Multimedia: The art, science, and technology of creating meaning

As Forouzan Golshani said in a previous editorial, multimedia is neither graphics, nor audio, and certainly not the CD-ROM it is stored on. It is a minor sacrilege that in the classroom the first definition of multimedia we give is along the lines of “Multimedia is a combination of text, audio, and still and moving images.” I should hang my head in shame for doing it myself.

We all had to learn Newton’s laws of motion as the eternal truth, before being told that Einstein decreed it all wrong, umpteen years ago. However, Newton’s “simple” laws provided the foundation for building enough scientific understanding to appreciate Einstein’s otherwise unfathomable relativity principles. Now that we have learned from the various “simple” descriptions of multimedia, and built an adequate understanding of its various facets, it is time to delve into its deeper meaning.

While developing a multimedia project, some students begin by making statements such as, “I’ll use this 3D animation; I’ll include that video.” Often those who approach their projects with such a “sexy content” inclination end up with results that don’t seem to convey any meaning.

For me, the purpose of any multimedia content is to convey meaning. That doesn’t mean that it should preach; but, if a multimedia system doesn’t add to what I already know, for me it fails. Any content that conveys new meaning in new ways—and, if required, with new technology—is multimedia. To create such meaningful multimedia we need to combine artistic, scientific, and technological knowledge.

Our perception of what qualifies as multimedia changes with time. Even thousands of years ago, the tribal storyteller who stood silhouetted against the setting sun to narrate stories used body language to describe character actions and emotions. And as the sun set, if the storyteller enhanced the narrative by drawing in the air with burning sticks, he was using multimedia (without calling it so). The one common factor between that narrator, and a modern one, is creating and communicating meaning.

Thus, multimedia is the art, science, and technology of creating meaning. And our challenge for the future is to develop theories, models, tools, and processes that coalesce art, science, and technology for creating meaningful multimedia.

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