

IN THIS ARTICLE

Multimedia

A Job by Any Other Name

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Two colleagues explore what it means to be a multimedia designer and how to succeed at this nebulous job.

It was one of those dark and stormy nights of the soul when we question our career choices and regret that we didn't go into something more lucrative like architecture or medicine, or something noncorporate, like herbology or costume design.

Instead, we have accumulated more than 30 years of experience working with computer-based and print-based products. We have designed user interfaces, written scripts, managed objects, developed software manuals, and taught classes. We have also worked on teams to produce multimedia marketing presentations, electronic brochures, consumer titles, and software training. Yet, we often have a hard time describing what it is that we do.

What is it that we do again?

Over the years our jobs have changed, and our skills have grown and strengthened. Today, they call us *multimedia designers*. Still, we have pondered what to put in the blank next to *Title* on an IRS form. We have struggled to come up with a business card that doesn't require a 10-minute explanation. We've obsessed over a 25-words-or-less job description for our alumni magazines. And we've tried to explain at industry meetings that we're not graphic artists or programmers.

Because of our nebulous job function, we are serious about defining our titles. *Webster's* doesn't define multimedia designer yet. But if it did it might be something like this:

▶ (A) A person that communicates through words, images, and sound,

interweaving them to tell a story of some kind in an interactive way.

▶ (B) A professional communicator that uses written and spoken words, graphics, still and moving photography, and musical and nonmusical sounds to deliver a specific message to a specific audience for a specific reason.

▶ (C) The member of a multimedia project team that determines the look and feel of a product, identifies the appropriate types of audio and visual elements, plans the architecture and records it in a flowchart, designs the user interface, and storyboards the presentation of the content.

Although definition C has merit, any member of a multimedia project team might participate in one or more of those tasks. For example, a multimedia

MULTIMEDIA TEAM ASSESSMENT TOOL

Skill Categories

Skills	Skill Categories			
	Multimedia Design	Project Management	Software Engineering	Graphic Arts
understand and trust the creative process	P	P	P	P
ability to come to consensus (to say when something doesn't work for you and to listen to and entertain someone else's ways of doing things)*	P	P	P	P
think metaphorically	P			
think visually in 2-D/3-D images	P			P
evaluate and choose programming tools			P	
discover/be open to client's wants/needs		P		
comprehend, analyze, organize information for instructional and/or informational purposes	P			
identify the types of audio and visual elements necessary to the product	P			
determine the look and feel of the product	P			P
write for the spoken word and for monitor display to tell an engaging story	P			
possess color composition basics	S		P	
create graphic images that communicate what they need to in an aesthetically pleasing way				P
know in-depth, available software tools for producing graphics/animation				P
plan architecture and flowchart it	P		P	
produce graphics/animation				P
make maximum use of a programming tool's capability (writing creative code)			P	
create and work with online schedules and budgeting software		P		
possess sophisticated, state-of-the-art hardware knowledge		S	P	
know the audience	P			
match technology with the delivery environment and audiences	S		P	
edit scripts/storyboards for consistency, grammar, syntax, punctuation, and style	P			
direct the implementation of the "look and feel" of the product		P		
use the tool of cinematography to convey concepts, emotions, and information	P			
design user interface & interactive strategies (know how to invite and respond to user input)	P		S	
supervise, review work, and generate team cooperation		P		
communicate clearly and graciously in writing to and in talking with the client		P		

P = primary skill S = secondary skill * = perform magic

Other possible skill categories that may overlap with those reflected in the matrix as well as providing unique skill sets: animator, audio producer, editor, programmer, testing, video editor, artistic director, client, game designer, quality, video director, audio engineer, creative director, interface designer, scriptwriter, video producer.

designer and an art director might collaborate on the look and feel of a project, or a systems engineer may contribute to the design of the interface.

So far, we have not reached a definitive description of what we do. So, what next? The *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* explains what other designers do. It is striking how similar the design tasks are across such diverse industries as furniture design and interior design and how the dictionary describes the tasks we do as multimedia designers.

According to the dictionary, here's a sampling of what designers do during a day's work:

- ▶ determine the purpose, function, budget, and environment in which a product will be used
- ▶ advise clients
- ▶ consult with the technical and marketing staffs
- ▶ analyze market trends
- ▶ determine the feasibility of producing a product
- ▶ select the materials to be used to make a product
- ▶ create sketches of the final product
- ▶ write detailed production requirements
- ▶ submit the design plan for the client's approval
- ▶ revise the design if necessary
- ▶ render design ideas into a prototype
- ▶ analyze the physical surroundings prior to installing the finished product.

Again, we recognize an overlap with other team members. A graphic designer "creates sketches of the final product." A project manager might "determine the purpose, function, budget, and environment in which the product will be used." A systems engineer, musician, and video producer all "advise the client." The client "examines the prototype and modifies the design as needed." Does that mean that every member of a multimedia project team must have some degree of design skill? According to interface expert Joy Mountford, design is "an incredibly important activity.... It's not something done by one person. It's a team activity, and that's what has to change to make multimedia work.... Only compelling multimedia products have that element of interdisciplinary knowledge."

Ability to communicate

There is another crucial aspect: The "word people" on the team have unique skills. In an attempt to determine exactly what their skills are, we made a list of all of the skills needed to get a multimedia product out the door. That way, we can identify the skills that only a multimedia designer would use. (See the Multimedia Team Assessment Tool on page 29.)

Our chart presents a typical skill distribution on a typical multimedia project team. But on any project team, the skills frequently overlap. Each multimedia professional is fluent in at least one of the required skill sets including:

■ Multimedia designer is kind of a virtual job title ■

- ▶ project management skills
- ▶ software engineering skills
- ▶ graphic arts skills
- ▶ multimedia design skills.

There is another skill that a multimedia designer has to have, and that is frequently ignored when assembling a team. It is the ability to communicate verbally and in writing, as well as through sight and sound. A multimedia designer must also be able to shape a message so that it entertains, teaches, and persuades. That is one of the core competencies of the multimedia project team.

Someone must translate the multimedia presentation's content into a language—words, images, and sounds—that the audience can understand. Without a competent translator, the product will not be a coherent communications device.

Roll camera

A mentor of ours once likened the role of a project manager to that of a film producer and the role of the multimedia designer to that of a film director. The director must take in all of the information and come up with a vision—a vehicle to convey the information in the most appropriate way for the content and audience.

There is a moment when, in the process of culling through all of the pieces that can go into making a multimedia presentation, the designer experiences an "ah-ha" moment. That is when he or she envisions the finished product and where the next hectic months of creative work will take the team. Then, the burden is on the designer to convey the vision to the rest of team, clearly and convincingly.

Despite the importance of communication, multimedia design is often delegated to someone for whom it is, at best, a secondary rather than primary skill. That sometimes occurs because producers consider that communication peripheral to graphic arts or system engineering skills.

Whatever you call the person with the core competency of multimedia design—multimedia designer, writer, creative director, or interactive filmmaker—that person's competency is fundamental to a product's success, even if a team member from one of the other essential disciplines also has experience and training in the competency. Other skills are also necessary to make a good product, though they are not sufficient to make a great one without the core competency of multimedia design.

To paraphrase a review of Mark Von Wodtke's *Mind of Media: Creative Thinking Skills for Electronic Media*, "The process of building a good product from a good concept is an intensely artistic one. The missing ingredient between 'technically good' and 'boring' is design, craft, and talent. These elements are extremely hard to measure...unless they are missing."

So back to the question: What does a multimedia designer do? Well, it depends on the project, the composition of the team, and the skills of the team members. It's kind of a virtual job title for a very real job. ■

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