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NM2 productions: Two ready, six to go

NM2's work focuses on the creation of eight novel media productions and the tools needed to create them.

The first two Pilot Productions *Cambridge City Symphony* and *Gods in the Sky Choice* have now been prepared and evaluated. *Gods in the Sky Choice* is restricted to the NM2 partner companies, but *Cambridge City Symphony* is available on DVD to anyone, for a small handling fee, via the NM2 Website (www.ist-nm2.org).

The living room experience

The NM2 productions are bridging the gap between "lean back" consuming and "lean forward" active participation and are best enjoyed in a living room experience using a Windows Media Centre PC and a large screen.



Gods in the Sky Choice pilot demonstrator presented in a living-room environment



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Gods in the Sky Choice

Gods in the Sky Choice is derived from *Gods in the Sky*, a factual documentary produced by the British independent producer WagTV for Channel 4, which was broadcasted in the United Kingdom in August 2003 as three 50-minute programmes. It tests conceptual thinking about structuring non-linear reconfigurable narrative for the screen by analysing and re-purposing the footage for handling, via broadband, in three different modes: Entertainment, Education and Information, as a pilot demonstrator and model for future production.

The original programmes contained a mixture of material in these three categories, namely:

- Entertainment: Myths from many parts of the world staged as puppet theatre with the eccentric presenter, Allan Chapman, as storyteller; or danced, to music; or enacted as drama.
- Education/Entertainment: The presenter visits important locations all over the world, and shows formative material *in situ*, with facts and figures.
- Information/Education: The presenter gives brief lectures on the topic of myth as stories of the constellations, and their place in cultural history, illustrated by documents, visual material and chalkboard diagrams.

In *Gods in the Sky Choice*, the material can be reconfigured according to topic - such as culture, planet, god, historical period, scientific discovery, or a number of other themes - in each of the three modes.



Gods in the Sky Choice on a via Windows Media Center

Cambridge City Symphony

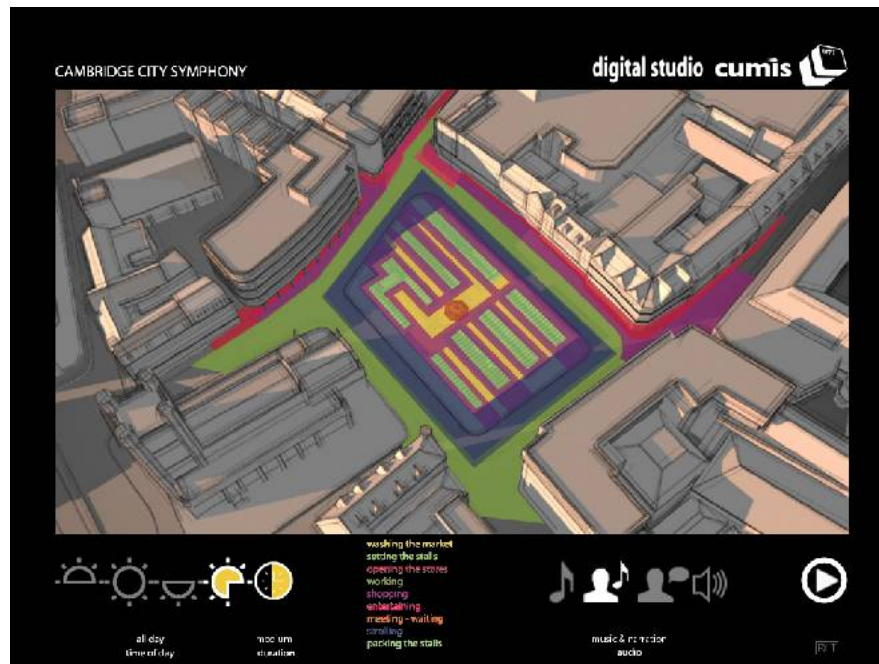
Cambridge City Symphony is based on the early City Symphony genre and has been created after systematically analysing their form. The elicited structure has been used as a template from which to create configurable versions of the City Symphony based on several hours of filming in the city of Cambridge. This interactive version invites the interactor to make certain choices via a graphical interface in order to create a personalised version of the production. One important application



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could be the creation of personal postcards that reflect the key locations an individual wished to recall from a holiday. The production is packaged into a DVD and can be installed and used on PCs running Microsoft Windows XP with Microsoft Internet Explorer as the default browser. The picture below shows a screenshot from the interactive user-interface.



