

# Developing multimedia in a multicultural environment

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## **Developing Multimedia in a Multicultural Environment\*** **(Abridged version)**

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### **Abstract:**

**This paper seeks to address the constraints and opportunities in multimedia development in a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment. It will draw from theories on multimedia technologies and cultural studies as well as training and production in multimedia development.**

Various definitions of multimedia exist and various terms are also used to refer to the technology or product. Multimedia is also sometimes known as hypermedia or digital media. There used to be a term 'multi-media' which means a combination of various kinds of media such as video, audio and texts projected onto a big screen especially in music gigs. Multimedia, however, is different and refers largely to computer-based production which integrates the various media elements such as text, image, sound and animation through digital processes so that video or audio media are also digitised when imported and integrated into the whole multimedia product.

Interactivity is widely considered one of the core concepts of multimedia. Perhaps the single most important characteristic of multimedia is the audience or user-centredness of the technology, that is, technology use whereby individual users or groups of users are highly engaged in interacting with the product. An interaction-centred approach where emphasis is placed on processes of negotiation such as that inherent in human negotiation is central to the construction, presentation and use of multimedia products. Many kinds of technology-centred media, particularly computer-centred media, have failed to achieve the degree of interaction anticipated owing to insufficient attention given to the external design or social-organisational dimension of the communication technologies.

### **What is multicultural environment?**

A multicultural environment suggests the discreteness of different cultures as well as the plurality of cultures. I wish to draw attention to the social diversity along the lines of gender, age, class, religion in the cultural diversity of ethnic and linguistic groupings.

The development of multimedia in an multicultural environment should enable the transference of the richness of cultural diversity in such a technology, specifically in terms of content at the representational levels of sound, text and images. At the same time, it is also important to pay heed to ethnic/cultural and linguistic sensitivities. The challenges to avoid ethnic prejudices and stereotyping due to cultural differences and the opportunities to capture the wealth of cultural diversity are enormous. Since currently most multimedia products have been developed in the "West", the cultural content of such products are located within "Western" perspectives and representational systems.

Multimedia products have the potential to reach as wide an audience as television or any other form of mass media and is therefore also potentially accessible for use by many different kinds of social and cultural groups. Multimedia developers should consider carefully how they wish to portray various groups. Artistic and creative merit must be accompanied by cultural and social sensitivities.

**For multimedia developers** to anticipate diversity among potential clients or users, it is important to adequately segment users into target groups. It is always possible to make different segmentations for one and the same population (eg along the lines of sex, age, strategy, economic position). Hence it is important to segment users properly to allow for differences. Existing characterizations (originally developed for other purposes) are often unsuitable for different socio-cultural contexts as relevant points of diversity may remain unidentified and provisions to deal with this diversity are not incorporated in the technology. As a result, users may find the technology too general and insufficiently

tailored to their needs. First, in order to ensure adequate anticipation of users' needs and social context, the development process should be participatory in nature.

Second, the development process should be iterative in nature in order that learning experiences of users can be rapidly integrated into both the internal (technical) and the external (social-organisational) design.

Third, the prototyping process should be preceded and accompanied by qualitative sociological/anthropological research.

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