Early Video Mail[1]

Bill Buxton

I have always characterized the approach that we took with our various mediaspaces a doing smart things with stupid technologies. That is, the way that we got to live the future yesterday, so that we could better understand the human requirements of what we might build in the future, was to implement everything with well known technologies. That is, we faked the digital future with old analogue video technology – albeit, old technology that we could control by computer.

Let me give one of my favourite examples.

We set up EuroPARC in Cambridge England in 1987. As the name suggests, however, we were supposed to be part of PARC, that is, the Palo Alto Research Center - as literally as the laws of physics would permit.

We had a video codec that let us bridge the EuroPARC and PARC mediaspaces for synchronous meetings. However, there was this little problem of the 8 hour time difference. This stressed the reliance on synchronous communication. So we decided that we needed to support video mail. The problem was, there was no broadband Internet back then, and getting a dedicated line capable of the shipping video back and forth was prohibitive – especially at UK pricing. So, we resorted to stupid technologies.

What we did is take a leaf out of the old-school audio-cassette driven answering machine play-book. We added a special node to the mediaspace switch, along with appropriate software. What we connected to it was a conventional VHS VCR that was capable of two things:

1. Handling SMPTE time code
2. Capable of being controlled from a computer

With this we were able to develop software that enabled one to lay down a message on the cassette that followed the previous one, and by using the time-code as a kind of index, keep track of where that message started and stopped, and who it was for.

We then used the world's highest bandwidth, cheapest, and – at the time – fastest unregulated telecommunications carrier to convey the video messages to Palo Alto: Federal Express.

Within 24 hours of transmitting the mail, the folks at PARC could mount it in the appropriate VCR on their mediaspace, so that the intended recipients could access their messages from their office.

Did it work? Yes, sort of. Was it used? No, not really. Just for some demos. Why? Because it turns out that there was not a pent up demand for video mail after all. Would there have been if we had of improved the flow? Well, perhaps. But we

[1] From: Harrison, Steve (Ed.)(2009). *Media Space: 20+ Years of Mediated Life*. New York: Springer Verlag, 194-195.

were not at all convinced, and now that it is practical and still not prevalent, we were probably right.

But that is only half of the truth. What that infrastructure *was* used for was as a kind of video server from which one could access video clips and demos.

So did we learn the importance of that message? Well, sort of. But then, not really. How do I know? Well, none of us invented YouTube.

Damnn!!!!