

MAiP

Master of Arts
interactive
Production

Learning Contract

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Baseline

I worked extensively in graphic design and prepress from 1987 - 1999. During that time I set up and ran for seven years a small design and print house called 'JedSet'. I have also been team leader in the origination department of Rexam Pharmaceutical Packaging producing designs for Boots, Lilly and Zeneca; and Night Manager at Fairway Reprographics, handling brochures for CenterParcs and Butlins. This experience built solid technical skills in:

- Photoshop
- QuarkXPress
- Illustrator
- Freehand.

I have taught in Further Education part-time for five years at Totton College and full time for the last three years at Southampton City College. Relevant software taught includes Dreamweaver web design, a little Flash animation and basic video editing in addition to the print based applications Photoshop, QuarkXPress and Illustrator on courses including Higher National Certificate Advertising, National Diploma Graphics and Open College Network Applemac and Dreamweaver Web design. To support my courses I have set up a website at www.jednet.co.uk which has course schedules, instructional handouts and links to useful and inspiring sites. The site is also showcases a wide range of student work and hosts many small sub-sites.

Goals and Staging Posts

I want to improve my video editing and post-production skills and also learn one or more 3D packages. I also need to be able to deliver the results effectively on the world wide web. As I presented at the first Professional Practice seminar, when I first contacted the course leaders I put forward these goals:

"To develop my skills in web design, multimedia and video, initially so that I can pass these on as part of the modules that I teach ... additionally to improve online teaching resources for my students and those on other courses, to make them more interactive and so more interesting and better tailored to the needs of individual students."

I hope to meet all of these aims by the end of the Major Project. It is important that I achieve a qualification in MA Interactive Production as my career in teaching or industry is currently limited by my lack of academic qualifications.

Practice

I will take Digital Video as my first option. I have been filming the musician Nick Harper for two years when he has played in the area, with a view to adding video clips to his website, which has just been relaunched. The dv-video needs to be edited, composited where possible to show multiple angles, and colour retouched and manipulated to fit with the style of the new site.

This will need skills in Final Cut Pro and After Effects which I do not yet have. I will also need to research compression methods to deliver the video clips to the widest range of browsers at the best possible quality while keeping file sizes to a minimum. This will require investigation of Quicktime, Real Media and Windows Media Player, and compression/decompression 'codecs' such as Sorenson and Cinepak. To improve interactivity I will also research Flash MX and Director as an alternative means of delivering the video content.

Practice

I propose to create a three-dimensional scale model of one of our Apple Macintosh computer design studios at Southampton City College.

My previous 3D experience is slight and a prime reason for joining the MAiP course was to improve in this area. I first explored 3D on a Sinclair Spectrum computer in 1982, since which time I have done little more than occasionally extrude some text in Adobe Dimensions as a graphic effect before taking the result back into a 2D vector drawing package such as Adobe Illustrator or Macromedia Freehand. I have spent some time reaching an understanding of character modelling in Poser 4 which I made use of last year while teaching Fashion and Textiles at BTEC National Diploma level. Forays into Bryce were less successful.

As 3D buttons and graphic elements become more pervasive on the web it is clear that I need to acquire some skills in this area, both to support my other design work and as a possible future subject to teach. I own a Mac and have ready access to Apple Macintosh computers at Southampton City College, where we may in future run 3D on the Macs as a stand-alone course or as part of another course such as National Diploma Multimedia.

This leads me towards either Lightwave or Cinema 4D as the main software package to learn and employ for this Practice as they run on the Mac operating system. I bought books on each once I knew that they were to be part of the MAiP course and after exploring demonstration versions I would choose the flexible and initially more user-friendly Cinema 4D for this Practice – if it were not that the MAiP course will be introducing 3D to us in Lightwave.

I will therefore start the project in Lightwave but I am prepared to switch to Cinema 4D if I find Lightwave inappropriate for my needs since I do not put my emphasis on the Lightwave strengths of quality of modelling or rendering for this particular project. It is more important to be able to export the final result out to a format suitable for use in Macromedia Director as part of my Major Project.

