

SAVING STUDENT BRIAN: ENGAGING STUDENTS WITH INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY

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Question: How do you provide library orientation for a large number of first-year students without boring them to death?

Answer: Make a video using new technology, student actors, and a little fun.

At the University of Kentucky Libraries, we recently revived our First Year Experience with a video filmed on campus and in the virtual world, Second Life. From writing and filming to editing and screening, this paper will describe the process and offer practical tips and suggestions for creating your own instructional video.

UK 101 is the University of Kentucky's First Year Experience class for freshmen and transfer students. The UK Libraries have played an instructional role in UK 101 classes of varying sizes over the years. In the fall of 2006, several librarian instructors expressed their frustration with the library's existing UK 101 presentation. Students seemed bored with the presentation, and we were concerned that our message wasn't getting across. Two members of this project had previously been involved in the creation of a humorous animated video for an internal library celebration. Based on this experience, they wondered if an animated video might be a better way to engage students.

In early 2007 we gathered input from some of our student library assistants who were familiar with the current UK 101 format. We discussed possible storylines and presentation formats that might capture the interest of college freshmen. The students provided feedback throughout the process - from the idea stage to first script to read-through. The student participants were

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Kraemer (Information Technology Librarian),
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very enthusiastic and, while they felt that the format was timely, they also cautioned that it would need to be flexible enough to stay current with changing student interests - not a small feat.

Several key points emerged from our discussions. The first was that the storyline needed to resonate with students - what could the libraries do for them? Secondly, the story had to have universal appeal. Finally, thanks to our previous animation adventure, we knew that we had the expertise on campus to produce a quality animated video.

Several off-site meetings eventually produced a script that met all our criteria. The storyline focused on a senior, Brian, at the end of his last semester frantically trying to do research with no clue how to begin. Meanwhile his neighbor down the hall, with her research project completed and a job offer in hand, was partying away.

A library student assistant with a major in art was recruited to draw the story board based on the script written by librarians. It was agreed that the characters would be generic, similar to Homestar Runner, an animated internet cartoon. We were satisfied at this point that this was the direction we would take; however, in the end, we took a very different path.

In late spring 2007, two other library faculty members gave a presentation on Second Life at the Kentucky Library Association Spring Conference. It was at this presentation that the virtual light bulb went on. The two librarians working on the UK 101 project saw the animation possibilities of Second Life and met immediately afterwards to discuss a collaboration. This was when our animation project turned into something a little different from what we had first envisioned.

WHY THE CHANGE?

The restructuring of the UK Libraries' component of UK 101 and the new video was the result of a combination of

factors. For many years, the University of Kentucky Libraries has offered introductory classes to new students. Since 1989, the Library's introduction was incorporated into UK 101. UK 101 began with four sections in 1989 and has grown to 92 sections in 2007.

In addition to the large enrollment size, certain characteristics of the student body also complicated delivery of this content. The population of the UK campus is larger than most of the cities in Kentucky. Many of our students come from small towns and rural areas and the transition to a campus the size of UK can be quite intimidating. Add to that the imposing structure of the William T. Young Library and we eventually learned that it was an achievement just getting some students to venture into the building. Not only did we have to combat library anxiety, we also had to deal with the ever-growing number of students. In particular, the number of sections and class sizes mushroomed in 2005, forcing the libraries to consider a different plan for reaching over 2100 students in six weeks.

The UK 101 classes are 50 minutes long. Past feedback indicated that the classes wanted more time to tour the library. We decided to allow 30 minutes for the tour, but that meant we had only 20 minutes for the introduction to the library. How much library instruction can you convey in 20 minutes? We decided to simplify the message.

CREATING THE VIDEO

Although we had the expertise on campus to create a professional animated video, we wanted the ability to make regular updates and therefore decided to create the video in-house. While Second Life is not animation software, we realized that it could be used to easily create animated action in a customized environment.

Second Life (SL) is a 3-D virtual world application used for social interaction. Users create representations of themselves called avatars in order to interact with other users. Users can buy land in the virtual world and build objects using modeling and scripting tools that come with the client application. Unlike other virtual world applications, the content within SL is not created by the company that supports the application, but rather is created and owned by the users themselves. The 3-D modeling utility allows users to build basic geometric shapes, which can be combined to create complex objects. The application also supports image uploads, allowing users to further customize content they build in SL by applying custom images.

Librarians at the University of Kentucky had begun investigating the educational possibilities of SL in early 2007. When describing our work to audiences that were unfamiliar with SL, one tool we have used is to capture SL activities in video using the screen capture program Camtasia. Video presentations of SL enable audiences to get a feel for the experience before downloading the SL client and creating an account. When colleagues interested in re-vamping the UK 101 presentation saw

a video demo of SL, they realized that this tool could be used to create interesting, creative and fun animation. The avatar "actors" were native to the application – all we would have to do would be to clothe them to look like students. The set would have to be constructed using the SL building tools.

We were still novice builders at the time we decided to try this approach. But our sparse skills in combination with creative use of "freebies" - SL objects created by other builders and made available for no cost - were sufficient. We decided to re-create a generic dorm room, without trying to make it look like an actual dorm at UK. We could identify the space as "Kentucky" by uploading images of posters and UK content.

