

Communications Update

A Monthly Round-Up of Media and Communications

Issue 92 • September 1993



It's the Go: **Multimedia**

The emergence of Interactive Multimedia has the potential to accelerate Australia's growth into world markets. Multimedia products are brought to fruition through the convergence of information and communication technologies and so bring together the broad base of technical and intellectual skill resident in this country - text, audio, moving and still pictures, computers and expertise in the subject matter.

Mark Ridgway, Information Technology Strategy Section, DITARD

No doubt about it, interactive multimedia is the flavour of the month.

Recent weeks have seen two major conferences on the subject, topping a year in which it has been placed firmly on the policy agenda and an industry association, AIMIA (Australian Interactive Multimedia Association), was formed to advance the cause.

The emphasis in the conferences, mounted by Technology Training Corporation and IIR Conferences, was on technology and on commercial applications of multimedia, and speakers were drawn largely from industry. There were liberal sprinklings of case studies demonstrating corporate applications of multimedia (hereafter called MM), mostly in training and marketing, and a number of demonstrations. The NSW Public Works Department appeared in both programs on aspects of MM use for the Sydney Olympic 2000 bid. The NSW State Library's topic for TTC was 'Winning Export Dollars with Interactive MM Applications' which must have had the library's founding benefactor David Scott Mitchell turning in his grave.

The social and cultural implications and uses of MM received fairly cursory attention, though the both conferences had a session on intellectual property and copyright protection, the big sleeper issue of MM (and see also the AUSTOUCH project case study p.3). People paying around \$1300 to attend these conferences are naturally interested mostly in what's in it for their companies. (Note: CU attends when it can get a media pass).

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A Boon to Training

Watching some of the demonstrations appearing on a large video screen and controlled from a laptop computer, it was clear that many MM applications are simply an extension of the technique 'programmed learning' which was pioneered by the behavioural psychologist B F Skinner and has been around since the 1960s. The difference is that it can now be tricked up with moving pictures and an infinite number of multiple choice paths, thanks to computer technology.

This was amply demonstrated in a presentation at the IIR conference by Dr Patricia Youngblood of Andersen Consulting. With over 100,000 employees scattered around the world, Andersen developed a highly sophisticated MM Business Practices Course (BPC) which can be undertaken by trainees at their own location, in their own time and at their own pace. The BPC covers a wide range of situations encountered in everyday work, and allows trainees to select from a number of ways of dealing with them.

Excerpts showed aspects of encounters with customers as well as relations with staff, and the responses often involve mini-videos with the parts played by actors. With this MM training program, Andersen has saved itself millions of dollars in delivery and travel, cut learning time by 40 per cent, and recouped its development costs in six months.

The 'Gee Whiz' Factor

Mark Richards of Animation Design had a sympathetic hearing when he suggested that the subject of MM was surrounded by hype and misinformation because of what he called the 'gee whiz' factor and the expectation that MM was 'the next big thing'. His remark that there was a 'kind of feeding frenzy of suppliers but no-one is quite sure where the food is' got a big laugh. He went on to say what MM isn't: it is not a product, a solution to every problem, or a single concept/

technology. Rather, it is 'a set of enabling technologies and ideas which if properly exploited, deliver new opportunities'.

He referred to a remark made by the then Treasurer Paul Keating in 1986 when cross-media ownership rules were introduced; 'You can be queen of the screen, or prince of print, but not both'. Richards said that this was no longer true, and that someone like Murdoch or Packer could in fact be 'the monarch of multimedia'.



An Apple for the Teacher

David Strong, Vice President of Apple Computer Australia and a driving force in AIMIA, showed a futuristic video made by Apple in 1986 in which an academic is shown calling up and interacting with colleagues, identifying and printing the latest articles on the subject of a lecture, making a map overlay, or a lunch date, all through his computer and its monitor, with a kind of built-in 'minder' who talks back and reminds him about such matters as his mother's birthday. Strong pointed out that many of the elements of this video which were regarded as way off in the future, such as video-to-video communications and voice recognition, are here already.

He spoke of what he called the 'Tower of Babel' syndrome: multiple messages being received through different media, a principal cause of another syndrome, 'The Cluttered Office', with computer, monitor, keyboard, printer, fax, modem - all the paraphernalia of the modern electronic office. There is a need for a medium which can synthesise all the ways we communicate, Strong said, and digitisation is the way.

Strong said that schools had been much quicker to recognise the potential of MM than business, and he listed five different areas of application for business: desktops (for MM presentations), training, merchandising, public access and education.

In training, he mentioned particularly the benefits of being able to simulate actual work experience, of access to information which would normally require manuals, of on-line instant information in a crisis, and of the consistency of the training information given as compared with trainers.

Interactivity the Key

Strong said that the full potential of MM depends on interactive computing which in turn depends on adequate telecommunications bandwidth. 'We are fortunate in Australia to have one of the most advanced telecommunications systems in the world', Strong said and added that this gave us a head start on many other countries. No doubt mindful of Apple's recently launched Newton, he also mentioned the importance of wireless communications for use with handheld devices.

Despite some of the extravagant claims made for the effectiveness and impact of MM, no-one went the whole hog and sent an interactive MM presentation to the conferences instead of a speaker. Clearly, real people still have a role to play..... □