The first purpose of this virtual model would be to facilitate a new layout for the computers which acknowledges the introduction of a data projector into the room.

As I showed in my seminar presentation, at present the computers are placed in rows back to back so that half the students have to turn around to look at the data projector screen, which is the primary mode of delivering taught content. Several students find themselves positioned too far from the screen or at too acute an angle to be able to follow material delivered on the screen. One of my students made great issue of this recently - and although initially I was surprised, on reflection I believe she was right to do so. I have since learned that one of our lecturers, Gerald Clayson, was marked down during a classroom observation from a 'one' to a 'two' specifically because of the room layout.

It is not practical to physically move all the desks and computers around to see what might or might not work, especially as this studio is used by many different groups of students and staff from three separate areas: Art and Design; Media and IT.

I hope that by creating a virtual representation of the studio it will be possible to reach a consensus for a new layout which is mutually acceptable. Indeed it should be possible to create a number of potential floor plans and to discuss the merits and drawbacks of each. It would be possible to do much of this with graph paper and cut out representations of the desks and computers. However that would not help us to fully envision what view each student might receive of the screen in terms of distance, angle and the brightness and contrast of the image.

There are several additional constraints including:

- the location of power and networking sockets and the resulting trailing cables
- the placement of a white board or future smart board
- the position of the door and ease of student entry and exit, especially in an emergency
- one wall is formed entirely of windows. These cause the reflection of sunlight from the computer screens if they face the windows, as half currently do. They also limit our options as they wash out another wall with light on a bright day to the detriment of any attempts to project onto that wall.
- The position of electric lights which flood sections of the wall. It is possible to remove a fitting, but this must be justified convincingly, not least because one has already been removed two year's ago at my request.

This first version of the virtual three-dimensional studio environment would not need to be visually attractive. The crucial criteria would be that it was correct for scale and lighting. Photorealistic results featuring painstaking textures and bump-maps on carefully modelled translucent iMacs can wait for a potential future application of the 3D environment as a marketing tool in the prospectus or on a web site.

In the greater scheme of things there is a second Apple Mac studio in a building scheduled for demolition in one year's time. It will be necessary to plan for the installation of our computers into a new building, at which point the time and effort in Practice 2 to learn these skills may be repaid. The college plans to market itself heavily on the promise of the new building and the virtual representation of a complete classroom would be a valuable asset. This version would justify the further development of modelling and textures.

Major Project

Once a new layout has been agreed and established there are still a number of potential uses for the virtual classroom environment produced as Practice 2, several of which I outline below under *1. Technical support*.

One problem that I face is how students and staff will be able to access and interact with the 3D environment and any associated database information relating to the computers, scanners and printers featured.

After considering this problem I have decided to create a 'portal' style home page or pages for the Apple Mac computers in each studio. This will provide a more useful alternative to those currently employed. Outnumbered by a thousand Windows pcs, the forty Art & Design Apple Mac computers at Southampton City College have enjoyed years of autonomy characterised by Mac vs Windows hostility on both sides. Although half the Macs are connected via 100BaseT ethernet into the main network, the absence of Apple client software means that in practice we have access only to the internet and some printers, but not to shared server space or crucially the college intranet which is the default start page for internet access. (see Appendices)

Without the option of the intranet most of our Apple Macs use the default Apple/Netscape page. This carries American biased news and ads as well as a large advertising banner in a frame retained along the top of every page visited. Understandably some students and staff have instead set the Google search engine as their start page while others have selfishly changed it to their personal web-based e-mail service such as Hotmail or Yahoo. (Our Macintosh computer users do not require the use of a log-in. As a result, other students that follow them onto that particular Mac receive this as an inappropriate introduction to their internet session).

