

Project Post-Mortem

By HEXAD

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1. Introduction

HEXAD is a project team at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center. In cooperation with our client Sarah J. Mahler from Florida International University, we were exploring a method of using digital experiences to help people be more comfortable in unfamiliar real life situations. Since comfort is subjective and personal, we concentrated on building a prototype with solid structure and swappable content that can be easily applied to different situations, like formal dinner, public speaking, or traveling abroad. And with the client's assist, we decided on using taking care of a crying baby as an example to prove effectiveness of our design.

For this semester, the final deliverable was an iPad application in which users can practice taking care of a crying baby. This application is helpful to users and has potential to be applied to other areas, so our client can demo it to different companies and find partners for further development.

2. What Went Right

2.1 Ask for help when needed

At the beginning of this semester, we already noticed that the team setup would be a huge challenge for us: we were six first-year students with no project experience; we were all non-native speakers; we had no 3D modeler and had only one 2D artist in the team... But at the end of this semester, we have solved all these problems: all teammates work together efficiently; our presentations are getting better and better; we have a lovely animated 3D baby and nice user interface in our application...

What has helped us a lot is asking for help when needed. With the faculty's support, our programmers worked on the prototype smoothly and we learned how to convey ideas better and get useful feedback.

2.2 Focus on the goal

We always knew what we were making was a prototype with solid structure and swappable content, rather than just a baby-sitting simulation game. We focused on the goal of helping people be more comfortable in real life, which really helped us make decisions and prioritize tasks.

After doing research, we concluded that knowledge, experience and practicing are 3 pillars of feeling comfortable. Based on this conclusion, we decided that the elements needing to be included in the prototype are: instant feedback, educational information, general tips, and analysis report. Since taking care of a crying baby is only an example to prove effectiveness, instead of spending a lot of time on baby's animation or crying sound, we went through many design iterations to get a completed structure including all these elements.

2.3 Successful client relationship

At the beginning of this semester, we were really worried about client meetings because we did not have much experience in communicating with clients. But during the semester, we found out some rules that are really helpful in establishing and maintaining good client relationship.

First, never ask the client "What do you think?" before giving different options with specific reasons. Brainstorming and coming out with ideas is our job, not the client's. Before propose ideas, we should consider the client's perspective and have our own choice. And when we propose ideas, specific examples can help a lot.

Second, keep the client updated. During this semester, we used Google Drive to share documents and recent progress with our client. And we also kept a rolling meeting document so the client can track decisions and our next steps.

Third, know the client. Before the semester started, we have already read our client's book to get familiar with her theory. And when we had the first in-person meeting, we asked tons of questions to clarify the minimum requirement and expectation. Having the client as our friend was one of the most enjoyable things in this semester.

2.4 Excellent team atmosphere

We are definitely one of the happiest team at ETC. We all enjoy working with each other and we care for each other in daily life. We had Google Doc sharing internship information, we celebrated birthday together, and we were willing to help others when they were busy with assignments or personal stuff... A non-stressful atmosphere is always good to a small team.

3. What Went Wrong

3.1 Slow to get up to speed

We totally have 15 weeks in this semester, but we used 5 weeks to settle on the final concept. We spent too much time on discussing roughly about many ideas and looking for a “perfect” one, rather than talking about ideas in detail and choosing the best one.

And also, since we all did not have project experience, we spent too much time on establishing schedule and pipeline.

3.2 Bad communication with people outside the team

We did not communicate with people outside the team very well. We spent much more time on creating the product than selling it, which hurt the morale when people could not understand the idea and vision.

Actually, during this whole semester, we were always working on the same concept. But the audience’s reactions in 1/2 presentation and soft opening were quite different. After we spent more time on clarifying our idea and vision, the same product got more welcomed and was considered much more useful.

4. Conclusion

This is our first project semester and we really learned a lot. Though we already had rich teamwork experience during BVW, this long-term teamwork experience was still a huge challenge for us: how to maintain the morale, how to synchronize everyone’s progress...

Fortunately, we solved all the problems and pulled off the plan. Now we will hand the prototype over to our client and we will be happy to answer questions for future developers.