Mainframe systems, migrate your existing data across, then startup the new system – and hope it works.

Oh yes, we almost forgot about cost – none of this is going to be cheap. So you're going to need a very good reason to make this change.

There are many cases where organizations have attempted this and failed. Or migrated only half of their systems. Or migrated to a new system that is slower, crashes regularly, and doesn't do everything the old system did. But there are also many cases where a migration from a Mainframe application to a different system has been incredibly successful – just what was needed. Either way there's no doubting that it's hard to do, will cost a lot, and can be risky.

Mainframes Do Some Things Better

Think about ambulances. If you're running an ambulance service are you going to buy cheap or used vehicles to use as ambulances? No way! You're going to want to spend money on vehicles that you know won't break down. And what's more, you're going to want to spend lots of money looking after and maintaining those vehicles because if they fail, people die.

In many cases, the Mainframe is like this (except that no-one dies). Yes, it's a system based on older technology. But in some ways it is the best at what it does. Its strengths are:

- **Reliability:** Would you believe that the ‘z’ in zSeries stands for ‘zero downtime?’ Although this is a bit of marketing, there’s no doubt that Mainframes run, and run, and run.

Mainframe hardware is the most reliable on the planet – and the best supported. If it breaks, you’ll have an engineer at your doorstep in a flash, 24 hours a day. Mainframe software has been used for the critical business applications of many large corporations for many years. Today, an organization with a properly setup and run Mainframe can measure the time between unscheduled outages in YEARS.

- **Accountability:** The z/OS operating system has the best recording of any operating system on the planet. This recording has little overhead, and lets you monitor everything from performance (how fast did we do that?), to security (who tried to do that?), and accounting (who and how much do we charge for that?)

Why Are Mainframes Using Older Technology?

So why are Mainframes using old technology - why can’t they simply use new technology as it becomes available? Because of *Backward Compatibility*.

In 1964, IBM released a new Mainframe - the System/360. But there was one problem - the System/360 wouldn’t run programs written on the previous IBM machines - so customers had to rewrite them. The System/360™ (now z/Series) almost bankrupted IBM.

Today, every time a new Mainframe is released it has to work with existing mainframe application programs and software - it has to be *backward compatible*. This makes it a little more difficult for IBM to move to newer technology.

- **Data integrity:** Yes, we’re back to this. When data integrity is important you can’t beat the Mainframe. The database applications that run on z/OS such as IMS and DB2 have lots of features to make sure that database corruptions simply don’t occur. So a database on the Mainframe is very, very safe.
- **Throughput:** Even today, it’s difficult to find another platform and database management system that can process the high number of transactions that Mainframe database applications eat

up for breakfast. We're talking thousands of transactions PER SECOND, each completed in less than half a second. So for larger applications the Mainframe still seems like home.

- **Security:** Correctly setup Mainframes are the most secure computing system on the planet. Period. No viruses on the Mainframe.

The Last Word

So, we now know about Mainframes and where they sit in the computing industry. We know that:

- They're usually legacy systems holding the key data for an organization.
- They can do a lot of work, and they can do it quickly, safely and reliably.
- They're expensive, and difficult to setup and run.
- They do some things far better than any other system.
- They're hard to move from.

The fact is that the zSeries Mainframe is going to be around for many, many years to come.