At this point I intend to create a start page or pages which feature the following elements:

Technical support

This section will be centred on my Practice 2 three-dimensional representation of the studio. Each computer represented will show its designated number for networking purposes - one of the most common questions voiced in class is "what number is that computer?" It will also allow access to deeper information about each Mac including:

- unique college security number
- operating system version (currently any of 9.00, 9.04, 9.1 or 9.21, OS X variations soon)
- amount of RAM fitted
- capacity of the hard drive
- MAC (Media Access Code) address
- versions of primary design software installed (e.g. Photoshop 6.01 rather than 6.0)
- relevant service history such as date of last battery replacement

The names of students who regularly use that computer together with their class times would be a future expansion option – it would be useful to know which computers might be free during any particular session for the use of staff or students from another class who need extra access time. It would also indicate which students might be affected by hardware failure, maintenance or the removal of a machine for use during exhibitions (student work is currently stored locally on each machine's hard disk). There is potential to link into more information about the student and their progress and assessment histories, but that might fall foul of the Data Protection Act and is in any event not planned as part of the project during the duration of the MAiP course.

I will add studio specific information about using our flatbed and slide scanners, inkjet and laser printers and networking. It would also be useful to have information for students on how to download and install free typefaces from internet sites such as 1001FreeFonts.com.

At present one of my roles at the college is to be the sole Mac support technician, a part-time post of one day per week. When I am sick, teaching, on holiday or leave this post, it will fall to a full-time colleague with little or no Mac experience to try to provide support. The radical industrial design of the Apple iMac presents challenges to a novice Mac technician.

To assist them and myself I will add:

- links to Apple Computer technical support pages and that of useful Macintosh community sites such as macfixit.com
- links to the web sites of our main software suppliers such as Quark, Macromedia and Adobe for the easy download of upgrades and documentation
- in-house documentation and video clips demonstrating how to add RAM or change back-up batteries.
- small animations which require the appropriate Apple QuickTime, Flash and Shockwave plug-ins would assist in establishing whether these were correctly installed on a particular computer. This might be extended to Real Media and Windows Media Player plug-ins.

Search engines

Links to the popular search engines such as Google and Altavista, possibly even allowing a search from within the page itself. There could also be guidance on using search engines more successfully, for instance the use of Boolean functions such as *and* and *or*.

E mail providers

Links to the most requested web-based providers such as *MSN Hotmail*, *Yahoo* and *Apple's .Mac*. Described as the internet's "killer application" e-mail is vital for both academic and social purposes but the college does not provide students with official e-mail accounts (unlike Totton College). It is also not possible to access staff college accounts from the Macs.

News

The *BBC*, *CNN*, major newspaper web sites and design industry sites such as creativepro.com and k10k.com, together with any others by request.

At least as important in my view is to provide space for Southampton City College course specific news such as visits to galleries, project deadlines and links to relevant web sites for research.

For example, in January 2003 two of our classes went to the Victoria & Albert Museum in London to see the *Rewind* exhibition, a celebration of 40 years of excellence in design. Had the portal been in place we could have showcased the exhibition, advertised that there were places available on the coach to other students, provided web links to the museum venue (www.vam.ac.uk) and to the exhibitors, the Design & Art Direction educational charity (www.dandad.org). Students could then properly research the exhibition and make an educated decision on whether to go.

Software tutorial links

There are very many useful web-based resources containing inspiration, tutorials, textures, images, fonts and professional practice information about copyright and health & safety. To keep these current and interesting it is important to provide a system which allows students and staff to submit new links, highlight broken links and perhaps to place the links in some form of merit order or carry somebody's personal recommendation. Windows users can access the student intranet Art & Design links page which has some excellent links – but by listing them in alphabetical order makes no attempt to categorise them. As a result the illustration site howtodrawmanga.com is followed by camera supplies shop Jessops.co.uk.

Student support services

Financial, nursery and counselling help is available to students, but many are unaware of all the assistance they could obtain.

Chat rooms

Actually these are proscribed in the Southampton City College code of conduct for internet usage, but if there were significant demand there is certainly a case for setting up some form of forum for student discussion and feedback, perhaps through a dedicated Yahoo or MSN group.