Creating a Second Life account is free, but building objects generally requires that you own land. There are places within Second Life where users can practice building, but objects built in these "sandboxes" will be removed and returned to your account in a few hours. We did not yet have University of Kentucky land within Second Life, and none of the librarians working on this project owned land at this time. But through collaboration with other librarians working in Second Life, we were able to borrow space where we could build and leave our objects in place until we were finished filming. (Thank you to Pipsqueaks Fiddlesticks, who in real life is a librarian at the College of DuPage.) Second Life educators are a collaborative group and are very willing to help new educators with special projects. We used an existing structure on our borrowed property, and changed the interior to resemble a dorm room (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The UK dorm room set in Second Life



Filming the action within Second Life could be done independently of the voice recording. We filmed in logical sequence, and made sure there was plenty of time in between gestures for dialogue. As we filmed, we found it helpful to practice the dialogue in order to estimate the timing. The avatar "actors" were manipulated by a librarian and a library student assistant.

Once we had a significant amount of raw footage from

Second Life (about 20 minutes of avatar gestures and movement in the dorm room set), we began working on developing the audio track. We put out a call for student actors to become the voices of our characters. A student assistant became our female lead and a library staff member, a recent UK graduate, was cast in the male role of Brian.

We set aside a couple of hours for recording the audio track. We used a computer in a private study room and installed a microphone and Audacity software for our recording session. The actors worked well together and were able to run through the entire script after just a few attempts.

At this point, we had about 20 minutes of Second Life video footage and about three minutes of dialogue. It was quite shocking to realize that our film was this short—much too short, so we began discussing our options. We felt strongly about keeping what we had already done (it had already taken quite a bit of time and effort to create) so we developed an idea around our character, Brian, taking a physical tour of the campus libraries. This physical tour would happen in the real world, not Second Life.

While one of us was working hours at a time on editing the existing footage, the others were working on developing a second script. We used Camtasia for editing. The editor put down the audio track and began cutting from the 20 minutes of Second Life footage. It is an understatement to say how challenging it was to cut the video clips to fit neatly into the audio track, especially when attempting to match gestures to dialogue. It was certainly a learning experience, and after a number of hours, the Second Life portion of the video was complete.

Upon completing the second script, the writers planned for a single day of shooting live video. On what was surely the hottest day of the year, only one of our group was able to participate in the filming effort. Our male voice actor served as our cameraman. He was just learning how to use the camera, which is evident in the final product. We decided the shaky footage made the video look more realistic. Had the day not been so hot and the trekking around campus not been so time consuming, we may have attempted to shoot more footage in each library. But due to the heat and the amount of travel-impeding construction on campus, the cranky shooting crew decided to cut the day short.

Because we were shooting in such a tight timeframe, we were not able to reshoot portions of the video. Likewise, we were not able to select our actors and extras for the live action physical tour portion—basically we just asked whoever happened to be in the library to help us. In retrospect, we would not do it that way again for several reasons. One of the most noticeable omissions is the lack of diversity we have in our cast.

With about 40 minutes of live video from numerous campus libraries, we decided to try a different approach with editing the second half of the film. The editor put together the

second half, reading aloud the script throughout the edits. With video clips completely edited, we then recorded the audio track.

We asked “Brian” to reprise his role and record the audio track. It was helpful that he had been the videographer for the live footage and knew the material well. We found it worked best for him to run through the entire audio track without stopping, and incredibly he nailed it on his third take.

With the audio and video edits complete, we knew it was time to preview the film. We had each seen the video so many times (particularly the editor) that we could practically recite the dialogue word for word, but we were curious about the reactions of others. We invited everyone who had any role whatsoever in the making of “Saving Student Brian” to a private screening. To our delight, everyone laughed in the right places and really enjoyed it. We had a few minor suggestions for edits and made those revisions quickly. At this point, we were ready to go live with the video.

THE VIDEO IN USE: UK101 FALL 2007

There were several advantages of using the video over the PowerPoint in UK101 sessions. Using the video ensured that every group received the same basic information regardless of the presenter. With the PowerPoint, the narration depended upon the presenter and some people would talk too much, others too little. We had to make sure that groups were given enough time to tour the library. When presenters talked too long it cut into the tour time while those who talked too little omitted important details. The video was also more appealing to inexperienced or first-time presenters because it reduced the amount of information that they had to convey.

The presentation also maintained the interest of the audience. We know because we heard them laughing. What will we do next year? The current structure of UK 101 can only accommodate roughly half of the freshman class. Planning is underway to make UK 101 a mandatory class and that will force yet another re-design.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The team is currently planning a revision of the video for the Fall 2008 semester. We plan to revisit our script, correct technical issues, and update the content to reflect new information. We also intend to increase the diversity of our cast and provide additional facts about library services in pop-up text throughout the video.

Our filming and editing skills have improved, as well as our skills with Second Life building and camera controls. As part of the new University of Kentucky presence in Second Life, we will even be able to film in front of the virtual William T Young Library. The library now has its own video camera which will allow us to take our time in filming the live action shots, particularly in setting up shots with a tripod to eliminate unsteady

camera work. We learned so much and had fun working on the first “Saving Student Brian,” and we are really looking forward to working on the sequel.

Link to watch the video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoqJ4jOgG0M>

FOR FURTHER READING

Barefoot, B. (2006, January 20). Bridging the Chasm: First-Year Students and the Library. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52(20), B16-B16

Garner, R. (2006, January 1). Humor in Pedagogy: How Ha-Ha Can Lead to Aha!. *College Teaching*, 54(1), 177. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ744358)