Essay

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1. Introduction

Wiard Vasen, Ayse Yuksel and myself (Daniel Genis) created an interactive video[1] for the introduction into Multimedia course at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

This document will show the steps our group took in creating the video and will elaborate on some issues we encountered during the project. The task was to create an interactive video including moments where the viewer can choose between different clips using Ximpel. Ximpel is a solution to create interactive web videos based on Flash. At the end I will include my personal experience doing this course followed by some suggestions to improve this course.

2. Conceptual phase

Defining what the Video will be about

After a brainstorming session we picked our own study informatics as the main subject. It was easy and simple to relate to this subject. The idea was to show how important IT systems and computers have become in our lives.

During this phase our concept was redefined a lot. The dilemma was to find suitable ideas that are realistic for the given timeframe (7 weeks). We anticipated that the amount of work curve will be more and more towards the end (almost like an exponential function). The final concept was to show a tour through the University and display informatics as a frustrating and sometimes beautiful way[2].

Further documenting the video

The next step was to further document the different video clips and make decisions about what they will contain in more detail. It is difficult to discuss video clips as there are so many aspects to a video (speed, color, position of the camera etc). During this process we redefined the our scenario many times. The last version of our scenario document and the corresponding choices tree were considerably different from our original ideas[3].

Using these documents we created pictures of the shots that will be required to be filmed. These pictures mainly describe where we had to shoot pictures[4].

3. Shooting the video clips

Using the documentation we created it was possible for us to take all required video shot during one day. Even shooting our simple picture we sometimes got confused about which shots we had and which needed to be taken. The documentation we created helped us always to find out what still needed to be done. We had to use the main buildings canteen as our FEW canteen was closed.

Shooting the video it became apparent that even though the documentation was detailed there had been moments where we were unsure how to actually take a particular scene. The complexity of shooting pictures in general became apparent. In total we took about 35 minutes worth of videos.

4. Putting the clips together

Getting started

Once you start cutting the images together you have to review your video material, select the appropriate clips and put them nicely into the order you need them to be in. We tried to avoid showing the same clip for more than 3-4 seconds without a cut so the clips will be more exciting to watch.

It turned out to be quite difficult to really select the best video material available. Some shots were not as good as we would have hoped. So by cutting the videos correctly we tried to work around the fact that some shots did not look as good as expected.

Tweaking the images
Once the images were cut together we started tweaking the cuts and added some video transitions. Here the goal was also not using too many as the clips might not look professional. We continuously reviewed our images and made minor changes to optimize our videos and cut's.

Adding sound
Once the video clips were finished we added music and other sounds to the clip. The clips required some minor editing at times to fit to the music. Most of the time we took particular parts of music instead that fitted to the scenes.

Finding the correct music for your clip can be challenging as we were collecting possible song candidates. In order to get the right music we did some research looking for suitable songs mainly in youtube, to then continue downloading this song to use it for our video.

Exporting clips to .flv
The adobe premiere 3 version at the VU MediaXperience was not online registered and as a result the export function to .flv was not available. These computers were not connected to any network. Due to these factors we exported the clips into high quality .avi in order to take them home and use our home computers to convert these files into .flv. The total file size of all clips were ~450 mb. This is beyond the capacity of most usb memory sticks. Using software from Riva we converted the .avi files into .flv[5].

Towards the end of our project the data saved on the MediaXperience computer got erased, the entire computer got reinstalled. We did have a backup bust lost some

5. Using Ximpel to create an interactive video

Understanding Ximpel
Getting familiar with Ximpel was our last task in order to complete our project. At first look it appeared to be a simple task. The example was kept very simple and the .xml file is very understandable[6].
The structure and syntax is easy to understand and combined with the “readme_v2.txt” file you will have the most essential tools at your hand to create an interactive video[7]. It will not however give you a good understanding of all the possibilities of Ximpel.

The need for special clips for the coice moments
After getting an understanding of Ximple it became apparent that we needed special repeatable video files which while be displayed while the viewer can make a choice between the next clips. For simplicity we choose for a frozen image as a repeating video. It came to our mind to maybe create a nice indefinite background music, however there was not enough time to even attempt this.

Creating choice loops
In order to create choice loops (as described in out choice document. See footnote 3) it we modified the .xml file to display a defined set of videos and then to display the same choice selection screen again. It was not very difficult to see how this could be done.