Screenshot of the *Cambridge City Symphony* active user interface

The early NM2 productions ensure that the tool development work is focused on real production-led issues and to obtain feedback from real end-users about their requirements and wishes.

What users say

So what have the evaluations of these first productions taught us? In general, both productions were appreciated by end users.

Comments from the evaluation of *Gods in the Sky Choice*:

Reviewer 1: "this is a very good concept"

Reviewer 2: "It creates something new"

Reviewer 3: "The interface and navigation are easy to understand and it is relatively simple to navigate"

The evaluators told us they thought the interfaces were well designed and easy to comprehend. However, in both cases, users told us they did not feel 'in control'. Making a number of choices and then watching the resultant assembly of clips was, not regarded as an interactive experience.

Especially in *Cambridge City Symphony* and to a lesser extent in *Gods in the Sky Choice*, people were sometimes disappointed, because there seems to be no, or too little, relation between their choices for certain options and the clips that are subsequently shown. It was clear from both



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evaluations however that a lot of the criticism was due to the fact that the productions were experimental and not really finished, and that the tools lacked some functionalities that were intended by the producers.

Some quotes from the evaluation of Cambridge City Symphony:

Reviewer 1: "I can imagine something like this is useful in information centres or on the internet. You might add additional information about opening hours and so on."

Reviewer 2: "No, I don't feel one could personalize it enough to use it as an electronic postcard. Ultimately you're not really choosing images or particular things."

Future NM2 productions will be based on genuine NM2 production tools and user opinions

NM2 is now concentrating on the next six productions. They will use prototypes of the NM2 tools, the pre release versions which are now being used by the production teams. These new tools take into account the user feedback from the earlier productions and will seek to make the creation of the next phase of productions faster and easier.

The next two NM2 productions will be *Accidental Lovers* and *Interactive Village*.

Accidental Lovers is a character based romantic black comedy about love, the narrative of which is influenced by the engagement through SMS messages of its TV based audience. This award-winning concept will be developed for presentation on Finnish TV, hopefully in the Autumn schedule of 2006. In this new format of interactive television, viewers will be able to affect the unfolding drama, by sending mobile messages to a system that triggers on-screen events based on the keyword recognition. The system responds immediately by audio dialogue of the characters and indirectly through consequential thematic changes on the video images and scenes. Events will be collected from a large database of video and audio clips of improvised scenes that are associated with keywords that will be sensitive to the incoming mobile messages. Flexible content units of video, audio and text combined with algorithmically directed databases, associative and metaphorical script writing guarantee the sustainability in the story line.



Interactive Village, is based on village life in Dolní Roveň in the Czech Republic. It allows the user to navigate their way through the village, to meet its inhabitants and to construct the subjects of their own interests into documentary format.

The production can be viewed as a 'soft' news human interest story; or as an in depth study of human life with scholarly sophistication. Indeed the three central approaches traditionally provided by the



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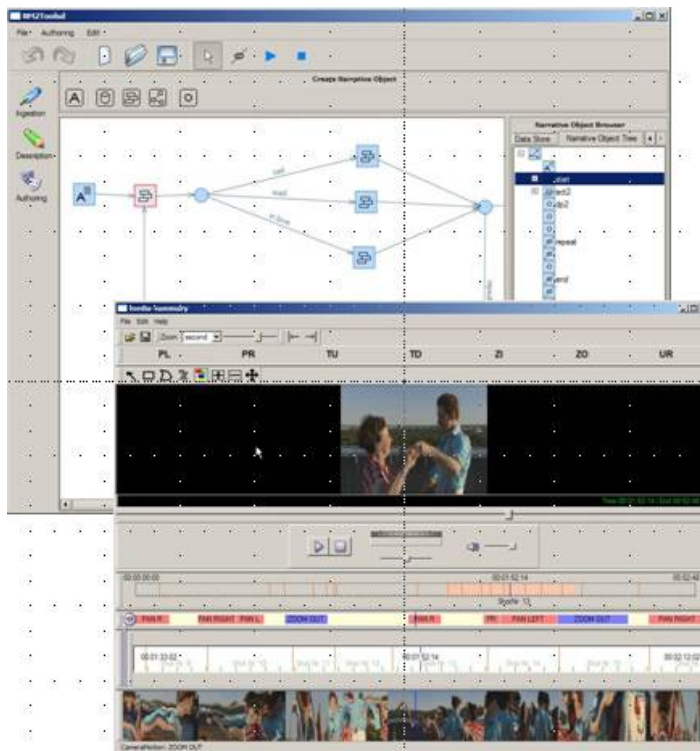
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visual ethnographer: Observational – Didactic – Polemic; are now subject to the viewer's choice

NM2 tools are the key to interactive media

Key to the success of NM2 is the development of comprehensive production tools for the new interactive media genres.



