Oliver Harris
BAIMP Year 3

Professional Placement Report

The Summer between the second and third year required a minimum of six weeks to be used as a means of learning and experiencing Interactive Media in a professional environment, whilst utilizing gained knowledge and insight learnt from the course. Approaching the completion of the second year an opportunity opened to work for Professor Stephen Deutsch regarding the solution to publishing academic articles and journals online complete with user accounts and the possibility of protection control upon the documents, for sound and film music enthusiasts. The brief was later to expand and encompass a website for advertising the skills of Mrs Willetts whom I was introduced to through Professor Deutsch, where a number of webpages were designed and subsequently completed.

The placement began with an opening correspondence meeting at Professor Deutsch's office located within Bournemouth University, where the brief was conversed in greater detail and screen diagrams were proposed on paper; the project was to be an 'E-Journal' called 'The Soundtrack' with separate areas for posting news, articles and reviews. This proved to be the basis for further encounters between Professor Deutsch and myself where discussion and progress reviews periodically occurred within his office. Contact was maintained via E-mail over the summer whenever distance proved an obstacle for meeting personally and this proved to be the foundation for a healthy working relationship where deadlines were set and work hence completed for them.

The project was explicitly not to be a straightforward 'blog', where information was just simply posted for anyone on the Internet to read – rather it was to reflect the nature of the academic journals to be posted and only be available to those specifically seeking it after signing up. The same was applicable for the design aesthetics where there was to be no musical notation symbolism used purely for decoration; instead the creative approach was to lean heavily towards keeping all the information as smooth and streamlined as possible with a smaller emphasis on otherwise artistic adornment. After

establishing three Photoshop mock-ups for the site the focus shifted behind the solution for housing the necessary database, which was to be PHP driven. Hand coding such a database proved to be far too challenging and consequently other solutions that could be modified to fit the brief were researched from the Internet. Researching into the PHP system proved useful which is where I found 'PHP Fusion', an open source content management system (CMS) that once downloaded and installed allowed customisation using Dreamweaver. A simple banner logo was designed in Photoshop and implemented, any unnecessary features such as the forum were deleted and a concise user guide was written for future reference. Embedding media within articles to be uploaded proved to be a problem; it was resolved with 'Adobe Acrobat Professional', which allowed QuickTime movies to be played back within the PDF articles to be uploaded.

This process allowed a lot to be personally learnt. Although using a CMS solution from the Internet was far from as professional as building a bespoke solution, customising it for the clients needs allowed skills in developing for the web to be exercised as well as writing for clients jargon-free user guides; otherwise complicated processes such as uploading articles had to be as streamlined as possible in written guide as well as user process. I also felt I learnt a lot about servers and installing upon them, although unfortunately when the server 'Nemesis' crashed at the University so 'The Soundtrack' was affected where all the MySQL files needed to run the data through the PHP were deleted and re-downloading the original 'PHP Fusion' files rectified the situation - it proved how the unexpected can and does go wrong even at the final stages of production and I learnt that explaining to clients situations in simple terms was another useful skill. I practiced new HTML tags (<embed>) which when used allowed the initial embedding of objects before it was realised how easier it would be with Acrobat Professional.

Following the implementation of 'The Soundtrack' I was next commissioned to produce a website entitled 'Music Workshops – Annabelle Willetts' where Photoshop was used again to produce initial designs. I had more artistic freedom with this part of the project where design was concerned. A brainstorm was created about schools, children and music, which were the subject matter; originally the site interface was to have a school desk design, complete with the images having 'Polaroid' style borders as if they

had been laid upon a surface and colouring pencils randomly scattered. Well known musical notation such as semi-quavers were also to be used whenever a link was rolled over. This process allowed me to realise that creative brainstorming is only appropriate within the scope of the brief; a weakness of mine was to go too far and overcomplicate the process by having too many ideas - many were not used in the final design.

The content was handed over a week later that consisted of a QuickTime movie, many prescanned images and four Word documents. It was decided there were to be six main pages – the Index, About Me, Workshop Details, Example Programmes, Making It Happen (the QuickTime movie) and Contact Details. The next phase was establishing a site design that appeased the client. Originally the links were to be placed down the bottom right side of the page but were changed to the very bottom of the page – this was established after the design of a smooth clean personal logo to display in the corners of each of the pages to retain continuity. The use of musical notation was heavily disliked and considering it were to be music tutors who were to view the site and not the children themselves it was realised a 'school desk' interface was not to be appropriate – rather a clean modern look was chosen, complete with marble effect background finished with a fading white gradient from top to bottom. The page titles were given a slight drop-shadow to emphasise their significance and all of the links an outer glow to guide the user what can and cannot be clicked. Fortunately the client was very specific about actual content placement following the submission of printed out copies of early design examples, which helped to speed up the production.

Using previously gained skills in Photoshop and Imageready the pages were developed over time and finally completed where each page was exported as a jpg with a sixty percent quality to speed up downloading time without compromising on quality; some of the slices, which were blocks of colours, could have been saved as gifs to further aid download time. The pages were then sliced up and imported into Dreamweaver where the QuickTime movie was placed within the Making It Happen page and all the page links were linked up accordingly. I learnt at this stage how otherwise limited my skills were in Dreamweaver and how much more attention it required to fully unlock its potential. Cascading Style Sheets could have been used for the text, which originally had

been formatted using Photoshop – had more time been allowed then the main sets of text would have been included in Dreamweaver.

Overall the placement was a satisfactory learning experience, especially when considering the development of my own professional ability to extract information and guide clients who may not understand computing terms. The actual nature of the placement was quite unusual, and if I had the opportunity again to choose somewhere more conventional I feel I may have learnt more, especially in illustration and the more artistic side of interactive media. The sporadic placing of the meetings also meant that I failed to grasp what going to work everyday for a company may have felt like, which in turn was reflected in the lack of overall deadline – towards completion many little tweaks had to be in place which added more time being spent on the placement when initially it was believed it was coming to fruition. Over actual time the projects were completed over a lot more than six weeks and considering I am in my final year it seemed unusual to work on such projects with more important tasks at hand although my organisation and communication skills have certainly improved. I learnt how much time, energy and effort any interactive media takes to produce which requires a fine degree of organisation and forward planning to structure for meeting deadlines.

Working in a professional environment would have allowed discussion and help from team-mates, as I found working by myself quite a task although this proved useful experience in mirroring the world of freelance work where work undertaking and problem solving is usually solitary. The tasks I undertook required a wide range of skill, whereas a conventional placement would have had my abilities focused on a specific area on a smaller concentrated region of a project. I feel valuable experience in most aspects of a work placement have been successfully reaped through working with Professor Deutsch.