

# Project Interactive Multimedia 2017

## Reflection Essay on Project LifeTimeFlash

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### **Introduction**

The course Project Interactive Multimedia is the final project of the first year of the bachelor programme Information, Multimedia & Management (IMM) at the VU. Before the course started, I already looked at some of the productions of last year to get an idea of what this course was going to be about. As the information about the course in the study guide was quite brief, looking at some of the results gave a better insight in what to expect. My first remark was that creativity is one of the building blocks of this course.

In earlier versions of this course, the XIMPEL platform used a combination of Flash and ActionScript (Flex) to program the interactive video games. Nowadays, a new version of XIMPEL is used that implements HTML5 and JavaScript. This makes the platform more cross-browser and cross-platform compatible, and also easier to use and program for the students. Although some programming skills are still required to master the XML format used, more emphasis can now be put on creativity.

### **Concept**

The focus every year is on the consequences of choice, as this is in line with how the XIMPEL interactive video platform is programmed. Additionally, there always is a subtheme associated. This year the emphasis was put on (serious) career games. In this course, students are given the option to work alone, or in groups of 2 or 3 students. I decided to partner with Pieter Hollander due to pleasant experiences from the past. Although I am not against working together with people I do not know yet, for a project with limited time available it is useful to know what to expect, and to be able to depend on someone else.

During initial brainstorming, we decided to approach the career theme from a higher, philosophical perspective. The first ideas that sprang to our minds are reflected in the title of our project: LifeTimeFlash. An important theme during your life is time, life and time together form a lifetime, and there is the belief that someday your life will flash before your eyes like a movie. Also, life is short, so spend your time well as it can be over in a flash.

As I have a background as cinephile, and Pieter is also interested in film, we agreed that we would use strong and dramatic visuals to convey our message. We would encourage the players of the game to think about their choices, and to reflect upon what matters in life. To incorporate the career theme, one of the paths that a user can choose is entirely focused on career. But as life is all about balance, one should think if that is the right choice after all.

## **Workshop Storytelling & Moodboard**

During the workshop storytelling, the quest for relevant material began. Finding the first visuals to present a cohesive story proved to be quite a challenge, but it eventually resulted in a moodboard that presents some of the elements we intended to use later to visualize our story. Some of the elements can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the knowledge about the story of the movies they are sourced from. It is especially this ambiguity that makes some of the visuals even more powerful in my opinion.

## **Storygraph**

Our storygraph has evolved a little bit during the implementation of the XIMPEL interactive video, but it essentially captures the flow of our interactive application. Players can always loop back to replay the story of their life, until they reach a balanced situation (live your dreams). Of course, it is always possible to chicken out when presented with the most important choice (take the blue pill), but then the story ends in a bad way (dream on).

We have used the storygraph as a support to find appropriate material for each choice and branch of the interactive video. It also led to the design of the hidden scoring system for the XIMPEL application: each element (career, leisure, people) starts with a scoring counter at zero. At the final choice, the engine checks if all scores equal one, and then present the final balanced sequence. If not, players are redirected to the pill sequence and the story could end or start over.

## **Viral clip**

Our viral clip comprises sequences that are sourced from for example The Matrix (1999) for the choice theme, Inception (2010) and Chronos (1985) for the dreams / time theme, and 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) for the flash theme. All these movies have things in common, like that they have been very influential in their genre, and also the recognizability (even) among the general public. The clip as a whole consists of intercut sequences that tell some of the different stories. The sequences are arranged to the soundtrack (part of Thomas Bergersen - Final Frontier), which includes a ticking clock like sound to emphasize urgency and to disseminate confusion. All video editing took place in Lightworks, a professional video editor also used to edit some of the Hollywood classics like Pulp Fiction (1994). This editing suite takes more time to master, though it allows for precise real time editing, even on modest hardware.

The guest lecture by Victor de Boer on film theory was a welcome addition to the course. Although I already was aware of most of the editing techniques presented, it refreshed my memory quite well. Furthermore, it encouraged me to pay more attention to how particular edits would work in the clips used in our interactive video.

## **XIMPEL interactive video**

For the creation of the interactive video, the use of the XIMPEL platform was obligatory. The current version of XIMPEL, that is HTML5 / JavaScript based, has an easy to use XML file format to define the playlist of your interactive video. The documentation is clear and easy to read, although we initially overlooked the section about the conditional leadsTo, as it is a bit

buried in the section about overlays. It could possibly also be referenced or mentioned in the section about scores and variables.

One problem we encountered though, was how to set a condition with multiple constraints. As we wanted to check if all hidden score counters equalled one, we needed to and-join multiple variable comparisons. However, adding ampersands to the condition led to erratic behaviour. Initially, we solved it by subtracting points from the score variables and then comparing equality for at most two variables at every branch. Although this worked, it was not very elegant. After contacting mr. Bhikharie, it seemed we had to escape the ampersands by using the HTML entity for the ampersands & to make the complex condition work. He immediately opted to add this remark to the documentation, which is of course useful for others possibly dealing with the same problem in the future. We would like to thank mr. Bhikharie for his quick, polite, and helpful response.

Overall, working with the XIMPEL platform was a pleasant experience. Anyone with even limited programming experience can use this platform to construct a powerful game or to convey an important message. As the programming was not hard to understand, this gives you the opportunity to put more effort in the creative part, like filming or finding the right sequences and combining or editing them to make them work.

### **Retrospect & Conclusion**

Although this course lasted four weeks, it felt even shorter. One could say that “time flies when you are having fun.” One of the aspects I liked the most is the creative freedom that you receive, of course within the boundaries of this year’s theme. Furthermore, I have learned about the educational value of these interactive videos. Some of the examples of XIMPEL apps shown earlier in class demonstrated this ability quite exceptionally.

The course information is disseminated through a website almost designed like a maze, but it oozes multimedia and creativity in a positive way. I would say that when one is browsing the website, the journey almost becomes more important than the goal. The information needed is present though, alongside material to further expand your knowledge. The additional wiki-like website at Google Sites is a soothing supplement mainly because it offers a summary of the most important course information like lecture contents and deadlines.

The lecturing style of mr. Anton Eliens is visceral and sometimes provocative, but this encourages you to think about, and reflect on, the material of the course. My opinion is that this suits the course very well, as it combats the more straightforward theoretical learning experience that the other courses of this first year of the IMM bachelor have offered.

In conclusion, this course is a valuable addition to the IMM bachelor programme. It completes the multimedia aspect of the first year, and it should be retained in the future in nearly the same shape. As mr. Eliens is going to retire, I would recommend that the future lecturer(s) should certainly take note of his legacy to maintain the heart of this course.