The prototype production tools are being developed after close consultation with the production teams. They are at very early (pre-release) stage. The NM2 tools include a number of functionalities not usually found in the traditional production environment. These are necessary to support the new workflow required for the creation of television with narratives that can be shaped by the viewer.

The new tools being developed include:

- An authoring tool to help in the scripting of narratives that can be shaped by the viewer
- A logging tool that allows metadata to be associated with script and media element as early as possible in the production chain
- A description tool that allows content to be automatically annotated with some descriptive features.
- A way of expressing narrative that allows it to be shaped
- A means of pre-testing the multiple narrative forms that can be generated to ensure they are sensible and several key

These are all developed within a common framework and great care is being taken to ensure the different tools all work seamlessly together.



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NM2 training on managing complex international projects

NM2 has gained a lot of experience in managing complex international projects with geographically distributed partners. NM2 wanted to share this experience and therefore organised a training event on 25 January 2006 at the Eurescom premises in Heidelberg.

Moderated by Milon Gupta from Eurescom, 42 managers and experts involved in all kinds of international projects listened to the presentations about building, running and managing complex projects. The programme included:

- An outline of the characteristics of projects in EU research programmes by Kai Tullius from the European Commission,
- A report by NM2's technical project manager, Doug Williams, on his experiences putting the project team together,
- Practical experiences of the NM2 coordinator, Peter Stollenmayer, on building effective project management structures,
- Demonstrations of various project management tools by Eurescom and Orbi Team,
- A panel discussions on knowledge management initialised by a teaser speech from Anja Walter, a consultant working for LearnAct,
- The interesting views of the NM2 partner Marian Ursu from Goldsmiths College on cultural diversity,
- An overview on the special challenges of IPRs in research projects by TNO's legal advisor, Folkert Teernstra.



The participants were actively involved and contributed to the seminar with many questions and remarks. The participants were particularly pleased with the practical, hands-on approach of the speakers.

One of the key messages was that good project management always depend on good project teams. According to NM2 project manager Doug Williams, "you can never underestimate the value of selecting highly performing partners from the beginning". NM2 coordinator Peter Stollenmayer said: "The personal relationships in such projects are extremely important. People who had a beer together can solve problems much easier than people who never met".

NM2 in the public eye

NM2 has been present at various events to introduce its goals, and to present first results

- NM2 partner BT presented "Perceived Role of Automatic Content recognition systems in the production of personalised media" at EWIMT 2005, which took place on 30 November – 1 December 2005 in London (<http://www.acemedia.org/ewimt2005/index.html>).
- NM2 partner John Wyver from ITL [introduces NM2 in a Netvideo](#), 27 November 2005



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- NM2 partner CUMIS (Cambridge University Moving Image Studios) presented the first two NM2 productions “Gods in the Sky Choice” and “Cambridge City Symphony” very successfully at the conference “Virtual Storytelling 2005”, which took place in Strasbourg, France from 30 November to 2 December 2005 (<http://www.virtualstorytelling.com/VS2005/index.html>)

NM2 is referred to in various publications, for example

- [“BT man helps viewers shape TV”](#), BT Today, 1 June 2005
- [“Take control of Broadband TV”](#), BT Innovation, 1 July 2005

About NM2

NM2 is an Integrated Project of the European Union’s 6th Framework Programme Thematic Priority 2 (Information Society Technologies). It was submitted to the second call of the programme and addresses the strategic objective “Cross-media content for leisure and entertainment”. The project is co-funded by the European Union through the IST programme under FP6.

NM2 is running from September 2004 to August 2007 and has an overall budget of about 7.5 million euro. 13 partners from 8 European countries are involved in the project.

NM2 unites leading creative and technology experts from across Europe to address a great opportunity for businesses and consumers in the near future: how to develop compelling new media genres, which take advantage of the unique characteristics of broadband networks. The project will create new production tools for the media industry that will allow the easy production of non-linear broadband media genres which can be personalised to suit the preferences of the individual user. Viewers will be able to interact directly with the medium and influence what they see and hear according to their personal tastes and wishes.

Further information is available at: <http://www.ist-nm2.org/>

The next NM2 Newsletter is scheduled for July 2006