Publishing digital media – managing change the Vivid way

For any publisher who is used to publishing books the transition to publishing interactive digital media is a difficult one. Many of the processes involved in the development of digital resources are very different to those involved in the development of books.

Yet it is not uncommon for publishers to not realise the breadth of expertise they will need and to expect the processes and issues involved in publishing books and digital media to be sufficiently similar that they can mix up the development processes in a single department and utilise the existing skill sets for paper publishing as their primary expertise.

Or there is an expectation that putting an 'e' (for electronic) in front of a persons job title (e.g. e- designer) will magically suit that person for the change in the detail of the job that the new title entails.

This is a mistake.

It is a mistake because the differences in the requirements for digital media publishing span content, budgets, schedules, development processes, rights, and publishing platforms – in fact pretty much everything that is involved in publishing books is different in publishing interactive digital media. And getting any part of it wrong can be expensive.

A long standing client of ours, a major educational publisher, once said that they were aware that the company had unnecessarily spent vast amounts of money by getting the development processes, for the development of digital media, wrong.

There is, though, an awareness that the future is digital, fuelled by the fact that there is now a date (2012) for analogue TV turn of, which is not far off. Yet, with a few exceptions many publishers are ill prepared for the very significant change they will have to manage within their organisations in encompassing interactive digital media development and production.

Many publishers have become involved in digital media publishing but often in a rather ad hoc piecemeal way and often with the notion of, for example , CD ROM materials accompanying books to deliver added value. Typically a publisher will use a third party supplier to produce the digital media materials, often to inadequate specifications produced by subject authors with scant experience of the medium, and managed by internal publishers whose main expertise lies in book publishing.

In this environment development tends to be problematic, expensive and long winded. Little wonder that publishers are searching for an environment that will

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smooth the development processes and deliver **speed to market** and **reduced costs**.

The Vivid Framework

The question is how can publisher's best manage the change into interactive digital media production, apart from establishing a full digital design and production facility entirely in-house, such that they quickly develop the appropriate practices that will deliver **speed to market** and **reduced costs.**

We believe this can be achieved but will require a fundamental shift in perception of relationships with suppliers.

The traditional relationship, and the one that is most common, is that each project is tendered to a variety of suppliers. A supplier is then chosen according to different criteria, which could be price, could be concepts and ideas, could be added value etc.. 'The project' runs its course, during which relationships are established, processes are developed and utilised, the product is made, tested and published.

Then for the next project the whole cycle starts again possibly with a new supplier, possibly with a supplier that the client organisation has worked with sometime in the past, possibly with the same supplier that developed the previous product. Because each project is regarded as its own entity this usually means, though, that new relationships have to be established, new processes developed, new understandings nurtured, with all the old ones in which time and money have been invested, simply thrown away.

This waste of the knowledge and experiences developed over the progress of a project means that individual projects continue to be problematic, cost more and take more time to develop than need be the case.

The alternative to this is to develop a **Framework** for working with a preferred supplier or suppliers over **multiple projects** that is designed to be forward looking from the start and that recognises the **relationship between projects** and the opportunities to utilise this relationship towards greater efficiency. This can be achieved by introducing efficiencies into processes, nurturing and consolidating relationships, enabling the development and utilisation of common elements and components, inducing sharing and transference of knowledge, working to common objectives, sharing risk, increasing profits.

This is the **Vivid Framework** - working together over the medium and long term in order to increase the efficiency of the production of quality digital media products with the **specific business objective of maximising profit**.

To put it another way working according to the **Vivid Framework**, ensures **speed to market** of **quality interactive digital media products** for **less cost**.

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Benefits of managing change under the Vivid Framework

- ✓ Achieving maximum efficiencies leads to **reduced development costs**
- ✓ Development of common elements and components reduces development times and enables **speed to market**
- ✓ Development of common functionality enables early and low cost prototyping ensuring products are **right for the market**
- ✓ Easy access to specialist knowledge ensures **making best use of appropriate technology**
- ✓ **Shared risk**
- ✓ Knowledge transfer enables **accurate forecasting and resource planning**
- ✓ **Common objectives**

Case Study – project x

The client

Well known established educational publisher

The objective

The objective of working with this client under the **Vivid Framework** is to reduce costs and timescales of the development of interactive digital resources in order to maximise profits.

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Background

Vivid have already developed an interactive digital media project with this client in the area of literacy during which the concepts of the Framework were borne in mind. In particular the functional shell and related xml schema, controlling navigation and aspects of interactive functionality, were developed with reusability in mind.

Following the successful publication of this project we then embarked on a series of three projects in the areas of maths, science and literacy intended to have significant reusable elements, building on the work of the previous literacy project.

Approach

In the client organisation there were 3 different teams, each of which was initially self contained, dealing with each of the subject areas. Through our involvement we were able to provide a link between the teams and establish areas of commonality across the three products.

Most notably we were able to establish that the navigational and functional needs of all three products were sufficiently similar across them all that we could incorporate the needs of all three in a **single functional shell**. This, itself, was an adaptation of the shell developed in the previous literacy project allowing immediate cost savings to the new projects. We also produced an xml parser in ActionScript tailored to those specific needs. Where there were different requirements we were able to incorporate these as they occurred with minor modifications to the shell.

There was also a requirement for a set of user tools to be used at different points of each programme. We were able to develop a single set of tools (modified from an existing Vivid toolset) that was easily configurable for appropriate reuse across each of the programmes.

For data exchange between us and the client we developed a pro forma Excel spreadsheet for the client to provide data in a specified format and developed an accompanying Perl script to interpret that data to the required xml. This was common to all three projects but only had to be developed once and now this is familiar can be used efficiently across further multiple projects.

Savings and efficiencies

Taken over just these three projects the cost benefits of working on multiple projects under this framework have led already to substantial savings.

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These are specifically:

- ✓ Functional shell programming – 53% cost savings across the three projects
- ✓ User tools – 50% cost saving across the three projects
- ✓ Tailored development tools – initially existing Vivid tools were modified for a small fee for specific use in the projects. Further use of tools across new projects are provided free of charge at development in return for a small royalty on sales.

We are now in the midst of a fifth product in maths that will make use of the functional shell and benefit from substantial efficiencies gained from the relationships and data exchange and other administration processes that have now been established.

In addition to specific project tasks we are running tailored workshops that relate specifically to the client's situation and overall objectives as well as to specific project needs. For example the agenda of a workshop we ran at the clients premises last month included the specifics of the particular graphics requirements for a new project we are working on with them. This will enable a more efficient graphics specification and production process for the project.

Future developments

Overall we have already seen substantial cost savings over the span of the 4 projects thus far completed with a 5th underway. We also have a substantial functional shell that can be used to produce fast and economical prototypes for market testing and then utilised in a product development process that ensures speed to market.

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