Major Project Presentation

There are two diametrically opposed ways to present all this information:

- primarily on one 'portal' page, making use of drop-down menus and small buttons and links to squash it all in. Inevitably such feature rich pages look busy, can be initially confusing and leave little space for design.
- alternatively it could form a series of pages which you could navigate through as a number of choices or questions in the manner of a software installation wizard. Nobody wants to click more than necessary - it should not be a chore to be faced each time you go online.

The 'final' project should find the best compromise between these options. I will survey students and staff during throughout the process of alpha, beta and gold master stages and again as the deadline for the Major Project draws close.

While I will have prime responsibility for the project for at least as long as it forms a part of my MA, I will liaise with the Southampton City College webmaster **Tim Pipes** and the Head of IT **Stuart Learmonth** as well as other interested colleagues so that it becomes less dependent on my input. One of the greatest challenges at the end of the official period of the project will be to keep momentum. It is important that staff and students accept it as useful to them and feel that they are involved and can participate in updating the page(s). Otherwise, disaffected, they might do as some do now and set a different start page more appropriate to their needs.

Production Tools and Skills Required for Major Project

Southampton City College have been very supportive and agreed to buy educational licences for all the software I need for this project. I wish to use Macromedia Dreamweaver, together with Flash and Director to create a fitting Macintosh home page which will be more appropriate to all Mac-using students and staff.

Web page design

I have been using and teaching Dreamweaver for four years and have many books. Dreamweaver MX also features the database connectivity previously found in Ultradev. This may be useful in attaching database information in my technical support section previously outlined. I have used and created my own databases in Filemaker Pro during the seven years between 1987 and 1995 when I ran my own design and print business 'Jednet'. I have not used a database package since then so this will be a challenge. I have never used a database in conjunction with a web site.

Graphic elements

I will need to use Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop and Imageready to prepare any graphics. All three are programmes which I teach and am confident in. As an alternative to Imageready I hope to learn the basics of Fireworks MX from scratch this year.

Flash and rich media content

Flash MX I know far less well than Dreamweaver. I have previously bought the Flash 4 Creative Web Animation, Flash 4 for Windows Made Simple, Flash 5 Cartooning and the Flash 5 Bible. I have experimented with Flash versions 4 and 5 and came to the Institute for a two day course in Flash 5 two years ago. Since joining the MAiP course I have bought the books Macromedia Flash MX Training from the Source and a Friends of Ed book for upgrading from v5 to Flash MX. I may attend a part-time course at Southampton City College. It will be necessary to employ Flash MX if I wish to combine any Quicktime video clips with Flash content, as earlier versions could not handle video. My current digital video skills are self-taught and limited to iMovie 2 and a little Adobe Premiere 5 – I hope to supplement this with Final Cut Pro and Adobe After Effects as part of **Practice 1**.

Since the users of my portal will all be design staff or art students there is a pressure to make something special. Because the portal is aimed at computers under my direct control as a technician I am not fettered by the usual internet worries of cross-platform or cross-browser compatibility, nor should there be concerns about support for the Flash or Shockwave plugins or that unusual typefaces are unsupported. This leaves the potential for a more interesting start page (or pages) as it removes the need to design for the lowest common denominator. Where practical I will use Flash or Director to make for a more visually rich experience.

Director

I have no previous Director knowledge. I have bought some books for the MAiP course including Foundation Director 8.5. Director will be necessary for these main reasons:

- it provides a method of porting 3D content to the web
- it allows user interaction with the 3D content
- it may provide the best way to attach database information to the 3D content
- it is the most powerful tool available for resolving anything not foreseen

A further issue to be addressed is where there pages will be hosted. I will need constant access in the alpha and beta stages so propose to develop the project within my existing web site www.jednet.co.uk hosted by Total Connectivity Providers, who are based just across the road from Southampton Institute. Once the project is ready for general use it may need to be transferred onto the Southampton City College web server for security and hit rate issues. This creates the need to grant permissions for access for the updating of information conveniently for myself and other lecturers and will need researching. It would be useful to add a link to the same pages on the main intranet so that students using Windows pcs in the library would still have access to the information on the web.