We did have some difficulties at times which we did not understand at first. We noticed that Ximpel was behaving differently depending on whether the files were opened through a network mapped drive. More on this matter at the end.

Modifying the ximpelApp.mxml file
Understanding this file and it's attributes is very difficult. The Ximpel package comes with a set of .html pages that explain the ximpel class. However the documentation about modifying the ximpelApp.mxml file is difficult to understand. We managed to modify the original file to suit our needs a bit more.

This had been our last step to complete our interactive video.

6. Summary

Learning experience

As explained there is real difficulty in defining and detailedly describing multimedia itself. Misunderstandings and different views regarding a certain shot or scene are unavoidable.

As a group of 3 it was important for us to take all shots in one day due to schedules. Shooting the picture itself I found that even though we had discussed and documented the video in great detail, shooting it had many aspects that needed to be considered. Comparing our simple plot line with a real movie makes me understand how complex a cinema movie must be. I appreciate the complexity of this subject now, including the art of cutting a video.

Ideas regarding the course

I found that together as a group of 3 it worked quite well. At times just 2 of our group worked together because the 3rd person could not attend. The timeframe of 7 weeks is maybe a bit short. In my humble opinion I thought that we always were quite good in the schedule and maybe a week more would be beneficial for the end result, the interactive video.

I would suggest creating one practicum session 2-3 weeks before the end where the students could work on realizing their Ximpel code regarding their concept.As I shortly mentioned above we experienced some strange issues at times where guidance would have been very nice.

Alternatively more Ximpel example clips and their source code would be helpful to get a better understanding of Ximpel. For instance some examples from this year could be provided for next years students.

The course material is sometimes difficult to navigate. There is information available however the layout of the site can be confusing at times. Let me take the available information about this essay as an example. From this site (http://www.few.vu.nl/~eliens/imm/) you can klick on “essay opdracht” in the middle. To then get further information it is required to click on either “Write a paper” on the top right or a little bit further down the page to click on “essay”. These 2 links could easily be overlooked.

Suggestion for Ximpel

It would be very nice if Ximpel could allow for a certain text to be displayed at predefined times while playing video clips. Possibly to use for an explanation of the video displayed or what is currently happening. I think I have a limited understanding about the possibilities of Ximpel but I believe such a feature would assist the viewer in understanding the storyoutline. I believe in some of our clips we could have used such effect much like adverts would do.

Backups of the project data

It happened to us that we lost all our data on the MediaXperience computer. We did have a backup and just lost a small amount of work. I would like to note though that our project grew to 8 gigabyte as it's biggest size with all the source material and some rendered videos. Not all students have a mobile storage device that can store that much data (yet).

I would recommend advising students that data loss can happen and recommend backups, hoping they have a device that can store enough.

Comments regarding our project

From our original first scenario until our finished interactive video the have been many changes. The plot outline might be difficult to understand.
The original goals were to make it humorous(see footnote 2) and exiting at the same time. It has been very difficult to achieve this combination while trying to send out the message that the VU has a great learning environment and spirit. Our end product is really a bit different compared to the first basic concept referenced above.

1) Interactive video. Direct link to our final version.
http://www.few.vu.nl/~imm08302/ximpel/bin/ximpelApp.html

2) Concept of the interactive video.
http://www.few.vu.nl/~imm08302/concept.pdf

3) Scenario and choices tree documents. Final version.
http://www.few.vu.nl/~imm08302/scenario.pdf
http://www.few.vu.nl/~imm08302/boom.pdf

4) Pictures of the required shots.
http://www.few.vu.nl/~imm08302/storyboard.pdf

5) Riva .flv encoder.
http://www.rivavx.com/?encoder

6) The .xml code for our interactive video. This is not the simple example .xml file referenced in the text. It is the final code for our group project. The original Ximpel package can be downloaded below and it also contains the original .XML files for inspection.
http://www.few.vu.nl/~imm08302/ximpel/bin/XML/practicum.xml

7) Ximpel package readme and full demo pack (version 2).
http://www.few.vu.nl/~ximpel/imm/readme_v2.txt
http://www.few.vu.nl/~ximpel/imm/ximpel-distro-imm-v2.zip

Ximpel API documentation – for experts.
http://www.few.vu.nl/~ximpel/