

CAD on the Cloud

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Ever since SolidWorks announced its grand plans of taking its MCAD software onto the cloud, the topic of CAD on the Cloud has become a hot one. People have been talking about Software as a Service (SaaS) for quite a while now. But this is the first time a CAD vendor has made bold statements and even showed a working demo of their cloud technology in action.

Since SolidWorks showed that demo at SolidWorks World 2010, no new information has come out from the company with the result that its partners, resellers, customers and just about everyone else in the CAD software industry have started speculating about what exactly is going to happen. Most of the speculation is due to a lack of proper understanding of what cloud computing is all about. The point of this article is to explain some of the issues surrounding CAD on the Cloud as I understand them, and let readers draw their own conclusions. This article is not about SolidWorks alone. It is about CAD on the Cloud in general and applies to any CAD vendor who is working on offering its software as a service (SaaS).

One of the most misunderstood concepts about SaaS finds its roots in the term itself — Software as a Service. It suggests that the software will be served from some remote server somewhere in the cloud, which is absolutely true. But it says nothing about the data that the software will have to work upon.

For SaaS to work properly, the data needs to be on the same server as the software or very close to it. You cannot have the data residing on your computer and have the software running on some server in the cloud, quite simply because you would then need to upload and download that data every time the software does something to it. CAD data by nature is large and having the software and data in two different places is simply not feasible. So if you are going to adopt CAD on the Cloud, you need to get used to the idea of having your data and intellectual property reside on a server under the control of your CAD vendor. This may or may not be a good thing depending upon your personal view.

Probably the most widely asked question about CAD on the Cloud is: “What if I am not connected to the Internet?” Well,

the answer is simple. Go find something else to do. But seriously, the solution to this problem really depends upon the kind of redundancy that each CAD vendor builds into their system. Do they allow a local copy of the software to be installed which maybe synchronises your data with your computer when you quit the cloud application? Or some other system that ensures that you are not left high and dry when you are offline.

Another question asked is: “Who owns my data?” The question itself is a self-refuting idea because of the word ‘my’. Just because ‘your’ data resides on someone else’s server, it does not become theirs. So this fear is rather unfounded. Another similar question is: “If I want to move to another CAD vendor, do I get to take my data?” Of course you will. Nobody is going to switch to a CAD on the Cloud solution of a vendor who does not allow that.

There are many more questions and concerns, which begs the question: why would CAD users want to switch to the cloud in the first place? After all, the way they use CAD software now seems to be perfectly all right. If it ain’t broke, then why fix it? Clearly, CAD on the Cloud is not something that users have been asking for in droves. So why are some CAD vendors so eager to take their CAD systems on to the cloud? There are a few reasons for that.

Firstly, CAD vendors have been making it very difficult for customers to stay off subscription. CAD on the Cloud solves this problem since everyone ends up subscribing to the service. It also solves the problem of having to maintain and support earlier versions of software since everyone will be using the same version of the software. The problem of software piracy is also solved by CAD on the Cloud since you need to log into your account to make use of the software.

Having said all this, I find it hard to believe that we are going to continue to use software the way we do now till kingdom come. I believe the cloud or something like it is the future. The real question is whether the time is right for a paradigm shift this big. Is this generation of CAD users ready for such a shift? More importantly, do they even need it?